

Codification of Table Manners at the Eucharist in Early Stuart England

Reworking the Reformation in the English Church

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Abstract

Using official church documents from the Early Stuart era, broadsides, and pamphlets this article demonstrates how the church set official codes for worship and how the laity responded to that code. Eucharistic table manners and how lay persons behaved during Divine Service created complex multi-tiered relationships with the Church of England, its clergy and fellow lay persons. This article examines how the codification of Eucharistic table manners impacted the lives of lay persons in Early Stuart England. Further, this article argues that strict religious code was placed on the laity by a complex church administration. Laudism shifted how people worshiped in England, and for some, it made religion more accessible, but for others less so as it titled them notorious or outsider.

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Studying the Eucharist during the Protestant Reformation is a fascinating route to understanding the complexity of this watershed event because the Eucharist was central to Christian worship. As food, the Eucharist served as a binding agent for faith communities. Who was allowed to partake, how they partook, and how they understood the Eucharist all helped to define where religious factions were located within The Reformation. The Reformation in England was far less coherent than it was on the continent, however. It was not a clear opening up of religion to the *Priesthood of Believers* as it was in German states and Geneva. Rather, The Reformation in England was experienced as an opening, closing and opening up again of religion to believers at irregular intervals. Religion during the Tudor church was marked with irregular intervals of opening and closing. Henry Tudor made religion more accessible to Englishmen, Mary Tudor closed religion, and Edward and Elizabeth Tudor reopened by actively creating a church that was suitable for all subjects. Following Elizabeth Tudor's *39 Articles of Religion*, which for the most part ended the debate over the nature of the Eucharist by asserting that the church was Catholic in behavior and Calvinist in doctrine, attention was placed on how to receive the sacrament. Examining the Eucharist and its customs—which were receiving it kneeling on one's knees reverently at an altar rail—in the early Stuart church creates greater understanding of how codified religion impacted local parish life in England. How the Eucharist was received, who was allowed to receive it and who was barred from the altar rail defined community because taking the Eucharist—that was required by law—was an integral part of worship in the lives of seventeenth century Englishmen. Official church documents demonstrate a new focus on table manners. Shifting focus away from debating the nature of the Eucharist and from Elizabethan conversations defining the Eucharist to how the Eucharist is taken, church documents clearly show who is in and who is out—in respect to the Eucharist—according to their table manners when receiving the sacrament. My research argues that codification of Eucharistic table manners and how the Church of England enforced table manners affected the psyches of the laity and determined how they lived in community with fellow parishioners.

After proclaiming that anyone who disagrees that the Church of England is The True Apostolic Church and that its rituals and doctrines are ordered by The Holy Bible are to be excommunicated and barred from the table until they “publikly repent,” *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical 1604*—the canonical laws of the Church of England-- officially authorizes proper table manners for the clergy, churchwardens and the laity.¹ Attention is then turned toward the laity by setting guidelines and expectations for their behavior. All due reverence is to be used, insists the document. Further, it commands lay persons to follow the apostle’s teachings, “Let all things be done decently and according to order.”² The laity must remain silent during Divine Service, and according to the document, moving around, leaving, or walking during Divine Service was strictly forbidden.³ Dress was an important way to demonstrate reverence. Illustrating the importance of dress, Canon Law required that men attend church with uncovered heads unless they had an infirmity—in that case they were permitted to wear a night cap.⁴ Gestures were also codified. For example, the laity was instructed to bow in lowly reverence at the mention of Christ’s name and to follow *The Book of Common Prayer* and its rubric for further instructions on kneeling.⁵ Lay persons were forbidden to loiter outside the church, but rather everyone was instructed to enter church and participate in Divine Service with prescribed reverence.⁶ In addition to setting expectations for lay behavior, this document commands ministers to warn the laity prior to offering communion. The warning was stark— lay persons must receive communion because it is lawful to do so.⁷ The Eucharist was used as leverage because not only was it a symbol of belonging to a community-- parishioners celebrated this rite together-- but it also held people in line with the threat of being pushed to the periphery of the community or treated as outsiders. English men were required to receive communion in the seventeenth century. Similarly, they were required to participate in the common life of a parish. Both these requirements worked together in forcing the laity into submission and obedience to canon law. Dress, gestures like bowing, and table manners were all indicators of the richness of one’s faith, steadfastness of one’s morals, and one’s status within the parish.

¹ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, 1604*, 3&4. Jac.1, c.1.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, 1604*, 17. Jac.1, c.1.

⁵ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, 1604*, 18. Jac.1, c.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, 1604*, 22. Jac.1, c.1.

