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A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Scripture

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THE HOLY EUCHARIST IN ST JOHN—I

In 1 Cor. the Holy Eucharist is presented as the liturgical action of the believing community: the repetition of the action performed by Jesus at the last supper. It is the liturgical action which is done as the memorial of Jesus' sacrificial death, in obedience to Jesus' command 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor. 11:24). St Paul tells the Corinthians: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (11:26). The Holy Eucharist therefore is essentially an *action* performed by the community, an action having the power to re-present or renew the saving event of Christ's death, in the same way that the Jewish Pasch had always been the action whereby the saving event of the deliverance from Egypt had been renewed for each generation of God's chosen people. The action in each case involved eating and drinking, and what was eaten and drunk had in each case its symbolical reference. But that which essentially constitutes the Holy Eucharist according to St Paul is the action performed, not the things eaten and drunk.

This liturgical and effective remembrance of Jesus was without doubt the most prominent feature of the Christian community's life from the beginning. It was the essential community act, reiterating that this group of people was the people of God, for whom the blood of Christ had been shed: the people of the new covenant in Christ's blood. It was the act which united them into one whole: 'Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf' (1 Cor. 10:17). But because it was a community action, the individual Christian tended to lose sight of his personal responsibility towards it. It may come as something of a shock to find that within a very short time the personal interests and animosities of the Corinthian Christians were intruding themselves into the celebration of the Eucharist to such an extent that Paul had to rebuke them strongly: 'When you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse. . . . There are divisions among you. . . . Each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk' (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 21). Personal interests, personal ambitions and the desire for personal benefits were intruding themselves into this community act. We may imagine the unspoken question in the minds of the Corinthians: What benefits do I personally obtain from

this gathering of the Church to celebrate the Eucharist? Some hoped that their influence and prestige would be enhanced. Others looked simply for a good meal. It is clear enough from the whole of Paul's letter to the Corinthians that the latter found the greatest difficulty in subordinating personal interests to the good of the community: they had been quarrelling among themselves (cf. 1:11); the more educated and powerful resented the presence of so many of the lower class (cf. 1:26-8), and tended to despise Paul himself (4:8ff.); personal interests of one sort or another had influenced their indulgent attitude towards the man living with his father's wife (5:1ff.), and led them to prosecute their brethren 'before the unrighteous' (6:1): 'To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that, even your own brethren' (1 Cor. 6:7-8). That personal interests, militating against the unity of the 'one body' were not slow to make their appearance ought to be no cause for surprise. We all know from sad experience how difficult it is to control our own individual interests and ambitions.

But the emergence of such personal interests, in so far as they were a threat to the unity of the Christian community in general, and to the worthy celebration of the Eucharist in particular, are the occasion for a further consideration of the significance of the Holy Eucharist, precisely in terms of each individual member of the community celebrating it. The Eucharist as a liturgical action is the action of the community, attributable to no individual in particular. But in that community action there is a point at which each individual takes for himself a morsel of the bread and a share of the wine; each individual eats and drinks. Those actions are not community actions but personal ones, and the *personal* benefit depends upon the answer to the question: *What* have I eaten, *what* have I drunk? Already St Paul, realising that personal interests were profaning the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, had warned the Corinthians that personal responsibilities were involved in this community action, because of *what* each individual eats and drinks, namely the body and blood of the Lord: 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgement upon himself' (1 Cor. 11:27-9). The community in celebrating the Eucharist performs an action which proclaims the Lord's death until he comes; each man in the community, after examining himself, eats and drinks of the body and blood of the Lord.

It is with this second aspect of the Eucharist that St John is concerned. Paul had only touched on it from a negative point of view, as a warning of the dire consequences of eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. St John gives a positive answer to the Christian's question: What do I eat and drink at the celebration of the Eucharist, and what benefit accrues to me? With the question, What are we doing when we celebrate the Eucharist, he is not concerned. He writes his gospel within the Christian community, where the celebration of the Eucharist is the centre of its life, accepted unquestioningly as the bond of unity and the pledge of redemption. But he writes his gospel within a community the personal interests of whose members are surely no less assertive than those of the Corinthians; within a community moreover which had waited for its communal redemption far longer than had the Corinthians at the time when Paul had written to them. Even in the early fifties the fact that many of the Corinthians were weak and ill, and some had died, had called for an explanation (I Cor. II:30). The delay in the Parousia must raise questions with regard to the Eucharist, with its implied expectation of the Lord's coming. Many individuals who had formed the community celebrating the liturgical action were no longer sitting round the table of the Lord. The liturgical action continues unquestioned; but its significance for each individual becomes more important as the community outlives its members. John chooses to consider the latter, while leaving aside the former. Of the liturgical action which is the renewal of the banquet celebrated by Jesus on the night before he died he says nothing. Instead, he tells us *what* the bread and wine are which each eats and drinks, and what benefits accrue to each individual recipient.

