



That They May All Be One: Christian Unity in the Work of A.G. Hebert SSM, and its Implications Today

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ABSTRACT

Fr Arthur Gabriel Hebert SSM is perhaps best known for his role in the Parish Communion Movement (PCM), a predominantly Church of England based offshoot of the wider liturgical reform movement of the early and mid-twentieth century. The PCM made the case for Holy Communion to be the main act of Sunday morning worship, rather than the then more widely used Matins service.

Today Hebert's name is most often associated with liturgical reform, and the systematic theology which underpinned his work has fallen largely into obscurity. This paper explores the theology that informed Hebert's liturgical arguments, drawing out his understanding of a faith that transcends denominational and stylistic differences, and makes the case that Hebert's theology has much to contribute to present-day ecumenical and missional dialogue.

KEYWORDS: A.G. Hebert, Church of England, ecumenism, Holy Communion, liturgical reform, mission, Parish Communion Movement

For the majority of members of the Church of England today, the main act of Sunday worship is the Eucharist. To suggest that this has not always been the case might be a surprise to many. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, the principal Sunday service would have been Matins, with the Eucharist being celebrated either earlier in the morning, or later in a High Mass which might only be attended by the

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presiding priest and a few liturgical assistants. During the same period, the Liturgical Reform Movement sought to find ways in which acts of worship could be more accessible to the congregations, in particular seeking a way in which the congregation could experience worship as participating members of the 'Body of Christ'. Within the Church of England, two influential books argued for a move to make the Eucharist the central act of community worship on Sundays, the emphasis of the worship being a true 'Communion' in which congregations participate in a joining around the Lord's Table, both with Christ and with each other.² These books, *Liturgy and Society* (1935)³ and *The Parish Communion* (1937),⁴ written and edited respectively by the Anglican theologian Fr Arthur Gabriel Hebert SSM,⁵ had a profound impact on the worship life of the church, and went on to influence the work of other liturgical reformers such as Alfred Shand, Henry de Candole, Gregory Dix, Cyril Pocknee and Ronald Jasper. Yet towards the end of the twentieth century Hebert's work fell largely into obscurity, and where his work is referenced it is mainly in relation to liturgy and the centrality of the Eucharist.

However, his arguments for liturgical change are based on a systematic theology which seeks to understand the concept of Church unity as the heart of Church life, this being a true participation in Christ. In this sense, the true heart of Hebert's contribution to the Church is one of ecclesiology.

In this paper I will draw out the ecclesiology that underpins Hebert's liturgical conviction, because I believe that his core theological thinking, which has had such an important impact on the liturgical life of the Church of England, has as much to say to us today as it did during the most influential period of the liturgical reform movement. The Church of England is currently exploring in some depth what it means to be a Church in an increasingly secular

2. Williams R. Crockett, 'Holy Communion', in Stephen Sykes, John Booty and Jonathan Knight (eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, rev. edn, 1998), p. 315.

3. A.G. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society: The Function of the Church in the Modern World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

4. A.G. Hebert (ed.), *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays* (London: SPCK, 1937).

5. For a biography of Hebert's life with a summary of his work, see Christopher Irvine, *Worship, Church and Society: An Exposition of the Work of Arthur Gabriel Hebert to Mark the Centenary of the Society of the Sacred Mission (Kelham) of which he was a Member* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1993).

and pluralistic twenty-first century society. Hebert's ideas about how participation in the Eucharist develops a notion of Christian unity that transcends denominational differences to form an ecclesiological community based not on cultural norms and preferences, but seeks to imagine church as a truly eternal community, offers a model of Church that encourages greater inter-denominational cooperation in both worship and mission. Churches in a largely secular society should not be in competition with each other, but should join together in the task of proclaiming the gospel. At the centre of this idea is Hebert's conviction that the Church is both heavenly and earthly: it is the Body of Christ as a worshipping community bound not by the temporal needs of the present time and prevailing culture, but by its insistence on its foundation in Christ.

In today's era of greater ecumenical dialogue and inter-denominational cooperation, a systematic theology of this nature has a greater resonance, and is worth exploring afresh. The concept of Church unity is one that has arisen numerous times in dialogue between denominations, and remains a central theme in the theological thinking that such dialogues produce. To give one example, the second ARCIC commission focused on the question of Church unity, producing a document entitled *Unity, Faith and Order: The Church as Communion*,⁶ which in its preface outlines its purpose as:

[to] offer the outcome of our labors not only to our own respective churches, but to all who are concerned with the common search for that *full ecclesial unity which we believe to be God's will for all his people*. (my emphasis)⁷

This was followed in 2001 by the Church of England document *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity* which sought to outline the Eucharistic theology of the Church of England and to highlight areas of agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, and also areas where there is still significant theological disagreement.⁸ However, despite areas of disagreement, it is important to note that the discussions which contributed to these reports readily understood that the two Churches were 'already in a real though as yet imperfect communion'

6. *Unity, Faith and Order: The Church as Communion* (published by the Anglican Communion Office, and can be found at <http://anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/...> (accessed 24 November 2011).

