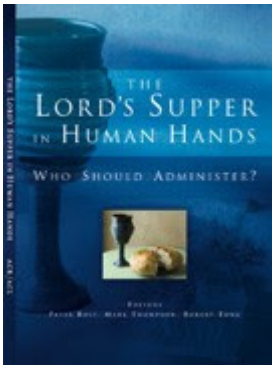
Review: The Lord's Supper in Human Hands



This is going to be one of those book reviews where I end up reviewing the issue rather than the book itself – the issue of who should administer the sacrament of Holy Communion within the Anglican Church – just priests (also known as presbyters), or also deacons and lay persons?

So let me indulge just one paragraph on the book itself. This book is a defense and promulgation of the argument by those in favour of lay and diaconal "administration" of Holy Communion. The authors are influential members of the Sydney diocese and they clearly and concisely present their argument, backing it up with the weight of discourse and evidence – including pages and pages of endnotes and citations. It is a very specific book – go to other places for a generalist discussion for the theology of the sacraments or on ecclesiastical orderings. Simply put, it gives voice to those interested enough to ask the Sydney diocese "What are you doing and why?" The chapters range from theological overview, to historical commentary, to summaries of synodical legislative processes. If you are interested in this debate and wish to provide a voice to be taken seriously – it doesn't matter what your conclusions are, but you simply must engage with this book.

There are two areas that I wanted this book to cover – the area of theology/ecclesiology, and the legislative/political arena. It covers the latter very well, the former only reasonably. So let me consider the latter first.

As George Conger states on his blog the legislative/political key behind the recent Sydney synod decision rests on grammar. What does "assist" mean? What does "administer" mean? And can

we construe the *Ordination Service for Deacons Canon 1985* such that it meets the 1996 Appellate Tribunal's requirement for a General Synod canon to authorise the otherwise-constitutional practice of diaconal administration?

This is indeed asserted by Davies et al. who draws heavily on the conclusion of a more recent Apellate Tribunal consideration of the involvement of women in the episcopate:

> *"…they expressed the view that legislation is to be interpreted by the meaning of the words used and not on the basis of any supposed intention by the promoters of the legislation." (p75)*

In other words – "if you can argue that way and get women bishops, then you can also argue that way and get diaconal presidency."

And I have a lot of sympathy for Davies' legal argument. But that sympathy results, in the main, not from delight in the present outcome, but in annoyance with *how* (not *the fact that*) women were allowed into the episcopate in the Anglican Church of Australia. A ruling on semantics – and it's resultant inconsistency with respect to Assistant Bishops – stole away conversation and debate on that issue – at least in the public arena. And so a maverick part of me enjoys the riposte from the other side of the divide.

But another part of me is saddened that ecclesiological debate in our church has come down to this – the back door of legal loop holes rather than the kerygmatically charged fervour of nutting things out together. In my mind semantics is, frankly, an insipid way to promulgate ones desires about issues that impact the whole. Even if the semantics can be argued – bring the explicit proposition anyway and debate that in the light of day. The "women bishops" issue will always have the dishonour of having been shoved in the side door. Do the proponents of diaconal and lay administration want to walk

that same shadowy road?

The other political issue, of course, is the relationship with GAFCON. Technically this shouldn't be an issue. As Robert Tong mentions in the last chapter, the Jerusalem Declaration states:

> *"We celebrate the God-given diversity among us which enriches our global fellowship, and we acknowledge freedom in secondary matters. We pledge to work together to seek the mind of Christ on issues that divide us."*

And Tong then reiterates:

> *"It is our hope that those who disagree with our views willi n a spirit of generosity and freedom accept such differences in secondary mattes within the Anglican Communion, as together we continue to seek the mind of Christ." (p118)*

And, while GAFCON should be the place where the difference between primary and secondary is clear and biblically sound, the feeling around the internet traps seems to be that many of the orthodox GAFCON leaders struggle mightily with one of their number going down this road. I can only hazard a guess what the Anglo-Catholics and African clericalists might think and say about this. If GAFCON is going to work, something more than awkward silence will be needed. The centre is only won through engagement and freedom to be vociferous.