This is consistent with John's preoccupation throughout his gospel, namely to expound the significance of Jesus Christ for the contemporary believer: not so much the significance of what Jesus said and did during his earthly life, as the significance of what Jesus *is*, here and now, for each one of us. The events of Jesus' life and his teaching are the source and foundation, but to show their relevance to the individual Christian of the succeeding generations demands that those events and that teaching be applied and developed. Thus, for instance, John chooses to relate only a very limited number of events; and he does so, precisely in so far as they are 'signs', or significant actions, namely, actions that actually take place but carry 'a meaning deeper than the actual happening,'¹ not, in John's mind, to be grasped by the eye-witnesses of the actions, but by John's contemporaries, to whom the Spirit of truth has been given. Moreover, they reveal what Christ

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1953, p. 300

is, here and now and eternally, rather than what Christ did on this or that particular occasion. They are manifestations of his glory (cf. 2:11), not in the superficial sense of showing him to be a wonder-worker, but of showing forth to those who see his signs with faith, the glory which makes him to be what he is: the only Son from the Father (1:14). As Barrett says: 'It would not be impossible for the casual reader of the synoptic gospels to pick out from them miracle narratives which he could regard simply as the work of a strolling magician. It would be much more difficult to do this in the fourth gospel. With the miracles, as with other elements of the tradition, John has seized the christological interpretation which is implicit in the synoptics, clarified it, and stamped it upon the material in such a way that the reader is not allowed to escape it. The miracles of this gospel are a function of its christology. Rightly to understand them is to apprehend Christ by faith (10:38; 14:11). The miracles once grasped in their true meaning lead at once to the christology since they are a manifestation of the glory of Christ (2:11).'¹

The feeding of the 5,000 is one of the few incidents John chooses to narrate, because it is a sign of what Christ is for all believers, namely the bread of life, the bread of God 'Which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (6:34). That Jesus is the source of life, or the true and eternal life, is the dominant theme of the gospel. 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly' (10:10). It is this theme which is presented through a series of variations, in the doctrinal discourses which form the core of the gospel (ch. 3-12). We have first of all the idea of rebirth of water and the Spirit; then there is the water 'That I will give him, [which] will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (4:14). After the cure of the sick man at Bethzatha we have the claim, 'For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. . . . Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life' (5:20, 24). After the bread of life we have the proclamation: 'If anyone thirst let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water' (7:38). Then we have the variation of the theme in terms of 'I am the light of the world: he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (8:12). There follows the promise: 'Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death' (8:51). Jesus the shepherd has come 'That they may have life, and have it abundantly' (10:10). 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never

¹ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John*, London 1955, pp. 62-3

perish, and no-one shall snatch them out of my hand' (10:27-8). Finally we have the solemn declaration: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die' (11:25-6).

In the sixth chapter we have that particular presentation of this theme which is announced by the narrative of the feeding of the 5,000: Jesus is the source of life in so far as he is the bread of life, the food which endures to eternal life. He is the supernatural, the heavenly food, of which even the bread from heaven, the Manna, was only the faint and imperfect type. More insignificant still, the loaves which he had multiplied to feed the 5,000 had been simply an invitation to believe that Jesus could and would give them another bread which if any man eat of it, he would live for ever (cf. 6:51).

It is the supernatural character of this bread that must be emphasised, for it is all too easy to take the Eucharist for granted, to eat of it as of ordinary bread and expect it to work its life-giving effect in the same, natural and inevitable way as earthly food. It must be realised that this bread is the bread of life only for those who come to Jesus with faith: 'This is the will of the Father that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life' (6:40). The fundamental source of eternal life is Jesus; the fundamental and essential link between Jesus and men is faith; fundamentally, therefore, he who has faith has eternal life: 'Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life' (6:47), because belief in Christ means union with Christ the source of life. Here, as throughout John's gospel, we have that emphasis on faith which is reinforced by the insistence that faith itself is impossible to man unless it be given him by God: 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (6:44). John's insistence on the need for faith which is the gift of God, and his parallel insistence on the need for knowledge of God are surely the corrective for the irresponsibility of the individual within the community, and for too crude a reliance upon the sacramental efficacy of the community's status as God's redeemed people.