7. *Unity, Faith and Order*, p. 1.

8. *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity* (An Occasional Paper of the House of Bishops of the Church of England, Church House Publishing, 2001).

with each other.⁹ As we shall see, this concept of a real though as yet imperfect communion sat at the heart of Hebert's thinking when he advocated the liturgical changes that would place the Eucharist at the heart of the parish worship life.

Yet the potential that Hebert's thinking has for ecumenical dialogue is only one outcome of a rediscovery of his work, and I will show that there is also the potential for significant missiological thinking as well. This can be found in Hebert's argument that church unity is not a human problem to be solved, but a divine gift to be accepted. For Hebert, the central focus of church unity must be Christ, and the Church's union with him exemplified in the Eucharist. From this perspective, it is not only unity that can be located within the Eucharist, but the root of all Christian mission and outreach as an extension of God's divine gift to his people through Christ. The Eucharist is the place where the people of God are spiritually nourished, where they are reminded of Christ's giving of himself and his rising again, and of the Spirit's presence as the Church's source of mission to the world.

To get to the heart of Hebert's systematic theology, I will break down his thinking into three inter-linking themes:

- The growth of individualism, and the effect of this on the concept of 'communion';
- The centrality of the Eucharist as the main act of worship of the Church;
- The eschatological nature of Eucharistic worship, which extends into the life of the Church through participation in Communion.

I will explore each of these themes in turn, showing how each one is based on a fundamental conviction that unity in Christ sits at the heart of the purpose, function and mission of the Church, and how each of these themes has been developed to underpin Hebert's arguments for liturgical renewal.

Hebert links each of these themes together, building a picture of what the worship of the Church might look like in a contemporary society, a vision that is perhaps even more relevant in the twenty-first century than when it was first written. In many ways, Hebert's insight into many of the challenges that the Church of England has faced over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been remarkably prescient, and the systematic theology upon which his vision for the

9. *Unity, Faith and Order*, p. 2, para. 2.

Church is based is certainly as fresh and relevant today as it was in the early twentieth century. Add to this the potential for his thinking to contribute to the current work in missiology and ecumenical dialogue and there is much to merit a rediscovery of Hebert's theology of Church unity.

The Growth of Individualism and its Effect on 'Communion'

The first theme that helps us to draw out Hebert's ecclesiology of Church unity is his understanding of the concept of 'communion' and what that might look like in a culture that has become increasingly individualistic.

In order to provide some background to Hebert's thinking it is necessary to understand one of the key theological theories of his time. At the turn of the twentieth century the issue of individualism and its effects on the nature of society was beginning to be tackled in the theological sphere of academia. In his hugely influential paper first published in 1904–5 *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*,¹⁰ Max Weber was the first sociologist of religion to argue that religion and other social factors, in this case economics, might not be autonomous influences in social development, but might in fact be mutually supporting forces, each reinforcing the other. His thesis focuses on Protestant theology, particularly Calvinism with its emphasis on predestination, and how both this theological construct and an economic emphasis on capitalism might promote the concept of the individual in society.¹¹ In effect, he argues that one of the consequences of the Reformation was an increased theological focus on the individual, which when combined with other social factors, such as capitalism, leads to a change in understanding of how individuals in society relate to one another.

This is an important contextual observation when trying to understand how Hebert views the concept of individualism in the Church, because although this alone might be a somewhat simplistic analysis of the shifting tide of culture, the social trends that Weber's work describes appear to be the antithesis of Hebert's understanding of Christianity. In other words, Hebert's vision for what the Church should look like – what the Church should 'be' – involves moving in the opposite conceptual direction to the general trend of the culture

10. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).

11. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 98–128.

described by Weber: where the prevailing culture moves towards more individualism, the Church should move towards a greater sense of community and mutual dependence.

So for Hebert, far from Christianity being a way for the individual to access the saving grace of God, being a Christian is actually a process of being made one in Christ, utilizing the Pauline theology of the mystical Body of Christ into which Christians become 'members', in the same sense that limbs, fingers and toes are members of one body.¹² His theology is based on a simple assertion: Christianity does not merely consist of a call to reform one's life according to a moral and spiritual ethic based on the teachings of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth; it is the call to enter into a state of salvation, a state that God has already prepared for all people, and the door to which is opened through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.¹³ This would not be to argue that Hebert thinks that an individual response to the teachings of Jesus is unnecessary, as the Church still guards certain moral and ethical boundaries based on Scriptural precedent which it would expect its members to live by, but that there is more to Christianity than just what an individual does: greater than the living of a moral life is the living as a member of Christ's Body on earth, the Church.

