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THE REAL PRESENCE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER

I

Not long ago a friend told me of a remarkable experience which he had. He was spending a week-end in a small inn in a little country village in Scotland. Among the guests was a Roman Catholic priest, with whom he fell into conversation. The Sabbath happened to be the Communion Sabbath. At breakfast he asked the priest if he had ever been present at the Scottish observance of the Lord's Supper. No, he had not. So he suggested that he should take the opportunity, assuring him that he would in no way be compromised. After the service which he attended, when asked what he thought of it, that priest reverently said, "the likest thing to the original institution in the upper room." Surely that was remarkable testimony from such a source. As there observed, not only was the Lord's Supper freed from all the ceremonies in which it is buried in the Mass, but also from the magniloquent phrasings and repetitions of modern books of Common Order which are supposed to give dignity to the naked simplicity of our Lord's own words. There within the bald walls of an old humble country church with simplest forms and our Lord's words unadorned, this man, accustomed to the swelling ceremony of the Mass found the likest thing to the original institution in the upper room.

The contrast there between the simple Scottish rite and the Romish and other elaborations suggests the contrast there is between the paucity of reference there is to the Lord's Supper in Scripture and the exaggerated importance that is attached to it in many quarters to-day. What indeed emphasises the paucity of reference is the contrast between the attention given to it and its significance and the importance attached to the far reaching significance of baptism. Not once but often in the Epistles are men challenged by an appeal to all they have committed themselves to in baptism. Except in the two passages in 1 Corinthians there is no such enforcement of the obligations

which partaking of the Lord's Supper imposes. But what do you find to-day? Baptists, indeed, lay stress on the method and persons in baptism. There are those who teach baptismal regeneration. But it is the importance of the Eucharist—of the observance of Holy Communion on which stress is laid. That there may be no mistake about this as being the important thing in the worship of the Church even though the rite is not being observed, the Communion Table must be in the central position and the pulpit pushed to the side. Now far be it from me to seem to belittle the soul-moving influence of the observance of the Lord's Supper. The return of the Communion season is a great recall to the springs of religious life. It brings the soul face to face once more with the Saviour in the fullness of His dying love and saving power, awakens anew the sense of infinite need which only His gracious power can meet. It brings the believer anew into His presence. Most blessed is the privilege to sit at His Table, receive the sacred emblems at His hand, and hear Him say "do this in remembrance of Me". But to judge from the New Testament it was never meant by our Lord or by His apostles that the observance of the Lord's Supper should take precedence of the preaching of the Gospel. If that had been intended, why are the references to it in the New Testament so scanty? We are told of its institution in the synoptics. Paul does the same in 1 Cor. xi. and refers to it also in 1 Cor. x., but nowhere else in his writings. It may be indicated in the Acts of the Apostles by the phrase, "the breaking of bread". Its observance seems to be implied in the words "supper being ended" in John xiii. 2. But that exhausts the references. It is not mentioned by James, Peter, or the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. No reference is made to it in the Acts in connection with the founding of churches, nor in the Pastoral Epistles among the duties of office-bearers. How is this scantiness of reference to be accounted for, if its observance is of paramount importance in the life and worship of the Church? Is not the truth indicated in what Paul says in 1 Corinthians about the other rite, about baptism: "Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel." What he felt was true of the one rite was equally true of the other. Valuable as rites are, appointed by Christ Himself, of rare helpfulness to the faith and life of the believer, their place is still secondary. The pity is that the Church of Christ has ignored this; and the simple

rites in their studied simplicity as instituted by our Lord, have been embellished and magnified out of all proportion and have become bones of contention and division in place of bonds of fellowship and brotherly love.

How glaringly inconsistent this is with the spirit of the Lord's Supper, the Communion, becomes very obvious when what Paul says of it in 1 Corinthians x. 16f is considered: "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? For we, being many, are one bread, are one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." Fellowship with Christ, and through fellowship with Him fellowship with all those united with Him is one great meaning of this Sacred rite, something that should be plain to all who in it discern the Lord's Body. And yet when members of various churches meet to consider the possibilities of the re-union of the Christian family, while some are ready at once to set many differences aside and unite at the common Table of the Lord, such a service cannot be held because others will not sit side by side at the same table.