To strike a correct balance between the notions of salvation through knowledge and salvation through sacramental union was a problem from the beginning, and one with which John was particularly preoccupied. When therefore he speaks of the Holy Eucharist, he is concerned first to insist that here too, and perhaps here especially, we must never lose sight of the truth that salvation is through knowledge, namely that experiential knowledge which John prefers to call faith, an act demanding the conscious submission of the individual to the divine attraction. Jesus is the bread of life; but it is only he *who comes to* Jesus who shall not hunger, and he *who believes* in him who shall never thirst.

However, that salvation is not through knowledge alone is a truth evident to John's contemporaries from their experience within the Church. Regularly they celebrate the Holy Eucharist as the reaffirmation of their salvation through Christ, and the pledge of his coming to perfect it. Yet this action of the community is at the same time the means whereby each individual completes and perfects his own union of faith with Christ, by the sacramental act of eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood. Jesus is the bread of life, not only because in seeing him and believing their minds are fed with the life-giving wisdom from heaven, but also because in eating of the bread which they break together they eat of his flesh. Mind and body are united in the one complex and human act. When they come to Jesus with faith, drawn by the Father, and partake of the Eucharist, they are eating of the bread of life not only with their minds but also with their mouths, for the bread is the flesh of Christ and the wine his blood. In this way the Eucharist gives eternal life, here and now, to each individual recipient. The eschatological hope which the community expresses in its liturgical action of celebrating the Eucharist is not superseded, but the Eucharist is the food which here and now gives eternal life to everyone who eats and drinks: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood *has* eternal life, and I will raise him up in the last day' (6:54).

John's doctrine concerning the Holy Eucharist stresses therefore the significance for each member of the community, of his eating the bread and drinking the wine. It is for each, here and now, eternal life, because he eats the flesh and drinks the blood of the Son of Man who is the source of life. Let it not be said that such a thing is monstrous and impossible, for the Son of Man is a heavenly as well as an earthly being: the partaking of the Eucharist is truly the eating of the bread of life for it is the eating of the flesh of Christ: but only he can eat of this heavenly food to whom faith is granted by the Father. Whereas the synoptic gospels and St Paul had concentrated on the significance of the liturgical action of the Church in celebrating the Eucharist, St John's doctrine provides us with the answer to the question, What does each one of us eat and drink when we share in the community's celebration of the Eucharist, and what does it give to each one of us.

This has been an attempt to give a brief summary of the doctrine of St John concerning the Holy Eucharist, in a positive and coherent way. But it will be quite clear to anyone aware of the formidable difficulties facing the interpreter of John 6 that the summary rests upon a number of previous conclusions. Naturally, then, this understanding

of John 6 stands or falls by the validity of the positions previously adopted. It is true, moreover, that completely apodictic arguments are not forthcoming to establish the validity of these positions. In such a situation it might well be thought desirable to deal with the problems first. But all too frequently the contribution of the biblical theologian seems negative. We ought, I think, always to try as best we can to expound in a positive way the doctrinal content of the Scriptures which alone matters in the end, even though we cannot always do this with certainty.

On the other hand, the difficulties and uncertainties must not be glossed over, at the risk of facile, subjective and unsound doctrinal syntheses. It will therefore be necessary to indicate the underlying conclusions and the reasons why they were adopted.

(to be concluded)

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REVELATION IN THE BIBLE

II THE MANNER OF REVELATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In a previous article¹ we examined the use of the words 'reveal,' and 'revelation' in the New Testament, and glanced briefly at the synonyms 'manifest,' and 'manifestation'; and we found that they signify a kind of happening that is proper to the New Testament and to the last times, and *not* the kind of happenings that are told of in the Old Testament. For these words are not only dramatic, they are climactic; applicable therefore only to the climax of the drama; and that (in this particular divine comedy) is the manifestation of the fullness of God's saving will in Christ, both in his first advent and in his second. Revelation is thus something that has happened and also something that is going to happen.

We found a very similar pattern emerge from a look at St John's use of the word 'speak' in his gospel. The mere fact of Jesus' speaking is invested by the evangelist with emphatic meaning; he speaks because he is the Word of the Father, who has been sent. Speaking the mysteries of God is a function of having been sent; the Son speaks because the Father sent him; the Holy Ghost will speak because the Father and the Son will send him; the apostles and the Church will speak because the Word incarnate will send them. But there had been

¹ cf. *Scripture*, 1963, pp. 1-6