Interestingly, given the social context in which Hebert lived, and in which he developed and wrote his theology, Hebert identifies the origins of individualism in the Church at an earlier point in history, and in the mediaeval practice of saying Mass *sotto voce* with the congregation left to say their own private prayers. In this sense the greatest proportion of the people of the Church become mere spectators to the religious rites, which in turn become the preserve of the religious elite, the ordained clergy.¹⁴ Hebert argues that a lack of congregational involvement in what was originally a communal event cannot but lead anywhere except to a disengagement with the religious rites, and to a spirituality that is equally disengaged from any sense of communal activity. The result is a congregation of individuals present at the same religious service, but where all sense of community and shared faith is diminished. It is crucial for Hebert that Christianity is understood as more of a faith than a religion, and as a communal faith in particular.¹⁵

12. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 148–49.

13. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 149.

14. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 81–84.

15. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 42.

This is important, as it begins to reveal a strand in Hebert's thinking which has a far more ontological focus on what the Church *is*, rather than simply observing what the Church *does*, although the two are often closely related. Nonetheless, Hebert draws a distinction between being a member of the Church, that is, being part of the mystical and sacramental fellowship of the Body of Christ, and the psychological experience of an individual attending a church service.¹⁶ The experience of the individual is largely subjective, and whether they find the service edifying will depend on many factors of liturgical and worship preference. However, the fact of being a member of the Church is objective, in that God has acted through Christ for the salvation of the world, and the Church is Christ's Body on earth. Salvation has been effected, and it is a communal people who bear witness to this fact, however imperfectly they may do so.

This sets up a juxtaposition between individual religious experience and the communal faith of the collected Body of Christ. Hebert does not discount individual religious experience or try to explain it away, but he does insist that individual experience is of lesser importance than the understanding that it is through initiation into the fellowship of the Church that the economy of salvation is to be made known.¹⁷ This is because the act of redemption should turn the person away from an introspective view of their own relationship with God towards an outward focus on the wider community. As Hebert says, 'He [*sic*] cannot love God whom he has not seen if he does not love his fellow men whom he has seen'.¹⁸

It is from within this community of mutual love that Christian discipleship finds its root. Hebert is clear that he views Christian discipleship as a process that begins with conversion, rather than the conversion being an end in itself.¹⁹ This process cannot be done in isolation, neither can it be reduced to a set of defensible propositions, suitable to the mind of the individual, but must be lived as part of a wider community and fostered within the common faith of the Church.

While identifying the Medieval Mass as a root cause of individualism in the Church, Hebert is nonetheless aware of the general trend of Western society towards the individualization of social constructs and

16. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 83.

17. A.G. Hebert, *The Form of the Church* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 61.

18. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 61.

19. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 9–11.

institutions which Weber had conveyed.²⁰ Hebert is also acutely aware that should this general trend continue within the life of the Church, there would come a point when the Church would no longer be able to articulate with sufficient conviction the fact that salvation has been achieved for all humankind, simply because its congregations were focused solely on their own religious experience.²¹

Hebert's views on the dangers of Liberalism as a means of undermining the communal basis of the Church stem very much from his own theological influences, particularly the writings of F.D. Maurice.²² Read from today's perspective, Hebert's views can seem somewhat romantic and idealistic; harkening to the imagined former glory of a by-gone Christian age. To put this into context, it is helpful to compare Hebert's views with the three suggested models of Anglican self-understanding proposed by Paul Avis.²³ The third of these models, which Avis terms 'The Communion Model' can be summarized as 'Baptism is the basis and the Eucharist is the fulfilment'.²⁴ This would certainly fit Hebert's ecclesiology, but there is also a heavy influence to be seen of Avis's first suggested model, 'The Nation-as-Church Model'. This model can be summarized as 'The citizen as Anglican'.²⁵ This model draws from an era that predates the notion of a pluralistic society. In fact it makes the assumption that anyone born in England is automatically an Anglican. While Hebert himself may not make that point, coming as he does from a background of dedicated ecumenical work, he clearly makes certain assumptions about what 'community' should look like. There is a clear indication throughout his work that community, particularly of the Church, is an almost non-negotiable given: an individual belongs to the community more than they belong to themselves. In today's eyes this may seem a somewhat naive, almost troubling, notion – not least because it seems to limit the freedoms of the individual. And yet the ecclesiology that Hebert offers through this view is one that is necessarily challenging: part of the commitment of following Christ

20. A.G. Hebert, 'The Parish Communion in its Spiritual Aspect', in Hebert (ed.), *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays* (London: SPCK, 1937), pp. 12–13.