II

Why? Roughly there are three reasons. One is the insistence that the administrant dispensing the ordinance be set apart for the ministry in a particular way. Another is a radical difference of view as to what is the nature of the ordinance. Is it or is it not a sacrifice? In it, in the ordinance, in the elements, do the worshippers receive something from God or do they offer something, a sacrifice, to God? This has at the back of it differing views of the way of salvation. Is salvation a gift of God's grace or is it a reward of man's services? There is a third reason, and it is equally serious. It refers to the nature of our Lord's presence at the ordinance. Is the real presence physical or is it spiritual? Is the Lord corporeally present in the elements or is He spiritually present to a living faith? Some hold aloof from those who differ from them for one of these reasons and some for another.

The third of them received painful illustration at a unique episode in the history of the Reformation in France. In 1561 a great effort at rapprochement was made under Catherine de Medici at Poissy between the Romanists and the Protestants. Calvin in response to an invitation sent Theodore Beza to be

spokesman of a deputation of twelve ministers. Things seemed to be proceeding hopefully when it broke down, as Ralph Roeder tells the story in his *Catherine de Medici and the Lost Revolution*, p. 292, at an ill-timed word of Beza's. "Touching on the burning question of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, he had the misfortune to illustrate the Calvinist position by declaring that the body of Jesus Christ was as far removed from the bread as are the heavens from the earth. A wave of dismay passed through the Assembly . . . murmurs rose . . . voice vaulting over voice in defence of the venerable dogma of sacramental cannibalism."

Now the phrase 'sacramental cannibalism' is needlessly offensive. But the very offensiveness of it compels attention to the grossness of the idea of a physical presence of the body of Christ in the sacred symbols. That this is the idea is plain from the insistence on the importance of morning communion, i.e. fasting communion. Why fasting? In order that the stomach may be empty and the body of Christ present in the transubstantiated elements may not be contaminated with other material contents of the stomach. But two questions suggest themselves. For one thing what *spiritual* good can come from the corporeal assimilation by the digestive processes even of such elements? For another, if this was so important, isn't it strange that the Lord should have instituted this rite in the evening, and not only so, but in the course or at the close of another meal? The truth is the more one thinks of the idea of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the elements at the Supper the more grotesque it becomes. There our Lord stood with the bread in His hands and then the cup, and He says "this is my body": "this cup is the New Testament in My blood". How could anyone present there think for one moment that His body should at once be standing before them with the blood coursing through His veins and be at the same time in the bread which He held in His hands and in the cup? It is simply unconceivable. And if it was impossible then, how was it to become possible at other times? The word "is" can only mean in the connection "represents", or signifies.

It was on this point that Luther and Zwingli came into uncompromising opposition at the Marburg Conference. *Hoc est corpus meum* Luther chalked on the table, and from that he would neither argue nor budge. But is that decisive? What

does *is* mean in the very next word: This Cup *is* the New Testament in my blood? If *is* does not mean signify, represent, then the Cup is the New Testament and not what is in it. That is what is said, and there is no justification for taking *is* literally in reference to the bread and as equal to signifies in reference to the Cup.

Ah, but it is said, in John vi. 33 Jesus said "except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you". Quite true. This is one of those instances of the way in which our Lord had to sting the sluggish minds of men to the apprehension of spiritual truth by the use of staggering figures. To get Nicodemus clear of conventionalities to spiritual realities, He says, "except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God". "Born again!" exclaims Nicodemus, bewildered, amazed; and then to cover his failure to comprehend, he tries to turn it off with a poor pleasantry: "how can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" The Lord had to open his eyes there by a drastic operation to see the things of the Spirit. And so here. The Lord knew that His hearers would be staggered by what He said of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man. Especially revolting to a Jew would be the idea of drinking blood. If meat was to be eaten, for the Jew the blood must first be drained off. The result of the words here were just as with those to Nicodemus, an incredulous "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" How does our Lord meet that? "It is the spirit that quickeneth," He says; "the flesh profiteth nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."

