

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

W.H. Griffith Thomas explores the institution of the Lord's Supper, emphasizing its significance as a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and the spiritual participation of believers.

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31, Luke 22:19, John 6:11, 1 Corinthians 11:25, Hebrews 8:7

Topics: "Lord's Supper", "Holy Communion"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the detailed language used by the Lord in instituting the Supper, highlighting the differences in phraseology among the four accounts and emphasizing the textual nuances rather than theological discrepancies. The institution of the Lord's Supper immediately after the Passover meal is significant, indicating that the earliest disciples partook of Holy Communion following a meal. The act of taking bread instead of a lamb signifies a feast, not a sacrifice, with the bread and cup given separately for participation. The exegesis of the words reveals the symbolic nature of 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood,' emphasizing spiritual participation and the covenantal aspect of the Supper.

Transcript

In the light of these general principles we can now examine in detail the language of our Lord in instituting the Supper. There are some distinct differences of phraseology in the four accounts, which go in two pairs, St. Matthew and St. Mark being in close agreement, while St. Luke and St. Paul also agree together. The differences, however, do not affect the main question of the institution, and are matters of textual rather than theological importance in relation to the meaning of the rite. The full text of the words of institution is appended for the purpose of careful comparison and in order to show how each account supplements the rest.

Matthew 26.

Mark 14.

Luke 22.

1 Corinthians 11.

23 For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed

26 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take eat; this is my body.

22 And as they were eating, he took bread, and when he had blessed, he brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take ye: this is my body.

19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave to them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

took bread;

and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me.

27 And he took a cup, and gave thanks, and gave unto them,

23 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave to them:

20 And the cup in like manner after supper,

25 In like manner also the cup, after supper,

saying,

And they all drank of it.

24 And he said unto them

saying

saying

28 Drink ye all of it: for this is my blood of the covenant,

This is my blood of the covenant,

This cup is the new covenant in my blood, even that

This cup is the new covenant in my blood:

which is shed for many unto remission of

which is shed for many.

which is poured out for you.

this do as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

29 sins. But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my

25 Verily I say unto you, I will no more drink of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new

18 For I say unto you, I will not drink from henceforth of the fruit of the vine, until

26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come.

father's kingdom.

in the kingdom of God.

the kingdom of God shall come.

The Lord's Supper was instituted "as they were eating," that is, immediately after the Passover Supper. It is important to note this, as it shows that the earliest disciples received the Holy Communion just after a meal. Our Lord then "took bread". He did not take a lamb, but bread. This shows that what He was about to institute was a feast, not a sacrifice. "The Passover lamb, like other sacrifices, might only be slain in the forecourt of the temple." [Schaff-Herzog, Encyclopaedia.

Article, "Passover," Vol. III., p. 1758.] Of course it was a meal connected with a sacrifice, but the sacrifice was one thing, the meal quite another. Our Lord first took the bread and then "the cup" (one of the Passover cups) and blessed (εὐλογῆσας, Matt. 26:26 and Mark 14:22) and gave thanks (εὐχαριστήσας, Matt. 26:27 and Mark 14:23, for the cup, and Luke 22:19, for the bread). These actions of blessing and thanksgiving seem to refer to God as their object (cf. Matt. 14:19; ἀναβλήψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐλόγησεν, John 6:11; εὐχαριστήσας).

The word "it" is in italics, thus suggesting that our Lord blessed God; that is, He gave thanks according to the Jewish custom at the Paschal Feast. In any case the "thanksgiving" must refer to God, and if the "blessing" is to be referred to the bread (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6, ὁ εὐλογοῦμεν), the meaning will be consecration or dedication rather than praise or thanksgiving.* * [Bishop Westcott, in his Commentary on the Epistle to Hebrews, p. 209, has a special note on "The Biblical idea of blessing," which enables us to understand the meaning which our Lord intended to convey by the words which He used at the institution of the Lord's Supper.