21. Hebert, 'The Parish Communion', p. 13.

22. Christopher Irvine, 'A.G. Hebert', in C. Irvine (ed.), *They Shaped our Worship: Essays on Anglican Liturgists* (London: SPCK, 1998) p. 67.

23. Avis Paul, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, revd edn, 2013); see ch. 4.

24. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church*, p. 40.

25. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church*, p. 31.

means a certain surrendering of one's own autonomy in order to discover the true freedom that comes from a life fulfilled in Christ. From a twenty-first century perspective, Hebert's challenge may seem even more difficult to accomplish than when he first wrote *Liturgy and Society* in 1935. But Hebert never confuses unity with uniformity. Underlying his views is the ever-present assumption that community means variety.

From a missiological perspective, the implication of this insight offers an interesting counter-point to the notion that people should join a church in order to behave and believe exactly as the existing congregation do. The challenge that Hebert offers is to accept that a communal experience of God is not monotone, but multi-faceted. The fact that different people bring different gifts, experiences and preferences to the Church community does nothing to weaken a sense of unity, but as the words of St Paul suggest, 'Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many',²⁶ it is diversity held within a sense of unity that provides the greatest strength. So to counter the general trend of individualization in terms of experience of God, Hebert advocates two points of identification that provide the focus for the developing of Christian discipleship:

- identification with the Cross: a surrendering of selfish and self-centred desires;
- identification with the Resurrection: the freedom to serve God as God always intended, free from the dominion of sin.²⁷

The root of these two points of identification can be found in the Eucharist, which Hebert identifies as the defining act of the Church to signify membership of the One Body. In Hebert's thinking this is a profoundly missiological statement, one that underlines the need for the gathered Church to be active in worship in order for the Church to understand its purpose in the world. Nevertheless, the missiological implications in Hebert's two points of identification are more implicit than explicit. In fact, the Parish Communion Movement has quite rightly been criticized for its lack of focus on overt mission.²⁸ Douglas Webster puts forward the argument that the proper place of Liturgy is not to create a 'holy huddle' of like-minded people who gather on a

26. 1 Cor. 12.14.

27. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 61.

28. Douglas Webster, 'The Mission of the People of God', in David M. Paton (ed.), *The Parish Communion Movement Today: The Report of the 1962 Conference of Parish and People* (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 108.

Sunday morning to perform the correct rituals, but to equip people for a life of Christian mission in their everyday lives.²⁹ He notes that the emphasis on worship in *The Parish Communion* can lead to a diminishing of missionary activity, while at the same time noting that mission on its own is also inadequate: there must be a co-primacy between mission and worship as the key activities of the Church. Hebert himself is aware of this problem, and he addresses it in his paper to the 1962 Conference of Parish and People.³⁰ He sees the Eucharist as the pinnacle of worship, and the foundation of mission.

In this first section we have seen how Hebert starts to develop his theology of unity in the concept of the 'gathered Church', a community that forms its self-understanding and identity from its common foundation in Christ, rather than in any individual experience of God. It is in the theology of the Eucharist that Hebert finds expression for his prioritizing of communal faith over individual experience, and thus it is Eucharistic theology which provides part of the foundation for understanding Hebert's theology of Church unity. It is for this reason that we turn to an exploration of Hebert's Eucharistic theology next.

The Centrality of the Eucharist as the Main Act of Worship of the Church

Hebert is insistent that, among all the acts of worship that Christians can engage with, it is the Eucharist that most perfectly exemplifies the unification of every Christian both with Christ and with each other as his disciples.

It would perhaps be easy to dismiss Hebert's insistence on the centrality of the Eucharist as the principal act of Christian worship as the inevitable result of his more catholic-leaning influences. One of the most influential theologians to shape Hebert's thought on worship and liturgical renewal was the Swedish academic Yngve Brilioth (1866–1931), whose work Hebert later translated and published as *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Catholic and Evangelical*.³¹ Brilioth himself had been a student of the Oxford Movement, so it is not surprising to find the sacramental action of the Eucharist at the heart of Hebert's theology. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to attribute this Eucharistic centrality to an unthinking assumption or adherence to tradition on

29. Webster, 'The Mission of the People of God', p. 111.

30. A.G. Hebert, 'The Mystery of the People of God', in Paton (ed.), *The Parish Communion Movement Today*, p. 23.

31. Irvine, 'A.G. Hebert', p. 66.

Hebert's part. As Christopher Irvine points out, Hebert's ecclesiology is fundamentally based on the notion of the Church as the Body of Christ.³² The idea of introducing the Eucharist as the principal act of worship as a 'change for change's sake' or as a primarily evangelistic tool would have been anathema to Hebert. This point is made by Hebert's contemporary and colleague in the Parish Communion Movement, Henry de Candole, in his introduction to a conference reviewing the Movement after 25 years of its inception; those who heard of the Movement's 'success' in bringing more people into church introduced the Parish Communion without much thought to its theological basis and soon abandoned it when it was seen to 'fail'.³³ From Hebert's perspective this would not be in the least surprising. The centrality of the Eucharist, far from being an evangelistic device, is the primary liturgical expression of what it means for Christians to gather together as the Body of Christ. In this section, I will show how this conviction allowed Hebert to further develop his ecclesiology of unity by exploring how he understands the significance of the Eucharist.