Turning now to the ecclesiological aspects of the book, the first thing I noted was a congregationalist tendency. Although this was somewhat offset in later chapters, emphases such as these from Mark Thompson will do little to help build the breadth of support:

> *"The congregation should be able to authorise its own leaders, whether episcopally ordained or not." (p24)*

> *"It is hard to reconcile the notion of the diocese as the local church with the New Testament terminology of church… The normal context of Christian ministry and fellowship is the congregation." (p31)*

For me, at the heart of Anglican church order, for better or for worse, is the episcopate. We are led by bishops. We may not organise or release episcopal ministry very well. And indeed the present circumstance, such as Lambeth, seems to be a testimony to what happens when bishops don't bishop. But when it works, it works well – and it's what we've got.

And so I appreciated Peter Bolt's quoting of Canon Synge from the 1960's. I don't know Synge at all but Bolt's quote of him strengthened the overall argument.

> *"… The clergy have entrenched themselves in the area of oversight or episcope as though they had the right to be there, thus converting a twofold tool of Christ, episcopate and laity, into a twofold institution, laity and clergy; the laity's vocation now becomes the support of the clergy and the vocation of the episcopate becomes the oversight by a senior clergy man of clerical machinery." (p101)*

Episcopacy is more than just sacramental ministry – it is about oversight and "governance" in a spiritual way of God's people. It means carrying the burden of vision and the heart of Christ for people. It is "apostolic" in the sense of being sent and of sending people into gospel ministry. In my mind, episcopacy (with a little "e") is at the heart of the burden of Christian ministers for the "cure of souls" in their care. So, when Sydney Standing Committee affirms (as quoted by Bolt) "Ordination is primarily to a cure of souls: therefore only those in charge of parishes would be i
n priests' orders." (p40) what we are basically seeing is an affirmation of episcopal leadership (with a little "e") in congregational life. The framework thus restricts incumbency

to the order of presbyters and releases sacramental ministry, in an orderly manner, to all.

And I agree with much of it. It is silly to have Communion alone isolated as something magical when deacons and lay people can do everything else. And I do know of some priests who are more interested in celebrating communion than of exercising leadership and being gospel-and-people-focussed in their "cure." I know what I see as prior and more important!

Consequently, I do not see lay or diaconal administration as inherently involving a downgrading of the role of the presbyter.

However, I can see a weakness in the argument and have one major concern.

The weakness is the lack of answers to these: Much is made of the fact that there is no biblical mandate for presbyteral administration. But where is the biblical mandate for the three orders at all? (I'm reminded of a friend who when asked if he believed in women's ordination, said "I don't even believe in men's ordination") More specifically – where is the biblical mandate for linking eldership with incumbency? Where is the biblical mandate for a *diocesan* (as opposed to *congregational*) college of presbyter-elders?

The concern is this: Incumbency inheres institution to the little-e episcopal function of the presbyter. What about church planters? It will be nice that a church-planting deacon might now be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper with a new church and church-planting team – but why not make the church-planter a presbyter – surely he has a "cure" and is exercising eldership, albeit in terms defined other than an institutional incumbency? When will a church plant become a "parish" worthy of a "presbyter"? (I've heard the tongue-in-cheek answer referring to early synagogues – when 10 good men can gather around the torah!)

What I want to see in this debate – and from Sydney in particular – is an exposition of the biblical correlation (if any) between "orders" (bishop, priest, deacon), roles or functions (incumbent, assistant, church-planter, chaplain etc.) and giftedness (particularly in Ephesians 4 terms – Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor, Teacher). Without this the "being consistent with the Bible" argument weakens and will be overridden with poorer arguments of tradition and legalese.

All this matches my intrigue with this line in the book:

> *"Nicholas Taylor speaks of advocates of lay administration amongst the 'fresh expressions' church planting initiative within the Church of England" (p80)*

I don't know Taylor but I can sympathise with those he references here. Fresh Expression ministry in an Anglican Context often feels like an experience in shoehorning square pegs into round holes and liturgical restrictions are a part of that. Unfortunately, this book also feels like I'm still being shoehorned – just in the other direction – because it argues from institution rather than to it.

So do I support lay and diaconal administration?

As a fresh expression person my answer simply is – whatever makes us free-er to be the church we are trying to be. And so at this stage:

Yes – theologically I cannot see a biblical reason why administering Communion should be restricted to priests/presbyters.
No – politically and pragmatically – it's a secondary fight, not a primary fight. I don't want to get caught up in the politics of semantics.

I just want to gather around the Gospel proclaimed in Word and

Sacrament and see lives transformed.