The Bishop, after discussing the blessings of the Old Testament, says that when man blesses an impersonal object there is nothing in the idea of a charm or of any magical working. The full phrase is "to bless God for the thing." In discussing the New Testament uses of εὐλογεῖν the following points alone concern our present subject 1. A use "absolutely, without any expressed object, but with the clear thought of Him to whom praise is due for every good; Mark 6:41, Matt. 14:19, Mark 14:22, Matt. 26:26 (all εὐχαριστήσας); Luke 24:30.

In these cases, indeed, it is possible to take τοὺς ἄρτους, τὸν ἄρτον as the object from the context; but the Jewish custom points very plainly in the other direction; and this construction is decisively supported by the parallel use of εὐχαριστεῖν, Mark 14:23, Matt. 26:27, Mark 8:6, Luke 22:17, 19; John 6:11." 2. A use "with a material object; Mark 8:7, Luke 9:16, 1 Cor. 10:16. In these cases 'blessing the bread' must be understood as 'blessing God the giver of the bread.' The formulas in use (at the Paschal meal) are given by Lightfoot on Matt. 26:26."

The blessing therefore by our Lord, when He instituted the Holy Communion, seems to have been an act of blessing, not the bread and wine, but God the giver.] Then our Lord broke the bread and gave it to His disciples saying: "This is my body which is given for you." Afterwards He took the cup, and said, "This is my blood of the new covenant (or, This cup is the new covenant in my blood) which is being poured out for

you (for many) for the remission of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."

It is to be noted that the bread and cup were given separately, the one being applied to the body given and the other to the blood shed. Further, the disciples were there and then to "eat" and "drink". The ordinance was evidently for participation. We now come more closely to the exegesis of the words. 1. "This" (τουτο), in "This is my body, my blood," must refer to that which our Lord gave, and in the case of the bread this is so, from the grammatical standpoint as well, according to the rule of a neuter subject when the predicate is an inanimate object (cf. also John 17:3 for an instance of a pronoun conforming to the gender of the other noun).

Even apart from this we may probably say that what Christ gave was a broken fragment of the loaf which He had then broken, and that in giving it, He rightly said, "This (sc. fragment)." The Greek for "fragment" is neuter (κλ■σμα, cf. Matt. 14:20). 2. "Is" (■στιν), implies a real relation between subject and predicate, the relation being determinable only by the context. The addition of "given for you" shows the true point of correspondence. The ■στιν cannot be held to express identity of substance whether physical or spiritual, for in the case of the cup ("this cup is the new testament") the interpretation would be absurd. [Plummer, Article, "Lord's Supper"; Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible, Vol.

III., p. 149.] It is important to notice that the word is "is," not "becomes". It is hardly too much to say that our Lord would scarcely have used "is" if He had wished His disciples to understand that the bread was about to be changed into something else. He would almost certainly have used γ■νεται, as in the case of the water changed into wine (John 2:9). The idea of the whole phrase of which the copula is a part is, "This is the representation of, or equivalent to, my body which is given for you; my blood which is shed for you."

It is interesting, and possibly significant, to notice that in the Service Book used by the Jews at their Passover at the present day these words are used: "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt." [Girdlestone, Four Foundation Truths, p. 57.] There cannot be any doubt as to the meaning of "is" in such a passage. The ■στιν may be properly illustrated by ειμι in John 8:12, 9:5, 14:6, 15:1; passages which describe some definite and essential relation of Christ to men under the form of metaphor.

It must be noted, however, that the metaphor in these cases is not in the copula, but in the predicate, while here τουτο can only refer to the bread and wine. The words "this" (τουτο) and "is" (■στιν κ.τ.λ.), therefore, place before us separate ideas, and their relation can only be determined by the context. It were well if writers who press the literal meaning and application of the copula would heed Bishop Gore's words on the subject: "It is, I venture to think, useless to argue with too great exactness about the word is.