At a time when the principal Sunday morning act of worship in a typical Church of England parish church was Matins, Hebert argued that Holy Communion should be the focus of the weekly worship as it marks the point when the local Christian community gathers around the Lord's Table to share in the Body and Blood of Christ and thus reaffirm their place within the Church, the Body of Christ on earth.³⁴ His argument for the centrality of the Eucharist is based on a number of key theological assertions:

- first, that the action of the Last Supper, in which Jesus identifies himself with the bread and wine as signs of the New Covenant, is a microcosm of the whole economy of salvation, taking into itself the life, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ in one liturgical act;
- second, that the Eucharistic action is not bound by physical or temporal constraints, so that the Eucharist in the local church is united with all earthly Eucharists, including the Last Supper, and also with the eternal Eucharist (or the offering in thanksgiving of Christ for his people) in heaven.

32. Irvine, 'A.G. Hebert', p. 69.

33. Henry De Candole, 'The Parish Communion after 25 Years', in Paton (ed.), *The Parish Communion Today*, p. 8.

34. Hebert, 'Parish Communion', p. 3.

It is the sharing in these actions that links the participant to the history of salvation, which is why it should have *the* prominent role in regular worship. As Hebert asserts,

... the Christian, in the weekly and daily offering of the Holy Eucharist, brings his [*sic*] whole life and all that goes to make it up, in detail and bit by bit, into the context of the Sacred History, that it may all be consecrated to God in Christ.³⁵

This deserves to be unpacked a little further. Hebert's understanding of the Church is that it has two natures: one human and earthly, the other divine and heavenly. The latter is the Church as it is intended to be, complete and perfected by God's grace, while the former is incomplete and subject to human weakness with all the problems that this may cause. This difference between being complete and incomplete finds its expression in the 'form' of the Church, or how the Church operates. In other words, there are what Hebert refers to as 'Primary Forms' of the Church, such as the Sacraments given to the Church as a means of conveying the grace of God, and the orthodoxy of the Christian faith laid down in Scripture and the Creeds. These are the products of the complete, heavenly Church. The 'Secondary Forms' of the Church are things such as hymns, doctrinal positions and various customs and laws that are designed to reflect the primary forms, but do so in an imperfect way. These secondary forms are the product of the incomplete, earthly Church.³⁶ The fact that the Church has two natures does not prevent the Church from being one institution, a theology that links the Church as Christ's Body on earth with the doctrine of the Incarnation in which it is understood that Christ is one person, but has two natures: one earthly, the other divine.³⁷

It is from this understanding of the Church as having two natures that the purpose of the Church can be discerned: the earthly incarnation of the Church exists in order to sanctify, or consecrate, the people of God as set apart to be a 'holy' people, which it does by reflecting the primary forms of the heavenly Church.³⁸ It is important to note that Hebert does not suggest that the term 'holy' is to be used to describe the characteristics of a person or an object, but rather that it designates a relationship between a person (or object) and God. In this

35. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 80.

36. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 74.

37. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 154.

38. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 85.

sense, the Church itself is a holy institution in so far as it is set apart for the purposes of God, and is defined by its relationship with God.³⁹ Hebert sees this act of setting apart as a central component in understanding the unity of the Church. As a people consecrated to God's purposes, the Body of Christ, Hebert argues that the concept of the 'Real Presence' of Christ at the Eucharist should not just apply to the consecrated elements of bread and wine, but also to the people of the Church themselves. Hebert sees Christ as the true unity of the Church, beyond the scope of human fallibility and weakness, who provides the bedrock upon which Christian discipleship is founded. He sums this up, 'The mystery of the unity that we have in Christ is the most real thing about us'.⁴⁰

This sense of unity is expressed in the action of the Eucharist, in which through the *anamnesis*, or obedience to the command of Christ to 'Do this in remembrance of me',⁴¹ the participants offer themselves as 'lively sacrifices' and thus enter into the economy of salvation being enacted.⁴² Hebert draws his theology of *anamnesis* from Gregory Dix, understanding the act to be more than a mere memorial but an objective reaching back to the past and making it real in the present.⁴³ It is because of this that the Eucharist is the central act of the Church, around which Christians can form a common identity and find the truth of the unity of the Church,⁴⁴ and enables the Lord's Prayer to be said with conviction as 'Our Father...' rather than 'My Father...'.⁴⁵

It is therefore not surprising that Hebert identifies the increasing isolation of the congregation during the Eucharist in the periods immediately before the Reformation and in the years following it as a cause of the individualization of religion and faith. The lack of any common sense of unity as the congregation gathers around the Lord's Table pushes faith and religious practice into the realms of the private individual experience, particularly in some of the Protestant denominations that see the effectiveness of the Sacrament being largely dependent on the participant's faith, such as in Zwinglian theology. Such a view opens Hebert to the accusation of a certain naiveté when it comes to matters of doctrine, certainly from some of

39. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, pp. 74–75.

40. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 62.

41. Lk. 22.19.

42. Hebert, 'Parish Communion', p. 4.

43. Hebert 'Parish Communion', pp. 9–10.

44. Hebert 'Parish Communion', p. 7.

45. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 152–53.

his contemporaries who advocated a greater liberalism in doctrinal interpretation. Christopher Irvine has commented that this is perhaps a reasonable response given Hebert's doctrinal conservatism and his somewhat 'child-like enthusiasm'.⁴⁶ While this may indeed be the case, and Hebert's writing certainly pays scant attention to the theology of the early Reformers, it could be argued that this is because Hebert is seeking to draw back from denominational differences, arguing that the unity of the Church is to be found in the primary forms of the Church, and not to be confused with the secondary forms. Given his earlier work on the theology of Brilioth, who attempted to recover Lutheran, Calvinist and Zwinglian Eucharistic theologies in his analysis of Anglican, Reformed, Scottish and Swedish liturgies,⁴⁷ the implication is that Hebert's own understanding of Eucharistic theology suggests a spiritual depth to the Eucharistic action that goes beyond the mere ritual of the outward form, or its liturgical setting. He writes:

... [the] chief danger everywhere is that [the] spiritual aim [of the Eucharist] should be confused by some form of ritualism, by some identification of the movement with its mere externals.⁴⁸

Hebert makes the point that because the Church is both heavenly and earthly, the completeness of the Church in heaven is often misunderstood because of the Church's incompleteness on earth. However, he is clear that it is not the Church itself that is unholy, divided or incomplete, but the Christians who make up the Church on earth.⁴⁹ Schisms and quarrels might weaken the Church in its earthly form but none of these things can undermine the victory won by Christ on the cross, or the fact that he was raised again from the dead and took his humanity to be reunited with God in the ascension. Again, this is a primary form of the Church that is unaffected by human weakness. The one uniting factor around which Christians can gather is the Lord's Table, another primary form given to the Church as a Sacrament to convey the grace of God. This is a participation in Christ as the True Temple, of which the participants are 'living stones',⁵⁰ and as Hebert says, 'Thus our Lord is the ground and substance of the Church's holiness, as of its unity'.⁵¹

46. Irvine, 'A.G. Hebert', p. 65.

47. Irvine, 'A.G. Hebert', p. 66.

48. Hebert, 'Parish Communion', p. 7.

49. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 74.

50. 1 Pet. 2.5.

51. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 77.

In this section we have seen how Hebert has located the source of Christian unity in the person of Christ, itself an objective fact exemplified by the Christian obedience to share bread and wine in 'remembrance of him'. We have also seen how Hebert regarded the resulting community as one 'set apart' for the purposes of God, and defined by its relationship to God. Again, in terms of mission, this understanding of a unity located in Christ rather than set by denominational boundaries opens up the possibility of defining mission parameters not by its means but by its ends: it does not matter which church people join, but that they come into communion with Christ.

In addition, by identifying Christ as the ultimate source of the Church's unity, Hebert advocates an understanding of the nature of the Church in an eschatological sense. In other words, he sees the fulfilment of the purposes of the Church as being caught up in the fulfilment of all things when they are made one in Christ,⁵² when Christ shall be 'All in all'.⁵³ This eschatological element is the theme we turn to next.

*The Eschatological Nature of Eucharistic Worship, and its Implications
for 'Communion'*

Christopher Irving has pointed out that Brilioth's detailed work on the Eucharist covered five themes: thanksgiving, communion, commemoration, sacrifice and presence. The absence of eschatology is notable. It is therefore quite interesting that Hebert identified eschatology as one of the key aspects in his ecclesiology of communion. It demonstrates that while he was certainly indebted to the work of others, he was highly capable of expanding ideas in new and interesting directions that were not necessarily bound by any ecclesial tradition. It might be this very quality that impressed Hebert's work on a variety of later liturgists and theologians such as the Congregationalist Horton Davies and the Anglican Evangelical Leslie Brown.⁵⁴

With this in mind we will explore in this section how Hebert's theology of the two natures of the Church, one earthly and one heavenly, reveal how the primary forms of the Church point towards the time when Christ will be glorified as the one in whom all things

52. Eph. 1.10.

53. Col. 3.11.

54. Irving, 'A.G. Hebert', pp. 66-67.

hold together and have their being. What is crucial to understanding Hebert's theology here is the notion that external forms or rituals convey a deeper meaning that both inhabits and transcends those forms. For Hebert, this notion reaches its apex in the Eucharist, where both the temporal and eternal natures of the Church meet together.

