

The True Starting Point of Enquiry

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The sermon emphasizes the importance of returning to the original institution of the Lord's Supper as recorded in the New Testament to discover its real meaning and to avoid human interpretations that have led to division and strife.

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-26, John 6:51, 1 Corinthians 2:13, 1 Corinthians 11:26

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

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas preaches on the significance of the Lord Jesus Christ's death and His promised return, emphasizing how these two events are intricately linked and form the foundation of Christian faith and hope. He highlights the sad reality of how the Lord's Supper, meant to be a symbol of love, unity, and hope, has been marred by controversy and division within the Church over the centuries. Thomas urges a return to the original institution of the Lord's Supper as outlined in the New Testament, emphasizing the importance of understanding its true meaning and adhering to it faithfully to foster unity and peace within the Church.

Transcript

Our Lord Jesus Christ during the latter part of His earthly ministry laid special stress on two great facts associated with Himself; His death (Matt. 16:21; John 6:51, 8:28, 12:32); and His coming again (Matt. 16:27, 19:28, 24:27, 37, and 44; ch. 25). His death was to be "for the life of the world" and "a ransom for many"; His coming was to be the crown of His revelation and the constant hope of His followers. On the first occasion when the Lord revealed to His perplexed disciples the fact of His approaching death (Matt. 16:21), He spoke also of His coming and glory (Matt. 16:27), thereby linking the two great events and showing the latter to be the complement and perfect explanation of the former.

Then, "on the same night in which He was betrayed," our Lord instituted an ordinance which was to combine in its full spiritual meaning a reference to His atoning death and His glorious coming; an ordinance which would be a standing witness to both, and serve, for the sustenance and expression of His disciples' faith in the one and of their hope in the other (Matt. 26:26-29, 1 Cor. 11:26). In the light of these truths it is surely one of the saddest and most deplorable facts in the history of the Church of Christ that the ordinance instituted by our Lord as a memorial of His love and grace should have become associated with bitter strife and terrible persecutions among His professed followers.

This central act of public worship, this symbol and means of Christian love, unity, and hope, has for centuries been the occasion of controversy and enmity, and today it is the main dividing line between many "who profess and call themselves Christians." All which is tragic in the extreme, and conveys a deeply solemn message as to the possibility of grave departure from the original faith and love of the Gospel. Without now attempting to account for this sad state of things, the more practical question arises: Is it necessary for it to continue?

Is it possible to find some point of agreement from which the differing sections of the Church of Christ may start on the way to unity of faith in the bond of peace on this subject? There appears to be one and one only such starting point. It is that all should be willing to revert simply to the original institution of the Lord's Supper as recorded in the New Testament, to discover therefrom its real meaning, and henceforward to abide by that, neither more nor less. This may be regarded as a difficult matter, but it ought not lightly to be set aside as impossible.

The records of the institution in the New Testament with the subsequent references are neither many nor really difficult of interpretation. This method of discovering the truth as to the Lord's Supper is important on several grounds. In considering the original institution at the outset, we are more likely to gain a clear and true view of our Lord's meaning than by considering first what men have thought of it and then studying the original source in the light of what we have derived from the teaching of others.

It seems necessary to press this point because the second method is prevalent today in certain quarters. An illustration of this may be given from a recent able and important book on the subject. It is entitled *The Body of Christ*, by Canon (now Bishop) Gore, and is described on the title page as "An Enquiry into the Institution and Doctrine of the Holy Communion." The book extends to 300 pages, and yet it discusses the one record which we possess of the "Institution" and the primary sources of the "Doctrine," only after 240 pages of other matter, and even then takes but 20 pages to consider the sources.

These are the author's own words on his method: "We will make a beginning of our attempt to understand the Christian mystery of the breaking of the bread with the considerations suggested by Justin's hint of its resemblance to one of the rites of Mithra - the consideration, that is to say, of its affinities with the customs of religion in general outside the area of the special revelation which is the basis of the Christian Church. We will approach the Eucharist first from the outside." [Gore, *The Body of Christ*, p 11.]