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Another aspect of this document that further illustrates relationships between the laity and the Church of England is the manner in which it created outsiders—that is, people who do not fit in. Canon Law states, “Notorious Offenders must not be admitted to communion.”⁸ However, it does not clearly define what it meant to be a notorious offender. The document implies that people who are known for their sins, such as begrudging a neighbor, should not receive communion. Furthermore, it charges that Churchwardens should be barred from communion if they fail to report notorious offenders.⁹ As a result of not reporting notorious offenders, Churchwardens risked being charged with perjury. Canon Law created a dynamic in which Churchwardens were bound to report fellow parishioners’ failings, and as a result of their bounded duty, their position wielded considerable power. *The Tenor of the Oath to be ministered to the Church-Warden and Questmen*, an oath that all Churchwardens were required to take, illustrates that duty. “You shall make diligent inquirie, and true presentment of all and every person of or within your Parish,” charged the oath.¹⁰ The oath continued by instructing Churchwardens to report offences regardless of personal affections—report them indiscriminately. Canonical law’s reference to notorious offenders and the Churchwarden’s oath to report those offenders created tense relationships among members of Protestant communities. Not unlike laws that proscribed table manners, regulated dress, and restricted movements and speaking during Divine Service, the Churchwardens oath also kept the laity in line. Unlike Canon Law that descended from the upper echelons of the Church of England, Churchwardens, though given power by the Church of England, ascended the ladder of power from within local parishes. In other words, they were raised up from the laity and they became the official charged with policing how the laity participated in the Lord’s Supper.

Articles for the Church-wardens and Inquirers is a collection of questions that guided the Churchwarden in examining his parish for unlawful actions. They instructed Churchwardens in how to persecute correct church behavior and how to pinpoint anomalies during communion. However, more importantly they were a tool for preparing for the Bishop’s visitation—the Churchwarden was required to give his report. By examining the job of Churchwardens, one can clearly see the power they had and how, in many ways, they were the church’s police. The articles

⁸ Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical of the Church of England, 1604, 26. Jac.1, c.1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Tenor of the Oath to be ministered to the Church-Wardens and Questmen*, 1625, Car.1, c.1.

examined the actions of lay persons, but they differ from canon law because they extended examination to the clergy and strangers within the community. The articles wanted to know if strangers attended communion and if ministers gave strangers communion.¹¹ The articles ask, “What Strangers have preached in your church this last year?”¹² In addition to wanting information about strangers being present at communion or preaching, the articles also wanted to know details about the vicar. Does the Vicar give private communion in parishioner’s houses?¹³ Moreover, does the minister administer communion to parishioners who do not kneel reverently upon their knees when receiving it?¹⁴ *Articles for the Church-Wardens* greatly expanded the scope of the official church’s prying into local parish life to include ministers and outsiders— “strangers.” This document suggests the importance of Churchwardens knowing each parishioner, their lives and reputations. A Churchwarden had to know who was notorious within his parish, and thus, he had to know each parishioner and remain suspicious of all strangers. Communion within private homes was considered suspect because it was not public and it could not be monitored. It is clear, therefore, that the Church of England wanted to control access to the Eucharist.

After establishing the presence of strangers and vicars who do not preach and serve communion in a manner that is authorized by Canon Law, the articles turn toward the laity and prompted Churchwardens to further examination. Article one in the section entitled, *Articles Concerning Religion*, asked Churchwardens if any in their parish hold heretical views or opinions contrary to the teachings of the Church of England.¹⁵ Additionally, this article wanted to know if there are any “Popish Recusants” who refuse to receive communion using authorized table manners.¹⁶ *Articles Concerning Religion* reflect the intensity of the Churchwarden’s work. To answer questions concerning opinion and table manners, Churchwardens had to be present and also involved in the lives of fellow parishioners. There must have existed clear lines of communication between the laity and Churchwarden. In addition to

¹¹ Articles for the Church-Wardens and Inquirers to ground there presentments upon, 1625, Car.1, c.1.

¹² Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 6. Car.1, c.1.

¹³ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 7. Car.1, c.1.

¹⁴ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 8. Car.1, c.1.

¹⁵ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 8. Car.1, c.1.

¹⁶ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 1. Car.1, c.1.

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reflecting the intensity of the Churchwarden's inquiry, this section reflects distrust of the laity. In other words, the Church of England was heavily concerned with the resurgence of Roman Catholicism and new ideas—possibly ideas held by dissenting factions.