Hebert's understanding of the eschatological fulfilment of all things is based on his reading of Pauline theology, particularly as expressed in the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. Hebert describes the Epistle to the Ephesians as 'the Epistle of Catholicity',⁵⁵ because it outlines a complex theology of how Creation, as a fallen and dispersed entity, has been redeemed in the death and resurrection of Christ, and is now in the process of being drawn into one in Christ. This is very much a theology of 'Now-and-Not-Yet', where it is possible to say that salvation has been achieved for Creation by Christ, and yet the fulfilment of all things is to come when Christ returns in glory.

This is important when it comes to understanding Hebert's thinking on the nature of the Church. His understanding is that, just as Christ's glory was largely hidden during the time of the Incarnation, so the true glory of the Church is also hidden (including from the Church itself) but will be revealed when Christ returns. Until then, the Sacraments are outward and visible signs of God's grace working within the Church.⁵⁶ The purpose of the Sacraments is to make clear the eschatological destiny of the Church, in the sense that true unity in Christ can only be understood by a participation in Christ's death and resurrection through Baptism and Eucharist.⁵⁷ In these two Sacraments the Christian is called to die to the self (represented by the immersion in the waters of Baptism) and to rise again with Christ. The Eucharist then draws the baptized together so that they all share in the Body and Blood of Christ and, in the process, become united with Christ and with one another. The eschatological element is that these Sacraments are truly effective in what they convey in an inward, spiritual sense, and yet they are administered in a temporal, earthly sense, pointing forward to the fulfilment of all things as promised in Christ's return. The Church, as the guardian of the Holy Sacraments, shares in this eschatological vision. For this reason, if the Church is to describe itself as 'catholic', or universal, then this can only be the case

55. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 91.

56. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, pp. 77–78.

57. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 64.

if it is understood that Christ is the true source and meaning of 'catholicity', wherein true unity is to be sought.⁵⁸ No single ecclesial community can claim 'catholicity' as being their own.

For Hebert, the true understanding of this notion can be found in the concept of '*koinonia*', or of being of one mind in Christ. Again, this concept is based on the primary forms of the Church, and transcends the secondary forms. In other words, this is not a case of one denomination or tradition trying to impose certain stylistic or doctrinal demands as a means of forcing a recognizable, earthly unity, but rather recognizing that unity is already achieved in a 'common acceptance of the Redemption'.⁵⁹ If it is recognized that the Redemption is common to all Christians, regardless of denominational factions and disagreements, then there must also be an acceptance that ultimately all Christians are one in Christ. In an earthly sense, this seems to be a paradox, especially when there are so many bitter disputes between denominations, and even within denominations. But by referring back to Hebert's understanding of the Church as both human and divine, it is possible to see how the human arguments can sway back and forth, ideally with conversation and respectful dialogue, and yet this does nothing to undermine the Church's true unity as a divinely ordained institution.⁶⁰

This is the eschatological heart of Hebert's understanding of the Church, whereby the earthly Church, in all its disunity, is merely the present, temporal form of an eternal Church, which is united in Christ. As he says,

The Church on earth belongs both to time and to eternity: it is at once human, imperfect, militant here on earth, and divine, the heir even now of the eternal Kingdom of God.⁶¹

It is essential to understand that Church unity is not something that can be created, imposed or willed by human means, as it is something that has already been given by God to the Church through Christ.⁶² In the same way, schism is not really an undoing of the unity of the Church, as painful and as difficult as it might be for those who experience it. Hebert writes,

There still remains a unity which God has made, which is deeper than the divisions made by men [*sic*]. In spite of the schisms which

58. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 90.

59. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 67.

60. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 63.

61. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 152.