Here, we believe, is the error, or at least the danger, of the method, and one which is apt to lead, and indeed has led, to false conclusions. Why should we "approach the Eucharist first from the outside"? The institution is plain and well-known, and it would seem to be the safer, as certainly the simpler, method to consult the New Testament first of all. The other mode of procedure is not that which is best calculated to arrive at a true conclusion either as to institution or doctrine.

It seems scarcely fair or wise to fill the mental horizon with ideas that may or may not be deducible from the New Testament, and then to seek support for them from Scripture. We are thereby liable to start with (possibly erroneous) presuppositions and to read them into our authorities. The more trustworthy method would be to start with our authorities, and use them at every point to form our conclusions and to test any presupposition that we may have inherited or unconsciously adopted.

There is a special and practical reason for commencing with the original institution and using that as the touchstone of doctrine. It seems to be an inherent tendency of human thought and practice to depart from primary sources. In the above-named book there is an admirable chapter on Medievalism which supplies

a notable illustration of this very point. The author has no difficulty in showing that in medieval Romanism we have proof that "a real religious authority admits of being so much misused as to become completely misleading." [Gore, The Body of Christ.

First Edition, p. 220.] He rightly says that the deplorable failure of the ecclesiastical authority of the Old Covenant ought to have been a warning to the authority of the New: "It ought to have made it a first instinct with the bishops of all ages to be on their guard against gradual departures from the original spirit of Christian prophecy. It ought - to put the matter in definite terms - to have made them specially careful to maintain the constant appeal to Scripture, the record of the first inspired pattern of teaching, which the Church exists to guard and perpetuate, but to which it has no authority to add." [P. 222.]

And then he adds, speaking of medievalism: "The Scriptures, so far as they are referred to, are merged in a miscellaneous mass of authorities. The safeguard has vanished." [P. 223.] This is exactly what we feel about every discussion of the Holy Communion which does not start from the New Testament and keep the New Testament in view at each stage. The Scriptures, even though led up to, are apt to become "merged in a miscellaneous mass" of presuppositions and discussions before we are allowed to consider them.

Bishop Gore rightly adds: "If we find cause to mistrust ecclesiastical authority in a few instances, this tends to modify our whole attitude towards it." [P. 225.] This states the true position, and is a complete justification of the method of starting with the Biblical authorities and then rigidly testing every instance of ecclesiastical authority by their means. There is, however, a higher and more potent reason for appealing first of all to the New Testament. As Divinely inspired, it is unique and fundamental as the source of Christian Doctrine.

To those who believe the words of Jesus Christ to be the words of a Divine and Infallible Teacher, those of His Apostles to be "the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (1 Cor. 2:13), and the record of both to have been "inspired by God," and "written for our learning," there can be nothing more natural or necessary than to recur first of all to these records for the true meaning and force of the institution of the Supper of the Lord. This, moreover, is the standpoint of the Church of England.

That Church claims to derive her doctrine from Holy Scripture. Article VI is very emphatic on this matter: "Whatsoever is not read therein nor may he proved thereby is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the Faith." The Catechism and Articles speak of the Lord's Supper as one of two Sacraments "ordained by Christ". Article XXVIII, in condemning certain errors, calls attention to "Christ's ordinance," and it speaks of one particular error as that which "cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture."

Article XXX justifies communion in both kinds "by Christ's ordinance and commandment". The service of Holy Communion is full of allusions to and quotations from Scripture on the Lord's Supper. The Church of England, therefore, here as elsewhere, makes Scripture the supreme and final authority on essential doctrine, because it contains the only and complete expression of the mind of Christ on the Holy Supper. It has seemed necessary to discuss this matter at length because of its extreme importance. We now proceed to consider the Supper of the Lord as recorded in the New Testament.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net