III

But what is the bearing of all this on the question of the real presence of the body and blood of our Lord in the elements? It is this. It is assumed that in the whole discourse in the sixth chapter of John our Lord is referring by anticipation to the Lord's Supper, or else that His words when reported had a turn given to them in the light of the sacred rite which was in common practice among His followers. If I have to choose between these two alternatives, I prefer the latter. I cannot think of our Lord deliberately speaking in a way which would be utterly unintelligible to His hearers without a hint of how light would be thrown on it by something He would do months

afterwards. But whichever way you take it—and for my part I do not think our Lord in it was referring to the coming Lord's Supper—the idea of the physical is expressly set aside by our Lord Himself. It is to go right in the teeth of His own definite words, "The flesh profiteth nothing"—to talk of any physical presence of the body and blood of the Lord in the elements.

But there is more in what our Lord says, and it should have weight with those who claim that the sixth chapter of John refers to the Lord's Supper. His words definitely put the message which He has brought to men by word of mouth before any symbols. "The words that I speak": to pass on that message in a way that the simplest can understand, that is the important thing for the souls of men. To put rites, even the most imposing and impressive, before the proclamation of the truth which they may symbolise is to reverse the order and confuse the issues.

Refusing to recognise any presence of Christ of a physical or a material kind in the elements used in the observance of the Lord's Supper is there anything which we are entitled to call a real presence of Christ at the Table? Before answering that, it may be well to point out the grossly unspiritual conception of reality which is involved in the common understanding of the phrase "real presence". It proceeds on the principle that the material is the real. Can anything be more alien to the spirit of our religion? The truly real is not the physical or material, but the spiritual. It is for the spiritual presence of our Lord we wait at His Table. Those present there are those who trust and love Him. They are gathered at His invitation to receive as at His hand simple memorials appointed by Himself that tell how near He is, how much He loves them, how utterly they need Him, how fully He has met their need on Calvary, maintains their cause within the veil, and gives Himself to them. The memorials are of the simplest kind, the barest ingredients of an ordinary meal. Unless by faith men see in them something that speaks to them of Him, the rite is nothing and less than nothing to them. It is to the believer it speaks, and to the believer alone.

It is the whole rite, and not the elements alone, that is the memorial of Christ and His work for men. Much of the error and controversy about the Supper has been due to confining attention to the elements and neglecting The Supper as a whole. It is a rite to be observed by a company of men and women who are gathered together in a common love and trust to a common

Saviour. There is something out of keeping with the very idea of the Supper when it becomes a spectacle performed by a single individual. The company who gather come to be reminded of their common debt to Christ and of their bond of unity with one another in view of the union of each with Christ. They come to receive at Christ's hands the memorials of Himself, not to offer them to Him. What they do offer is not the bread and the cup. They receive them. They offer themselves. So far as this is a memorial of the dying love of our Lord, there is nothing sacrificial in it, no repeating or continuing of the Sacrifice offered once for all on Calvary. There is no place for a priest. The one and only High Priest of the Christian Church is He who sacrificed Himself, and after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever sat down on the right hand of God.

At the observance of the Supper any believer might preside, any believer might dispense the ordinance. If as a matter of practice among Presbyterians the duty and privilege of presiding and dispensing the ordinance is limited to ordained ministers, it is not because there is some mysterious grace that belongs to them which qualifies them for this. It is simply that things may be done decently and in order. It is the Lord's Supper. It is the Lord who is spiritually present—a real, because a spiritual, presence discernible to the eye of faith and welcomed with the heart of humble love. It is He who presides. It is He who gives Himself. It is with Him the soul holds communion.

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