62. Hebert, 'Parish Communion', pp. 17-18.

desolate Christendom, we can still declare our faith in the one Church of God.⁶³

This is not to say that schism does not matter. The crucial phrase in understanding Hebert's thought on this is 'In spite of the schisms', an allusion to the fact that schism is the result of human weakness and not the will of God. In Hebert's mind, the very human quality in the propensity to split and form denominations and opposing traditions is the result of humanity's collective inability to truly understand the purposes of God. In other words, earthly disunity, although caused by human weakness, should not be seen as a human problem. The problem itself raises questions that are ultimately beyond humanity's ability to solve satisfactorily. Instead, Hebert argues that the Church, collectively, should get on with the business of proclaiming the Gospel, nurturing disciples through fellowship and prayer, guarding and teaching orthodoxy, and administering the Sacraments, and to leave the ultimate questions of Church unity to God.⁶⁴ Hebert cites the Russian theologian Alexei Khomiakov in stating that whoever has faith, love and prayer is in communion with all others who have faith, love and prayer. These criteria apply to the whole Church, both heavenly and earthly, and are therefore sources of true unity as each of these things find their fulfilment in Christ.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, Hebert would want to take this notion further in a practical sense. He argues that this sense of Church unity must begin with the local church, not necessarily in terms of being members of an ecclesiastical institution, but in terms of all Christians recognizing a 'spirit of truth, unity and concord' as the root of their worship.⁶⁶ This is designed to counter any localized sense of 'togetherness', which Hebert argues can only result in a sense of being 'together' against others from whom the group would wish to dissociate, and to recognize that true unity is a divine gift that encompasses even those with whom there may be violent dispute.⁶⁷ He even goes so far as to suggest that only the increasing secularizing of society can eventually bring all Christians together, recognizing their common unity in the Christ once again rejected by the world.⁶⁸ Certainly the rise of

63. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 153.

64. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 12.

65. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 147.

66. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, p. 64, quoting the *Book of Common Prayer*.

67. Hebert, *Form of the Church*, pp. 68–70.

68. Hebert, 'Parish Communion', p. 22.

organizations such as Churches Together demonstrates the benefit of local churches working together for mutual support and understanding, and this has arguably been influenced by the rise of secularism. However, churches are often still defined by what they are not, rather than by what they are: Christians who share in the common redemption of Christ. Hebert's vision asks for more than simply cooperation between denominations, urging a real recognition of our unified foundation in Christ. Thus unity becomes not a goal to be achieved, but a source of missional purpose and conviction. This statement needs to be unpacked a little further.

In an era of increased inter-denominational dialogue and the rise of organizations like Churches Together, where communication and fellowship between churches has perhaps never been so widespread and positive, there is still a significant challenge to be faced in terms of mission. There are numerous strands to this challenge – far too many to discuss here in depth – but in our modern, pluralistic society many local churches often find themselves in competition with one another, in spite of an increase in dialogue and goodwill between them. This is often because their mission fields are similar and, in an era of increased secularization, there is an ever greater need to preserve traditions and guarantee a church survives into the future. In many respects, the increase in goodwill between local churches is somewhat deceiving, as it hides the fact that few churches of different denominations attempt to engage with mission together in partnership. There are notable exceptions of course, such as initiatives like Street Pastors, and Christians Against Poverty, which seek to demonstrate Christ's love for the world in practical ways. But on the whole, missional activity remains the preserve of either individual churches or individual denominations.

Hebert's view of the Church radically challenges this presupposition. By drawing away from stylistic differences and outward forms of worship, and by drawing attention back to the fundamental tenets of Christianity as a faith founded in Jesus Christ for the common good of humanity, Hebert offers a vision of what future cooperation in mission might look like. I am not sure that this is entirely what Hebert ever intended. He wanted to create a vision of Church rooted in a common purpose and worship of God. Nonetheless, his work also points towards a vision of mission rooted in a common purpose: to proclaim Christ's redemptive action to the world.

This is a view that may turn out to be more prophetic than Hebert might have imagined, but even in a Christian world of increased ecumenical dialogue and inter-church cooperation, Hebert's understanding of the eschatological nature of true Church unity

stands as a warning to those who would try to make Church unity a human problem to be solved rather than a divine gift to be accepted.

Conclusion

Although he is often most associated with liturgical renewal within the Church of England, the systematic theology which underpins A.G. Hebert's thinking has a relevance to today's era of ecumenical dialogue and missiology, because it raises questions about the increased individualization of society and the propensity of church denominations to make secondary forms of the Church more important than primary forms.

What I hope I have demonstrated is that the liturgical outcomes that followed in the years after the Parish Communion Movement, and still continue to develop today, are based not on a desire to see a particular liturgical form impose a sense of unity on the Church, but that they sprang from the systematic theology that Hebert developed to assert Christ's position at the heart of Church unity. This theology continues to offer us a radical reinterpretation of how we see the nature and purpose of the Church, and how we view our roles as Christians drawn together by our common mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God. For Hebert, the placing of the Eucharist at the heart of the Church's worship is the first step in recognizing a unity within the Church that has been lost in so many ways. In many ways, the Parish Communion Movement began to realize Hebert's vision, but arguably never quite finished the job. Or rather, the process that Hebert envisioned is still being played out: the work of numerous inter-denominational dialogue groups is testament to this, as is the possibility of increased cooperation of local churches in issues of mission and outreach. Hebert's eschatological vision of the Church, and his understanding of Church unity as a divine gift already given, has much to say to contemporary ecumenical dialogue and mission partnership. It is certainly a theology that merits further exploration and greater recognition.