



Research article

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**EARLY REFORMATION ERA AND RECEPTIONISM:  
A CONTEMPORARY PASTORAL DIMENSION**

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**ABSTRACT**



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Receptionism is an Anglican Eucharistic theological understanding that the bread and wine are unchanged during the prayer of consecration, and the faithful communicant receives the Body and Blood of Christ together with them. Though this was one of the dominant theological understandings of the Anglican Reformation Era, its importance seemed to have diminished later. Considering the dominant Anglican eucharistic theological understandings of the times, this article looks at the relevance of receptionism in today's world in light of the articles in the American Episcopal - Book of Common Prayer, emphasising its pastoral relevance.

**Keywords:** Receptionism, Eucharistic Theology, Nominalism, Moderate Realism, Manner Of Presence, Anglican, Book of Common Prayer, Pastoral.



## Introduction

Receptionism shall be defined as the belief that the eucharistic elements of bread and wine are unchanged during the prayer of consecration. The faithful communicant receives together with them the Body and Blood of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This was the dominant eucharistic theology in the later Reformation era of Anglicanism. Anglican theology is historically rooted in the documents that Thomas Cramer wrote, an English Catholic influenced by Luther, in the period of the English Reformation, most notably the Thirty-nine Articles, the Homilies, and the Book of Common Prayer. This essay, in its first part, will brief the eucharistic theological assumptions formed during the reformation era between 1558 to 1662 to expound receptionism and its influence on the Book of Common Prayer<sup>2</sup> (BCP), the Articles of Religion (articles) and Catechism. The second part will discuss the pastoral dimension of receptionism in the present times.

The early period of the Reformation, extending until the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, presents a variety of philosophical assumptions relating to the Eucharist. Nominalist and Realist philosophical assumptions are present in the eucharistic theology of this period.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that, from the beginning of the distinctly Anglican period, following the break with Rome, more than one theology of the Eucharist was present, and a variety of philosophical assumptions underlying eucharistic theology existed.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Cranmer held a receptionist understanding of the eucharist, which informed his work on the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books. This historic receptionists language is still retained in Eucharistic Prayer I of Rite 1.<sup>5</sup> However, Anglican eucharistic theology has tended to hold in balance, both an objective change of some kind in the eucharistic elements to become the body and blood of Christ and the subjective faith of the believer who receives the sacrament.

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<sup>1</sup> "receptionism." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view>).

<sup>2</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Book of Common Prayer (BCP) is primarily a liturgical text, meant to be used in corporate worship, and at the same time a literary landmark, a cultural icon, and a focus of identity for Anglican Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> David Kennedy, *Eucharistic Sacramentality in an Ecumenical Context: The Anglican Eucharist* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2008), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Donald S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, *An Episcopal dictionary of the church: a user-friendly reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Pub. 1999), 432.

<sup>5</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life. Revised edition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), 461.



The later period of reformation, extending from 1558, marking the accession of Elizabeth I to 1662, marking the publication of the Book of Common Prayer, paved the way for various philosophical assumptions underlying the eucharistic theology of this period. Transubstantiation and Immoderate Realism were denied; Moderate Realism, Nominalism, Receptionism, Manner of Presence, Sacrifice and the Eucharist emerged.<sup>6</sup>

### **Moderate Realism**

Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, insists that the heavenly part of the Eucharist (Christ's body and blood) and the earthly part (the bread and wine) remain in their natures without any evacuation or conversion of substance and, at the same time affirms a moderate realism using the language of the hypostatical union of Christ's natures, human and divine. Writers like Richard Baxter and John Bramhall speak of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as a 'true' or 'real' presence that is nonetheless spiritual, mystical, ineffable, miraculous and imperceptible. Where this occurs, there is a link between the sign and the signified in a realist manner.<sup>7</sup> Use of outward signs like candles, incense, vestments, altar frontals, bowing towards the altar as a place worthy of praise, veiling the elements after administration and consuming the consecrated elements within the church suggest reverence towards the Eucharist in general and the elements in particular and are in line with a eucharistic theology based on moderate realism, signifying a departure from the early period of the Reformation which presented a style of worship that was outwardly plain.<sup>8</sup>

