

The Lord's Supper in Current Teaching (li)

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

W.H. Griffith Thomas explores the distinction between the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, emphasizing their theological implications and scriptural foundations.

Scripture: John 6:51, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 7:27

Topics: "Eucharist Theology", "Lord's Supper"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the controversial topic of the Eucharistic sacrifice, exploring various definitions and perspectives on whether the Eucharist is a true sacrifice or a sacrament. He critiques the Tractarian doctrine of a Eucharistic sacrifice, emphasizing the importance of aligning beliefs with clear biblical teachings rather than tradition or personal interpretations. The sermon highlights the discrepancy between the sacrificial aspect of the Lord's Supper and the sacramental nature of the Eucharist, urging a deeper understanding of the significance of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and the purpose of the Holy Communion.

Transcript

Connected with this modern doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and arising out of it, is the question of the Eucharistic sacrifice. To many this is the most important element in the doctrine. Even the Lutherans hold their view of the real Presence entirely by itself and with no theological system built on it. With others, however, the doctrine of the real Presence of Christ's glorified humanity is absolutely essential to their system of thought. It is somewhat difficult to obtain a definition of the Eucharistic sacrifice from those who hold it in the Tractarian sense of the term.

It is clearly intended to mean some sacrifice associated exclusively with the Eucharist. One writer [Canon Mason, Faith of the Gospel, pp. 327-328.] defines it as: "The continual offering up to God of the Person of Jesus Christ in His body and blood. Christ commanded His Apostles to do this when making the memorial. We display to Him that precious body and blood in which all our hopes are centered. Such an act is most truly a sacrifice." Here we may note "offering up" and "displaying" regarded as identical in meaning.

It is difficult to discover where Christ commanded "the continual offering up to God of the Person of Christ in His body and blood." A scholarly work on the subject has recently appeared, written by a clergyman of the American Episcopal Church, [Dr. Mortimer, The Eucharistic Sacrifice, p. 106.] with an introduction by the late Canon T. T. Carter, of Clewer, in which we have the following definition: "The Catholic theory is that the Eucharist is a true and proper Sacrifice, in that it fulfills the conditions of a sacrifice, and is related

to one absolute sacrifice of our Lord upon the Cross, in such sense that it is not a mere commemoration of it, but it is identical with it, for in it are found the same priest, the same victim, and a real sacrificial action (although the manner of offering is different); and further, that it is the Sacrifice instituted by our Lord Himself in His Church."

To any careful reader of the New Testament these words carry their own condemnation. It is only by an impossible literalism which outrages reason, sense, and experience, that the Eucharist can be said to be "identical with" the sacrifice of Calvary. Statements about the Cross cannot be applied equally to the Eucharist without doing violence to the plainest teaching of Scripture, or without accepting a doctrine of the real Presence which is virtually identical with Transubstantiation.

Indeed, there is nothing more significant in Dr. Mortimer's book than its absolute silence as to any difference between us and Rome on the Eucharist. A recent popular presentation of teaching on the Eucharistic sacrifice thus states the position [Goodwill. Edited by Hon. and Rev. J. G. Adderley.]: Q. How is the Holy Eucharist a Sacrifice? A. The Holy Eucharist is the solemn presentation before God by the Christian Church of the One Holy Sacrifice of Christ. Q. What do we mean by the One Holy Sacrifice of Christ?

A. By the One Holy Sacrifice I mean the offering to God made by Christ in His life and death of Himself the Perfect Man. Q. Is there any repetition of the Sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist? A. No: there is no repetition of the Sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist, for "there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin." Q. How then is the One Holy Sacrifice presented in the Eucharist? A. Christ in His Perfect Manhood is continually presenting Himself on our behalf before God in the unseen heaven; and in the Eucharist this same presentation is really and truly made by Him under the forms of bread and wine."

In the most important of recent books on the Holy Communion, [Bishop Gore, The Body of Christ.] the author is not clear as to what constitutes the Eucharistic sacrifice; whether it is the consecration of the elements, or the invocation of the Holy Spirit, or the reception of the elements. It is curious that his discussion of it proceeds entirely apart from Scripture, and, when at length the New Testament is referred to, we read these significant words: "No doubt there is some justification at first sight for saying that the New Testament does not suggest that the Eucharist is a sacrifice."

In the same connection we have this notable statement of Dr. Gore as to the Prayer Book: "On the subject of the Eucharistic sacrifice our 31st Article only excludes any treatment of it which in any way suggests the insufficiency of the one offering of Christ. ... Beyond this our formulas are silent." All that the author can say is that it is "A feast upon a sacrifice, but the feast upon the sacrifice is the culmination of the sacrifice." [Bishop Gore, The Body of Christ, p. 261.]

