

The Approach to the Institution

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The Lord's Supper is a memorial feast that commemorates Christ's Atoning Death and teaches the absolute necessity of all men participating in it.

Scripture: Matthew 26:26, John 6:27, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 10:16

Topics: "Lord's Supper", "Atonement"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the distinct treatment of the Lord's Supper in five passages in the Bible, emphasizing the importance of understanding the historical context and spiritual significance of this ordinance. The discourse at Capernaum, a year before the institution of the Supper, reveals the necessity of all men participating in the Atoning Death of Christ to possess eternal life. The Lord's Supper is closely associated with the Passover, symbolizing a great deliverance and redemption from sin, with Jesus as the ultimate sacrificial Lamb.

Transcript

We find the Lord's Supper distinctly treated in five passages; in the three Synoptic accounts of the institution; in 1 Corinthians 10; and in 1 Corinthians 11. The allusions in the Acts of the Apostles to the "breaking of bread" are simple records of fact, and do not help in the interpretation of the meaning of the ordinance. The Epistles, with the exception of the two passages in 1 Corinthians, have no clear reference to the Lord's Supper. The two titles given in the New Testament to the ordinance are "The Breaking of Bread" (Acts 2:42 and 20:7 and 11); "the Lord's Supper" (1 Cor. 11:20), while two more, though not actually given as titles in the New Testament, were early adopted as naturally arising out of the New Testament language, and as appropriate descriptions of certain aspects of the full meaning of the rite.

The one is "Communion" (κοινωνία, 1 Cor. 10:16), and the other is "Eucharist" (Thanksgiving, εὐχαριστία, Matt. 26:26). In considering the institution and the terms used by our Lord it is important to remember that the ordinance was instituted on the eve of His death, and in the presence of men who were His disciples and intimate followers, and who had been in constant and close association with Him for nearly three years. It was not, therefore, a declaration of startling facts or even of elementary truth to men who knew nothing, but an exposition or a fuller explanation of new and additional truths to men already instructed.

Under these circumstances it is important to obtain a correct perspective in considering the ordinance. In view of the close connection of the Lord's Supper, both in time and teaching, with the death of Christ, we

naturally enquire first of all what the disciples knew already of the death by previous instruction; and whether the Master had revealed anything to them concerning it during those three years. If anything had been given we should expect it to throw distinct light on the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Our Lord had already foreshadowed in metaphorical language (John 6) and foretold in plain statement (Matt. 16:21) more than once the fact of His death; and He had so far explained the meaning of it as to say that it was "for the life of the world" (John 6:51), and "a ransom instead of many" (λ■τρον αντι πολλων, Matt. 20:28). It was, however, at Capernaum, about a year before His crucifixion, that our Lord gave the fullest (though not until the event had illuminated it, the clearest) teaching as to His death.

On the day following the miracle of feeding the five thousand, our Lord, speaking to the crowd of people attracted by the miracle only, urged them to "labour for the food that endures to everlasting life" (John 6:27), which the Son of Man should give them. Gradually, in response to their questions and criticisms, He revealed Himself as the Bread of Life (verse 35), and told them that the bread was His flesh which He was about to give for the life of the world (verse 51). Moreover, He solemnly and with marked emphasis stated the absolute necessity of everyone eating His flesh and drinking His blood for the possession and maintenance of eternal life (verses 53-56).

There is to be seen in these discussions a gradual development of His teaching from the idea of food, generally, to that of bread; then from bread to flesh; and lastly to flesh and blood. This last reference to flesh and blood separately clearly points to His death. Flesh could only be eaten by a Jew after the blood had been drained from it, and the multitude, therefore, ought to have had no great difficulty in perceiving the meaning of the allusion. Then followed the emphasis on the need of "eating and drinking," i.e., a literal though spiritual act of appropriation and assimilation answering to eating and drinking in the material world.