### **Nominalism**

The Eucharist elements remind or signify Christ's body and blood, that he was sacrificed and that there are benefits derived from that sacrifice. A nominalist would therefore argue that when they receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist as they are receiving only bread and wine and that there is no universal notion such as the nature of Christ. The nature of Christ or Christ's body and blood is not seen to exist as a universal notion and so is not received in or

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Douglas, *The Reformation to the 19th Century. Companion to Anglican Eucharistic Theology* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 73.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Friesen, "A Companion to Anglican Eucharistic Theology" *Anglican Theological Review*, 96, no. 1: (2014), 176-178.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Douglas, "Dialogue Amidst Difference in Anglican Eucharistic Theology: A Habermasian Breakthrough" *Australian Journal of Theology*. 9. 1. (2007), 32.



with the bread and wine of the Eucharist in a nominalist analysis.<sup>9</sup> Lewis Bayly speaks of the sign, and the signified in the Eucharist being separated and states that Christ is not brought down to earth. Still, the faithful receiver lifts hearts and minds to Christ in heaven, thus separating the elements from the body and blood of Christ. John Hales states that there is only bread and wine in the Eucharist and that these signs do not exhibit Christ, nor is Christ eaten in the sacrament in any sense – literally, metaphorically or really. For Hales, the Eucharist is a commemoration alone and a testimony to the union with Christ and other people.<sup>10</sup> Anthony Horneck speaks of subjective eating, which is spiritual and where the bread and wine are figures or remembrances alone. Christ is not seen as ‘in’, ‘with’ or ‘under’ the elements, and there is a distance between sign and signified. The communicant contemplates Christ’s crucified body, and eating Christ means applying for Christ’s passion’s benefits. Thomas Morton separates the sign and the signified in other places about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup>

### **Manner of Presence**

Several writers express the view that it is a mistake to attempt to define the nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Lancelot Andrewes positions that the manner of the presence is not a matter of faith but a matter of theory. John Bramhall trusts that the manner of the presence is not an article of faith but subject to theory. Though William Laud sees transubstantiation as defining the manner of the presence, he rejects transubstantiation as a manner of explaining that presence. Richard Montague contends that people should be content to know that the bread and wine of the Eucharist is Christ’s body and blood and not worry about ‘how’ the presence of Christ comes about.<sup>12</sup> Christopher Sutton and Jeremy Taylor also share a similar view on the manner of the presence of Christ.

### **Sacrifice and the Eucharist**

Eucharist is a renewal of the covenant by the sacrifice in the present is the opinion shared by Andrewes. Hammond relates the sacrifice of supplication and praise to commemorating the

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<sup>9</sup> William Atwell Spurrier, *Guide to the Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Edward Bridgett and Herbert Thurston, *A History of the Holy Eucharist in Great Britain* (London: Burns & Oates, 1908), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas, 80-82.

<sup>12</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Eucharistic Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2017), 134.



continual sacrifice of Christ in heaven, a ceremony of the covenant. Bramhall questions the sacrifice aspect concerning the Eucharist and opines that it cannot be propitiatory but distinct from the cross. Laud upholds the view that the Eucharist is a commemorative sacrifice in broken bread and poured wine and that it is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving as well as a sacrifice of self.

### **Receptionism**

Receptionism is a form of realism since Christ is seen present at the moment of reception. However, Christ's presence is limited to that moment (not before or after). Still, it is effective using the communicant's faith.<sup>13</sup> Lewis Bayly, bishop of Bangor, says that Christ gives his body and blood at the moment of receiving. Christ is in the use of the sacrament and not in the elements. Horneck and Morton state that Christ is only present through the faith of the sincere believer.<sup>14</sup> Though receptionism seems to be an often forgotten Eucharistic theological assumption of the later reformation era of the Anglican church, the Book of Common Prayer and particularly the articles of religion and the catechism still emphasise the importance of a receptionist understanding.