This is true, if by "culmination" we mean appropriation, but is this really "sacrifice"? Are not the sacrifice and the feast to be distinguished? Were all Jewish sacrifices appropriated? Yet they were sacrifices, and as such, had their culmination. The Eucharist is indeed a feast upon the Sacrifice of Calvary, but would the great majority of the Tractarian School be satisfied with this conclusion? Is not Bishop Gore retaining the name "sacrifice" while emptying the Eucharist of what they regard as of the essence of it?

It is thus difficult to get a consistent view of the meaning of the term, but we are evidently intended to understand that the Eucharist stands in such close connection with the Cross that it may be regarded as "a continual offering up to God of the Person of Christ in His body and blood" (Mason), or "the presentation of the One Holy Sacrifice of Christ" (Adderley). There is not a vestige of warrant in Scripture

for such a notion connected with the Eucharist or with anything else.

The essential feature of a sacrifice, according to Canon Mason, is "the presentation to God of that which is precious to us and acceptable to Him." But, granting this, what do we present in and at the Eucharist except ourselves, our substance, and our praises? We either offer in the Holy Communion a material or spiritual sacrifice. Which is it? And what is it? The essence of sacrifice is its value or cost, and applying this thought to the Lord's Supper we see at once that the only sacrifice that remains to be offered is that which costs something, the sacrifice of ourselves and our substance.

Pleading a sacrifice is not offering a sacrifice. Even representation is not re-presentation. We do not "display" the body and blood; we plead the merits and appropriate the grace of the body broken and the blood shed. But what is there of sacrifice in this? This doctrine utterly fails to realize the nature of our Lord's life in heaven. He is not offering Himself; He is seated on the throne, having already offered Himself once for all (εφ' ἑαυτοῦ, Heb. 7:27, 9:12, 10:10). In one of the books already quoted, a book of popular instruction for members of the English Church, occur these words [Canon Mason, Faith of the Gospel, p. 330 f.]: "He allows us at the altar to do with Him what He Himself does in heaven. ...

In this sense we may say that the Eucharist is a propitiatory sacrifice." This astonishing doctrine is entirely absent from Scripture and the Prayer Book. If the Eucharist is a great and solemn service in which the priest on earth is re-presenting and representing what our Great High Priest is doing in heaven it is at least strange that no reference to it should be made in the one part of the New Testament in which it would have been appropriate if true, the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The Prayer Book will be searched in vain for any such doctrine of an Eucharistic sacrifice. The only sacrifices other than that of Calvary known to our Church formularies are the sacrifices of ourselves (Rom. 12:1), our substance (Heb. 13:16), and our praises (Heb. 13:15). There is not even an oblation of the unconsecrated elements, as a comparison of the Rubrics concerning these and the alms significantly shows. Bishop Dowden's exhaustive paper on "Our Alms and Oblations" is conclusive on this point. [Journal of Theological Studies, I, p. 321.

Cf. Vogan, The True Doctrine of the Eucharist, p. 488.] The juxtaposition of these two Rubrics and their remarkable difference of wording deserves special attention. It is not without significance that the term "Altar" is never used in the Prayer Book of the Holy Table. It was in the Prayer Book of 1549, but was removed in 1552 and has never since been reintroduced. An Altar is determined by the character of the sacrifices belonging to it, and as is the latter so will be the former, material or spiritual.

Do we offer material sacrifices at Holy Communion? The answer is obvious. Do we offer spiritual sacrifices? If so, what are they? Only the sacrifices of ourselves, our gifts, and our praises. Can we use the Communion Table as an Altar in relation to these? In avoiding the term "Altar" with reference to the Holy Communion we are on the only safe ground if we are to keep away from error and danger. Moreover, it is following Scripture usage which most significantly avoids the term in connection with its teaching on the Lord's Supper, even when discussing the Supper from the standpoint of the analogy of heathen altars and sacrifices (1 Cor. 10).

Could there be anything more striking in its simplicity than this? Still more, the early Church, for the first two centuries, never spoke of the Holy Table as an Altar. Bishop Westcott in his note on the subject, when dealing with the Christian literature of the early second century says: "In this stage of Christian literature there is not only no example of the application of the word θυσιαστήριον to any concrete, material object

as the Holy Table, but there is no room for such an application." [Westcott, Hebrews, pp. 456, 458.]

Bishop Westcott goes on to say that it is in the writings of Cyprian that we find an entirely new development "of ecclesiastical thought and language. In them the phraseology of the Levitical law is transferred to Christian institutions. The correspondence between the old system and the new is no longer generally that of the external and material to the inward and spiritual, but of one outward order to another." The significance of this change needs no comment. Another writer of the Tractarian School in a well-known book, admits that the sacrificial aspect of the Lord's Supper does not seem prominent in the Scriptures, and that the Lord's Supper has scarcely one feature in common with the things which in Scripture are called sacrifices. [Church Doctrine - Bible Truth, pp. 185, 188.]

