

The Lord's Supper in the Epistles

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The Lord's Supper is a feast on and in memory of a sacrifice, and it is a means of drawing near to God through faith and obedience.

Scripture: John 14:15, Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 10:16, 1 Corinthians 11:26, 1 Corinthians 11:29, Hebrews 10:22, Hebrews 13:10

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

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the significance of the Lord's Supper as described in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. St. Paul emphasizes the importance of Christians being separated from idol feasts and highlights the communion of the body and blood of Christ during the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is portrayed as a sacrificial meal, not a sacrifice, and is a remembrance of Christ's death. Self-examination, discerning the Lord's body, and anticipation of His Second Coming are crucial aspects of partaking in the Lord's Supper.

Transcript

The next passage of the New Testament to be considered is 1 Cor. 10:14-22, where St. Paul warns against idolatry and presses upon the Church the necessity of Christians being entirely separated from idol feasts. In this connection he refers to the Lord's Supper and thus describes it (verse 16): "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" το ποτήριον της ευλογίας ο ευλογούμεν.

"The cup over which the blessing is pronounced" (Ellicott). This is usually taken as the accusative of the direct object, though it may mean the accusative of respect; "as to which we bless (God)," thus agreeing more closely with the Gospel narratives of the institution, and with the usual meaning of the word. [See Westcott's note, ut supra p. 18.] Κοινωνία means fellowship, partnership, joint participation. It is to be distinguished from "communication," which would be μετέληψις or μετοχή (the latter is used in the context).

It means fellowship of persons with persons in one and the same thing. It does not mean partaking of, or even communion with, the body and blood, but communion or joint sharing with persons in reference to the body and blood, the context showing that the Church is referred to as comprising those with whom we have "in common" (κοινός) the body and blood of Christ. Canon Evans [Speaker's Commentary, in loc.] says the word never signifies "communication" nor "participation". He adds that it cannot mean

"communion with the blood, for that is an incorrect idea.

Union with the body there is, but not communion. Fellowship is with persons (1 Cor. 1:9), or with things personified (2 Cor. 6:14). "Is it not the fellowship," therefore, means "is it not the (means of) fellowship," the context revealing the persons with whom we have the fellowship. We see how closely St. Paul here follows the idea of the original institution. It is not "fellowship" or "communion" generally, but specifically "communion" in the body and blood, that is, in the death of our Lord.

It is perhaps not without significance that in a sacrificial context with a definite mention of the Jewish altar, the Apostle, though indicating a certain analogy of these idol sacrifices and feasts with the Lord's Supper, nevertheless speaks of the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper is a feast on, and in memory of, a sacrifice, and for this a table, not an altar, is appropriate. The Lord's Supper is thus not a sacrifice, but a sacrificial meal, two things which, though connected, are fundamentally distinct.

The table is related to the altar as the feast is to the sacrifice, as its sequel and result, but the two are to be carefully distinguished. The sacrifice was offered on Calvary, but we still feast on it whether in, or apart from, the Lord's Supper. The other passage is 1 Cor. 11:23-29, where the Apostle is correcting certain local abuses which had crept into their observance of the Supper. He gives an account of the institution which he says "he received of the Lord" (παρ■λαβον απο του Κυρ■ου).

The account agrees closely with that of St. Luke, and chronologically it is of course the earliest of all. St. Paul adds two or three noteworthy comments in illustration of the rite. The most important of these is his statement that "as oft as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do show forth the Lord's death till He come." "Ye do show forth" (καταγγ■λλετε) means actual oral announcement and not representation by action. It is "showing forth" or "proclaiming" by words rather than by deeds (cf.

Acts 4:2). The object of the verb is, obviously, not God but man. It never means proclaiming before God, much less pleading or presenting before Him. It cannot mean "exhibit before God." [Bishop Perowne, The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, p. 8.] The other special points of this passage are: (1) as to the danger of eating and drinking "unworthily" (αυαξ■ως), i.e., unworthily of the sacred and solemn meaning of the ordinance; (2) that anyone so doing is "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord," i.e., guilty of profaning the Divine fact and channel of our Redemption; (3) the need of self-examination and of discerning the Lord's body (διακρ■νωσιν), i.e., spiritual discrimination of its sacred purpose and blessing; (4) the association with the Lord's Second Coming, "till He come."

It is noteworthy too that St. Paul calls the consecrated bread, bread (1 Cor. 11:26-28). As already stated, the above passages are all the clear and unmistakable references to the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. One passage sometimes quoted in this connection is "We have an altar" (Heb. 13:10). There is nothing in the context to refer this to the Supper, and on no proper exegesis can it be maintained. Bishop Westcott's words on St. John 6 rightly apply here: "It treats essentially of spiritual realities, with which no external act, as such, can be coextensive."

An altar, moreover, implies a sacrifice and a priest, and as it is the one purpose of the Epistle to teach the uniqueness of our Lord's Sacrifice and Priesthood it would be strange if at last the writer were to introduce an element contrary or at least foreign to all that preceded. The "altar" in this passage is an expression that includes sacrifice as well, and the reference is probably to our Lord as both Sacrificial Victim and Feast. If there is any earthly "altar" at all it is the Cross, but it is probable that the term does not refer to any definite place or thing, but is only used in a general and inclusive sense for the spiritual ideas

associated with altar and sacrifice. [Westcott and Rendall, in loc.]