In line with canonical law *Articles for the Church-Wardens* asked Churchwardens to examine the behavior, dress, and table manners of the laity. Do all in your parish or those who sojourn to your parish attend church? “Do all attend orderly and abide there throughout the service reverently behaving themselves inwardly as well as outwardly by gestures of their bodies in keeping their heads uncovered, reverently kneeling, standing and other decent behavior?”¹⁷ The article required Churchwardens to ensure that everyone over the age of sixteen regularly received communion. Lastly, the article asked if the minister has given communion to any “Notorious evildoer.”¹⁸ Interestingly, *notorious evildoer* is defined as adulterer, fornicator, common drunkard, or perverse malicious persons.¹⁹ Additionally, the article asks Churchwardens if anyone had been admitted to communion who was previously excommunicated before they had been reconciled by the Ordinary or a Churchwarden. This section of *Articles for the Church-Wardens* was an expansion of canonical law because it detailed the prosecutable behaviors of the laity. It also further demonstrates the power Churchwardens had and how they were bound, by duty, to interfere in the lives of lay persons. Table manners were an area of concern in this section of the article and they were standardized. Not adhering to the standard table manner while coming to church and receiving the Eucharist placed the laity at risk of becoming an outsider in their parish. Unlike canonical law, this section defined notorious evildoer as one who committed social crimes rather than religious ones. For example, adultery, drunkenness, maliciousness were crimes people committed against fellow humans. They are not crimes committed against religion—like heresy. This section thus determined who could and who could not live in community. Moreover, it defined belonging. The Churchwarden's power is clearly defined as it states that excommunicated persons had to reconcile with the Ordinary or Churchwarden prior to receiving communion. Again, the Churchwarden was placed at the center of parish life, and this is further proof of the power he wielded. People who found themselves in conflict with the Church of England had to

¹⁷ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 2. Car.1,c.1.

¹⁸ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 5. Car.1,c.1.

¹⁹ Articles for the Church-Wardens, 1625, article 5. Car.1,c.1.

reconcile with Churchwardens in order to reconcile with the church that reconciled them to God.

The question remains, how did the laity feel about clearly established religion that codified table manners and determined fellow parishioners belonging? One source that may speak indirectly for the laity is, *Satisfaction Concerning Mixt Communion*. Published in 1643, this pamphlet was created for mass consumption — for public and private reading. The document sought to answer the question, is it lawful to receive the Eucharist in the presence of evildoers? It answers that it is lawful because it is a Christian's duty to receive the Eucharist.²⁰ Following this answer, the author confronts popular arguments against receiving communion in the company of evildoers: The laity may not receive mixed communion because evildoers discern not the Lord's Body, nor have the right to it. Additionally, the document confronts the popular belief that the Eucharist is only meant for the saints or holy people because Christ said his children's bread should not be given to the dogs.²¹ Answering these arguments, the author agrees that profane persons should not receive the Eucharist, but these arguments, he concludes do not prove that a private person should avoid the Eucharist.²² Although this document is not a direct recording of lay person's thoughts in regards to the Eucharist and table manners, it is an indirect representation of the laity, because it was published for mass consumption. It is a response to popular ideas and concerns held by the laity. Concern about who can and cannot receive the Eucharist, how to receive it and even in whose company it may be received was a result of codified religion and diligent enforcement of that code. The Church of England created a Eucharist that demanded much of the laity by way of table manners, behavior, dress, suspicion of strangers and outsiders and this document encapsulates the laity's response.

Codification of religion in England and the creation of Churchwardens as an official administrative arm of the church greatly affected the lives of the laity because their lives were intertwined with the culture of the religion and they were bound by law to participate in that culture by receiving the Eucharist. The Eucharist, how people received it, who received it and who was forbidden to approach the table, became a decisive indicator of who belonged in the community. People who did not

²⁰ Samuel Gellibrand, *Satisfaction Concerning Mixt Communion*. John Raworth: London. July 8, 1643.

²¹ Ibid.3.

²² Ibid.

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adhere to the standardization of table manners, proper dress and gestures were ostracized. They were barred and titled notorious. Churchwardens were the face and voice of the official church at local parish level. They were official reporters and monitors of worship, and they wielded considerable power—so much that even the clergy were subject to their inquests. Examining official church documents from the early Stuart era gives an idea of how canonical law was enforced with a strong arm. Furthermore, we can see the commitment of Churchwardens and the seriousness of their inquests. Most importantly, these documents illustrate, perhaps unintentionally, the concerns of The Church of England. First and foremost, they were concerned with strangers encouraging unauthorized teachings and behaviors. Secondly, they were concerned with rogue ministers, and finally, they were concerned with the laity who did not live up to prescribed religion. The early Stuart church can be characterized as an era of intense worry over uniformity in the Church of England. The Eucharist, standardized table manner when receiving it, and who could and could not approach the communion table are all signals of how the Lord's Supper defined complex relationships between the laity and the Church of England, relationships between the laity, and clergy and relationships between peer lay persons.

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