Yet after this he says that the Holy Communion possesses "the most intense sacrificial reality," and he bases this assertion on our Lord's words, "do this," and St. Paul's "ye show forth." With this agrees another representative writer, who says, referring to *τοῦτο ποιείτε*: "We do not see that any other explanation of the sacrificial view of the Eucharist is forthcoming." [Church Quarterly Review, July, 1886, p. 328.] But, as we have already seen, neither of these phrases, according to true exegesis, bears a sacrificial meaning.

The truth is that, strictly and accurately, the Lord's Supper is not a sacrifice, but a sacrament. It has sacrificial aspects and relations because it is so closely associated in thought and purpose with the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and because it is the standing testimony to the world and to ourselves of our constant need of and perpetual dependence on that sacrifice in all our approach to God. But the ordinance itself and alone cannot with accuracy be called a sacrifice.

It is a sacrament of a sacrifice, "a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death" (Article XXIX). It is a feast on that sacrifice. The essential distinction between a sacrifice and a sacrament is that in the former God is the terminus ad quem, while in the latter God is the terminus a quo. In a sacrifice we give, we yield up; in a sacrament we receive, we appropriate. The thought of God as the terminus ad quem, as the One to whom we offer the sacrifices of ourselves, naturally follows from the idea of the Eucharist as a sacrament, but obviously this is a consequence, a necessary consequence if we will, of the rite, but not part of its original institution.

The only acts in the Lord's Supper, according to the institution, are "take," "eat," "drink," "this do," and these are not sacrificial. The ideas of a sacrifice and a sacrament are so distinct and different that the Lord's Supper, unless Scripture warrants it, cannot be both at the same time. The Passover was both sacrificial and sacramental; but the proper antitype to that is not the Lord's Supper, but the Lord Himself, who is at once our Sacrifice and our Feast. "Christ our Passover was sacrificed (*εταθη*) for us; therefore let us keep continual festival" (*εορταζωμεν*).

The Lord's Supper is not strictly and completely the antitype of the Passover. It is the Christian rite which is analogous to it in the sacramental but not in the sacrificial aspect. This does not for an instant deny the application of the term "sacrifice" to the whole service of Holy Communion in the sense used by Waterland in his Review and Charges; but the Tractarian School is by no means satisfied with Waterland's definition of Eucharistic sacrifice. No better expression of the truth can be found than in Bishop Bilson's remarks as quoted by Waterland [Doctrine of the Eucharist, p. 427.]: "Neither they nor I ever denied the Eucharist to be a sacrifice.

The very name enforceth it to be the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, which is the true and lively sacrifice of the New Testament. The Lord's Table, in respect of His graces and mercies there proposed to

us, is a heavenly banquet, which we must eat, and not sacrifice; but the duties which He requireth at our hands, when we approach His Table, are sacrifices, not sacraments. As namely, to offer Him thanks and praises, faith and obedience, yea our bodies and souls, to be living, holy, and acceptable sacrifices unto Him, which is our reasonable service."

Exegesis of New Testament teaching is, as we have seen, clearly opposed to the Tractarian doctrine of a Eucharistic sacrifice. Neither ποιειν nor ανμνησις has anything sacrificial in it, while the object of the verb καταγγλλετ (1 Cor. 11), which means to "proclaim verbally," can be only man and not God. In the Lord's Supper Christ is neither offered "to" God nor "for" man; He is offered "to" man as Saviour and sustenance to be accepted and welcomed by faith. It would be well if we could avoid ambiguous and misleading terms.

The Lord's Supper is not strictly a commemorative sacrifice; it is the commemoration of a sacrifice. [Cf. Andrewes, Responsio ad Belarm.] It has been truly said, "You may as well call the Waterloo banquet a memorial battle, as call the Lord's Supper a memorial sacrifice." [Quoted by Bishop Moule, Supper of the Lord, p. 37.] If the words "Eucharistic sacrifice" mean some sacrifice which is offered only at and in the Lord's Supper it is certain that no such idea occurs in Bible or Prayer Book.

Dr. Mortimer, the author of The Eucharistic Sacrifice quoted above, had occasion during his investigations to write to Bishop Westcott on certain points connected with the Epistle to the Hebrews. The following extracts from the Bishop's letters speak for themselves, and bear significant and convincing testimony to the true Church position: "Of the history of the 'modern conception of Christ pleading His Passion in heaven,' I cannot say anything. I have not worked it out. When I feel satisfied that a thing is wrong I generally dismiss it."

"To me more and more Holy Scripture is the standard of faith, and I hardly look beyond it as I study the words in the full light of our present experience." These wise and forcible words reveal the "great gulf fixed" between the Bishop and those represented by Dr. Mortimer. And as to which is the truer exponent of the mind of Christ, and therefore of the mind of the Church of England, we confidently leave our readers to decide.

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