It describes very various kinds of identification. It is a sufficient warning against laying too much stress on it, that in one report our Lord is made to say, This cup is (not 'my blood,' but) the new covenant in my blood. The copula, therefore, is clearly indeterminate." [Gore, The Body of Christ, p. 246.] 3. "My body, which is being given on behalf of you" (το υπερ υμων διδ■μενον). These words are to be taken, as they stand, in their entirety, and are not to be divided. Our Lord did not simply say, "This is my body," but, "This is my body which is given for you," thereby associating the ordinance definitely and solely with His death.

So also with the cup, it "is the new covenant in His blood." These statements, when it is remembered that the body was not then actually being given or the blood shed, afford us the clue to the interpretation of the whole phrase. Our Lord is not speaking of actual literal identity, whether physical or spiritual. He is

speaking to the disciples' faith, to their spiritual perception concerning realities of the spiritual world, of spiritual efficacy and grace. He is assuring them of the certainty, the availability, the possession, the blessing, and the joy of the Sacrifice of Calvary.

"The verity of Scripture seems to preclude our referring the κοινωνία to any other body than that which suffered on the cross, or to any other blood than was shed for us. But (independently of other considerations) as at the first Communion, which we are bound to believe was a true Communion, the body was not yet crucified, nor the blood yet poured out, it is obvious that this participation of the faithful in the body and blood of our Lord becomes at once lifted out of the realm of the natural and the material, and must be regarded as a spiritual participation, and because spiritual, the more deeply and essentially real." [Ellicott on 1 Cor. 10:16, p. 186.] 4.

"Covenant" (διαθήκη) recalls Old Testament facts and prophecies, and their realization and fulfillment by our Lord in His death. The "new covenant" foretold by Jeremiah (31:31, cf. Heb. 8:7-13) was about to be ratified, according to invariable practice, by blood, only it was now the blood of the Son of God to be shed on Calvary. This word "covenant" calls attention to the federal aspect of the Lord's Supper, a point never to be overlooked in any due consideration of the ordinance.

Covenants in the Old Testament are associated with covenant signs or seals, and so it is here. They witness to God's promise and pledge, and also to our attitude of acceptance. 5. "For my remembrance" (εις την εμην ανμνησιν). ανμνησις means "calling to mind," "recollection"; and, according to the words of institution, this is the primary and fundamental purpose of the Lord's Supper. The word never means "memorial offering," for it has no sacrificial association like μνημυσσον, which is the regular word for sacrificial memorial in the LXX. (cf.

Acts 10:4). It is difficult to understand on what grounds Mr. Darwell Stone says [Darwell Stone, The Holy Communion, p. 30.] that "the ordinary meaning of the word ανμνησις in the Septuagint is 'a memorial before God.'" The very opposite is nearer the truth, as may be easily tested by a careful examination of the Essays by Dr. T. K. Abbott on this subject. [T. K. Abbott, Essays on the Original Texts of the Old and New Testaments, and A Reply to Criticisms.] "Remembrance," it must be clearly understood, implies bodily absence, for it would be meaningless to speak of remembrance of one who is bodily present.

"The significance of the Lord's Supper as a remembrance cannot be maintained together with the literal meaning of 'this is my body.'" [Keim, quoted by Meyer on St. Luke 11., p. 309; cf. Plummer, Bible Dictionary, ut supra.] 6. "Do this" (τουτο ποιειτε) is to be rendered "do this" or "perform this." To translate it "sacrifice this" is impossible on any sound exegesis. "To render the words 'sacrifice this' is to violate the regular use of ποιειν in the New Testament, and to import polemical considerations into words which do not in any degree involve or suggest them." [Bishop Ellicott on 1 Cor. 11:25.]

The earliest writers after New Testament times never understood them in this way, nor do the ancient liturgies. In view of these facts it is difficult to understand a recent author [W. B. Frankland, M.A., The Early Eucharist.] saying that "to scholars the Lord's language, τουτο ποιειτε, has a sacrificial ring, and at the least the words are patient of a sacrificial sense." Surely the vast majority of scholars have no such impression, for there is no instance of the word being so used without an object of kindred meaning accompanying and explaining it.