The words of administration of the 1559 Prayer Book joined language from the 1549 BCP that identified the sacrament as the body and blood of Christ with more receptionists language from the 1552 BCP that urged the communicant to receive the sacrament "in remembrance" of Christ's sacrifice. This combination was continued in the 1662 BCP and subsequent American Prayer Books.<sup>15</sup> The Eucharist's balance of objective and subjective theologies is also presented by the Catechism, which states that "The inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith" (BCP, p. 859). The receptionist language of Eucharistic Prayer I in Rite 1 is not found in the other eucharistic prayers of the BCP.<sup>16</sup>

Though the receptionist view of just the 'reception' being the essential part of the Eucharist, there was a favoured approach to retaining the importance of the 'receptor'. A

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Palmer Wandel, *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation* (Boston: Brill. 2014), 86.

<sup>15</sup> BCP, 338.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Edward Brightman, *The English Rite: Being a Synopsis of the Sources and Revisions of the Book of Common Prayer, With an Introduction and an Appendix. 2d ed. rev* (London: Rivingtons. 1921), 111.



similar instance shall be seen in the articles on religion too. The Thirty-nine articles ultimately defined the doctrine of the Church of England and were incorporated into the BCP was significantly shaped by these eucharistic theological standpoints<sup>17</sup>. Article 28 of the Articles of Religion state that the bread and wine of the eucharist are the body and blood of Christ "to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same. . . ."<sup>18</sup> Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but instead is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ, and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ...<sup>19</sup> The Article begins by explicitly denying memorialism in almost as stark a way as it will go one to deny transubstantiation. The Eucharist is not only a sign of love between Christians. It is instead the "Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death." Because when we receive it in faith, we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ. However, this does not mean it is only the Body and Blood for the faithful. Article XXVIII says, The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after a heavenly and spiritual manner. And the meaning whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith. Again, nothing here precludes the elements from being indeed Christ's Body and Blood.<sup>20</sup> Article XXIX adds to the receptionist understanding rather seriously 'The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth (as Saint Augustine saith) the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ; yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing.'<sup>21</sup>

The Catechism also helps to make this clear. The Catechism distinguishes between the "outward part or sign" and the "inward and spiritual grace" in each Sacrament.<sup>22</sup> Yet, while we can speak in the abstract about these two dimensions of a Sacrament, they are no more separable than the human and divine natures within Our Lord. The Catechism defines a

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<sup>17</sup> Gervase Rosser, "The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. 3rd Edn. Edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone. p.1622.

<sup>18</sup> BCP, p. 873.

<sup>19</sup> BCP, p. 873.

<sup>20</sup> BCP, 873.

<sup>21</sup> BCP, 873

<sup>22</sup> BCP, 857,858.



Sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof”.<sup>23</sup> The Sacrament contains both a sign and the thing signified. A Sacrament is not only a reminder, not only a symbol but the actual means through which the thing that is signified is made manifest. Concerning Holy Communion, the Catechism says that the outward part is bread and wine. In contrast, the inward part is “the Body and Blood of Christ given to his people, and received by faith.” The benefits we receive are the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life. We must examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people.<sup>24</sup>

Though receptionism hasn’t survived as a Eucharistic theology for long, the understanding wasn’t questioned or undermined. References from the Book of Common Prayer discussed in the Rite 1, Catechism, and the Articles of Religion help us probe ‘why the receptionist's understanding was not questioned or undermined?’ Most of the other eucharistic assumptions gave importance to the act of institution and substantiation of elements and, less importantly, saw the importance of the receiver. But articles 28 and 29 specifically enforce the importance of the receiver.