In any case the context (γάρ, verse 11) is quite opposed to any interpretation which refer it to the Lord's Supper. The writer shows that he is referring to the Jewish ritual on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), when the priests had no right to eat of the sacrifices which were wholly consumed on the altar. At the most it can only have an indirect application or a very remote allusion to the Lord's Supper. [Strong, Doctrine of the Real Presence, p. 38 f. Perowne, The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, p. 109 ff.]

Although we believe that we have now carefully considered every passage of the New Testament in which there is any undoubted reference to the Lord's Supper there remains one passage to which some attention must be given. It has been urged by a writer in the Guardian in reviewing Dean Strong's work, The Doctrine of the Real Presence, that Hebrews 10:19-25 is "one of the most significant" allusions to the Holy Eucharist in the New Testament. Bishop Westcott's comment on that passage is also referred to, and the reviewer urges that the passage is "eloquent of the fact that it (the Eucharist) is a sacrifice, and also the center of Christian worship - that, indeed, for which 'the assembling of ourselves together' is observed."

Before considering these statements more closely it may be well to see what Bishop Westcott's comment really is. On verse 22, "Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water," the Bishop writes: "The two phrases appear to contain allusions to the Christian sacraments. That to the Eucharist is veiled: that to Baptism is unquestionable. In the one case the reference is primarily to the spiritual efficacy of the divine working of which the Holy Eucharist is the appointed but not the sole means." [Westcott, Hebrews, p. 323.]

The key to the true meaning of Bishop Westcott, and indeed of the whole passage in the Hebrews, lies in the words, "of which the Holy Eucharist is the appointed but not the sole means." This is where the reviewer in the Guardian has clearly gone too far. The passage manifestly includes all occasions of "drawing near" to God, of which the Lord's Supper is one but only one, not "the sole" occasion. To apply the passage as the reviewer does so definitely and exclusively to the Holy Eucharist is to read into it more than the passage will bear, and more than Bishop Westcott's comment teaches.

Dean Strong was probably nearer the truth than his reviewer when he omitted this passage from his discussion of the definite Scripture doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It is doubtless precarious to argue strongly *e silentio*, but it has often been pointed out, and we believe it has real significance, how very little there is in the New Testament about the Lord's Supper. "It is remarkable that the allusions ... are extraordinarily few," [Dean Strong, The Doctrine of the Real Presence, p. 37.] and in particular the silence of such Epistles as the great doctrinal treatises to the Romans and the Hebrews, together with the Pastoral Epistles, with their wealth of instruction on ministerial and general Church life, is in some respects the most significant of all.

There is such a thing in the New Testament as "the proportion of faith" (Rom. 12:6). One thing ought to be carefully noted, that the words of institution and the teaching of St. Paul "throw no light whatever on the way in which the indwelling of Christ is effected by the sacramental elements. ... We shall certainly not only be departing from the text of Holy Scripture, but departing from it unwarrantably and against its drift, if we attempt to define the relation which subsists between the sacramental elements and that which they convey." [Strong, pp. 59-60.]

Scripture, with characteristic simplicity, is content with emphasizing the duty and privilege of glad and grateful obedience to our Lord's command, leaving us to be assured that faithful loyalty to Divine teaching is a sure guarantee of Divine grace. "If ye love me ye will keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father and He shall give you another Comforter," is only one out of many passages of Holy Scripture showing the close, intimate, and assured connection between obedience and blessing.

Another matter of very great importance needs careful consideration in discovering the Scripture doctrine of the Lord's Supper. There seems to be no warrant for distinguishing, as is sometimes done, between the original Supper and the succeeding observances after the day of Pentecost. The distinction is drawn by Bishop Moberly in his Sayings of the Great Forty Days, by Archdeacon Robert Wilberforce in his Doctrine of the Incarnation, and by Bishop Gore. In the work already quoted Dr.

Gore says: "The Eucharist is a communion in the spiritual body of the risen and living Christ; and therefore it could only be rightly celebrated in the power of the Spirit, which was not given before Christ was glorified. How then could it be instituted before the Passion? How could Christ while yet in His mortal body give His disciples His flesh and blood to eat and drink? To this question there is, I think, no answer except by regarding the institution of the Eucharist as an anticipation of glory akin to the 'Transfiguration'." [Gore, The Body of Christ.

First Edition, p. 312.] But the true Scriptural view regards the first Communion as "a true Communion," [Ellicott on 1 Cor. 10:16.] and in no respect do subsequent Communions possess any spiritual difference unless it be (by the power of Pentecost) in degree of spiritual perception and realization. "Can we believe that the celebrant now distributes more than Christ distributed then?" [Plummer, Bible Dictionary, ut supra.] The gift of our Lord at the original institution was not different from that bestowed by Him after Pentecost and at our celebrations today.

What He gave then He gives now, and any view that maintains a difference between the first and succeeding Eucharists is unwarranted by Scripture. Our Lord said these words when His blood was not yet shed, when He was Himself before them, and when there could not be any presence of the glorified body. Yet we believe the disciples received a gift, a grace, a blessing. What was this? It was His body as given and blood as shed, in their spiritual force and efficacy; a gift offered to and received by faith alone.

The same gift is offered and received now in exactly the same way, the only difference being that their faith appropriated the gift in expectation and anticipation of Calvary, while our faith appropriates it in remembrance and experience of it. The Supper made its appeal to faith at the outset; it makes the same appeal still. It invites and requires the response of trust if its meaning is to be understood and its blessings appropriated and enjoyed. It is ever to be borne in mind that the whole revelation of the Lord's Supper presupposes and is founded on discipleship, with the faith and love arising out of that relation. It is only disciples who can "remember"; for remembrance implies knowledge, and it is only disciples who "know" their Master.

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