The word always requires to be in close connection with sacrificial language in order to be rendered "offer". Is there any idea of offering sacrifice in the context beyond that which refers to Calvary? The

disciples had been partaking of the Passover bread and wine, and our Lord had taken the Passover loaf and cup in His hands and said to His disciples, "Do this" that I have done with the special new meaning which I am now giving you. Mr. Darwell Stone, [Darwell Stone, *The Holy Communion*, p. 30.] in arguing for the interpretation "offer this" quotes several passages where the word occurs in the Septuagint, but in each passage he quotes the verse makes reference either to a lamb, or a burnt offering, thus affording a clear proof of sacrificial meaning.

Dr. T. K. Abbott, after an exhaustive discussion of the use of ποιειν in the Septuagint, summarizes the results by saying that the word is rendered "offer" only where the object of the verb, or at least the preceding context, defines the doing as sacrificial, and that this usage is not Hellenistic but Hebraic, and due to characteristic literalness of translation which there is no necessary reason to suppose would pass into the New Testament. The matter is so important that we make no apology for quoting the very valuable and conclusive note on St.

Luke 22:19, by Dr. Plummer [Plummer, "St. Luke," *International Critical Commentary*, pp. 497-498.]: "The proposal to give these words a sacrificial meaning, and translate them 'Offer this, Sacrifice this, Offer this sacrifice,' cannot be maintained. It has against it (1) the ordinary meaning of ποιειν in N.T., in LXX., and in Greek literature generally; (2) the authority of all the Greek Fathers, who knew their own language, knew the N.T. and the LXX., and understood the words as having the ordinary meaning, 'Perform this action'; (3) the authority of the Early Liturgies, which do not use ποιειν or facere when the bread and wine are offered, but προσφειν or offerre, although the words of institution precede the oblation, and thus suggest ποιειν or facere; (4) the authority of a large majority of commentators, ancient and modern, of the most various schools, who either make no comment, as if the ordinary meaning were too obvious to need stating; or give the ordinary meaning without mentioning any other as worthy of consideration; or expressly reject the sacrificial meaning; (5) the testimony of the Septuagint, in which the various and frequent Hebrew words which mean 'offer' or 'sacrifice' are translated, not by ποιειν, but by προσφειν or αναφειν or the like; (6) the fact that here and in 1 Cor. 11:24, the writer might easily have made the sacrificial meaning clear by using προσφειν or αναφειν.

He has not even suggested such a meaning, as he might have done by writing ποιειτε τουτον, i.e., τουτον τον φειν. He has given as a translation of Christ's words neither 'Offer this bread,' nor 'Offer this,' nor 'Do this bread' (which might have suggested 'Offer this bread'), but 'Do this thing.'" In further proof of this position the significant testimony of Canon Mason may be adduced. He writes: "The rendering 'Offer this,' has against it the fact that it is of recent origin.

All the Greek Fathers, with the exception of Justin Martyr, treated the words as 'Perform this action.'" [Mason, *Faith of the Gospel*. Second Edition, p. 328, note.] Dr. Plummer does not consider Justin Martyr an exception. [Plummer, "St. Luke," *International Critical Commentary*, p. 499, note, and *Expositor*, Third Series, Vol. VII., p. 444 f.] In view of the foregoing testimonies it does not seem too much to say that statements about ποιειν and αναμνησις being sacrificial should cease to be made.

Or at least we may ask the upholders of this view to be content with Bishop Gore's conclusion: "On the whole, then, there is not sufficient evidence to entitle us to say that ποιειν bears the sacrificial sense in the New Testament. The matter stands similarly with αναμνησις." [Gore, *The Body of Christ*. First Edition, p. 315.] The clear discrimination of the two elements and their separate bestowal is to be carefully noted. In view of Jewish ideas about blood this could only have reference to death. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper is therefore clearly associated with the Lord's Death.

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