### **Pastoral Dimension**

Our Church has entered into a phase where it has to welcome people from all races, nationalities, classes, colours, ethnicity etc. Members of our congregations no longer receive them only on Easter Day or after the forty days of repentance during Lent, which they believed to safely prepare them to receive the Lord’s body and blood. This is because "Anglicans have always understood their liturgy to be more than just human activity initiated here on earth; it is a participation in the worship of heaven. The ultimate destiny of humanity is seen in participation in that worship."<sup>25</sup> When the invitation is given, congregation members gather at a standard table to receive it. Receivers of the elements not just sit in their separate pews to passively receive but will agree to the call to come and receive him, "who takes away the sins of the world". Thus, it does not matter - rich and poor, young and old,

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<sup>23</sup> BCP, 857.

<sup>24</sup> BCP, 860.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Sykes and John Booty, eds, *The Study of Anglicanism* (New York: SPCK/Fortress Press, 1988), 87



short and tall, coloured and white, Americans and people of other nations, beautiful and ugly, more privileged or less privileged – gather together at a common altar, a standard table, manifesting unity. Even then, as per article XXIX, ‘the wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ; yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing.’

Article XXIX does not define who falls into the category of ‘the wicked’; instead, it allows each communicant to decide ‘whether I’m wicked or not. This article has significant pastoral dimensions continuing even today. This Article is a simple outcome to article XXVIII in a receptionist language. If faith is the means through which the body of Christ is received and eaten, those who do not have faith cannot receive and eat it. But, further, this Article categorically denies the possibility of the reception in any vice. Those without lively faith cannot become partakers of Christ. This envisioned excluding every possible ploy that might bring them in as partakers in an inferior sense. This article sources excellent struggle for those who continue understanding a real objective presence of Christ in or with the consecrated elements. If the body of Christ by any means is brought into union with the matter of the elements through consecration, then those who receive the elements are also partakers in Christ<sup>26</sup>. Paul goes on to say, ‘whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.’<sup>27</sup>

There is always this question of ‘worthiness’ and ‘who’d decide’ this worthiness, and in almost all cases, it falls on the priest who officiates. Both Paul’s and John’s texts leave it at the point of saying ‘whoever’, and Paul calls for self-examination of those who wish to partake.<sup>28</sup> These texts heighten the importance and need for a receptionist understanding in the administration of the Eucharist. A careful reading of articles 28 and 29 would better understand the receptionist view our church follows even today. It’s not the church or the pastor who should decide the worthiness of a receiver of the elements; it’s the receiver who

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<sup>26</sup> Gospel of John 6.54

<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:27

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:28





should examine oneself before partaking. Thus, the receiver cannot be passive and assume that just receiving the elements matters.

Anglican Eucharistic theology's attempt to balance the objective change in the eucharistic elements and the subjective faith of the believer who receives the sacrament has much significance. In its precise sense, weekly observance of this sacrament should bring edification in the lives of people who intend to participate in the holy elements to keep themselves worthy to receive the same. This should happen throughout the week, and people come back having lived a 'worthy' life to receive the elements again to renew and remember our commitment. In other words, by emphasising the receptionist's understanding, the church stresses the importance of godly living between two instances of Holy Communion. So that the ultimate destiny of humanity is seen in participation in the worship of heaven shall be fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

Receptionism as the only theological practice of the church is long forgotten, but the receptionist understanding is not all gone from the Anglican Church and the Book of Common Prayer. Along with the dominant theological assumptions of the periods in Eucharistic theology, the church maintained a close association with the receptionist view, for which prayers in the BCP and the Articles of Religion and catechism are examples. The Anglican church sustained a balance between the objective change in the eucharistic elements and the subjective faith of the believer. Understanding the subjective faith of the believer was shaped by receptionist understanding which emphasises and eventually helps to edify and sustain a godly living in this world and ultimately participate in the worship of heaven. Thus, the receptionist's understanding is still relevant and influential.

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