This participation is laid down as absolutely essential for all. The terms are introduced by one of those solemn "excepts" as recorded in St. John (3:5, 6:53, 12:24), which admit of no qualification whatever. What, then, is the meaning of this great and solemn passage? It teaches the absolute necessity of all men participating in the Atoning Death of Christ (as expressed here by giving His flesh and blood) in order to possess eternal life. The discourse at Capernaum was addressed mainly to unbelievers, and also to nominal followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and was concerned with the great work of Redemption which He came to perform, and the universal and individual necessity of participation in the blessings resulting from it.

This interpretation of the discourse is that which is accepted by all the best modern commentators, and indeed has been thoroughly recognized in all the ages of the Christian Church. It is remarkable that even Roman Catholic writers have taken this view. The words of one commentator in particular, John Ferns, a German Franciscan monk of the middle of the sixteenth century, are worthy of careful notice. In his commentary of St. Matthew he writes: "To eat His body spiritually is from thy heart to believe that Christ was made man, and took thy sins upon Himself, and for thee shed His blood. ...

He who thus believeth, by faith as it were draweth Christ into himself, and becometh one body with Him. ... Without this spiritual eating no man is saved. For unless we have part in Christ's righteousness and His life, we remain in our sins. ... He speaketh not here (John 6:53) of the Sacrament; for not all are condemned who take not the Sacrament. He speaketh of spiritual eating, that is, of faith in Christ. ... In this manner even the Fathers of the Old Testament did eat the body of Christ, for Christ was offered to them

also in the promises." [Quoted in Bishop Moule's work, Bishop Ridley on the Lord's Supper, p. 219, and by Bishop Ryle in Expository Thoughts on St, John, Vol.

I., p. 402 ff.] In view of the foregoing reference to our Lord's death we can readily understand the institution of the Holy Supper on the eve of His Passion and in the presence of and with reference to His disciples. We can at the same time perceive the true relation of the discourse at Capernaum to the Lord's Supper. This discourse was delivered at least a year before the institution of the Supper, and was in direct connection with events and discussions immediately preceding it.

It is necessary to emphasize this historical connection of our Lord's words because it clearly indicates that the primary interpretation of the discourse cannot be of the Lord's Supper. "We have insisted upon the historical circumstances out of which this discourse has arisen. It is obvious that it lies in such close connection with them that it would be manifestly wrong to affirm that the discourse is to be directly referred to the Eucharist." [Dean Strong, The Doctrine of the Real Presence, p. 28.]

Further, the discourse was addressed mainly to the multitude outside, while the Supper was instituted for the disciples. The relation, then, between the discourse and the Supper, is that of a universal truth to a particular application. The discourse teaches the universal truth of Christ for the world as Sacrifice and Life. The Supper is one particular means whereby disciples of Christ may appropriate and commemorate that death. It is not that the discourse refers to or explains the Supper, but that the Supper refers to and amplifies the discourse; or, better still, they do not so much refer directly to each other, as that both refer to the same thing, the Cross.

As with the Passover, the feast referred to the deliverance and not the deliverance to the feast; so, here, the feast refers to the Sacrifice of Deliverance, not the Sacrifice to the feast. "The discourse at Capernaum lays down the vital principles of which the Eucharist is an actual embodiment." [Dean Strong, The Doctrine of the Real Presence, p. 29.] "What is spoken ... cannot refer primarily to the Holy Communion, nor, again, can it be simply prophetic of that Sacrament. The teaching has a full and consistent meaning in connection with the actual circumstances, and it treats essentially of spiritual realities with which no external act, as such, can be coextensive. ...

But on the other hand there can be no doubt that the truth which is presented in its absolute form in these discourses is presented in a specific act and in a concrete form in the Holy Communion. ... But that which He deals with is not the outward rite but the spiritual fact which underlies it." [Westcott on St. John VI.] As Archbishop Cranmer taught, John 6 does not treat of oral feeding in the Sacrament nor spiritual feeding confined to the Sacrament, but spiritual feeding in and out of the Sacrament. [See Waterland, Review of the Doctrine of the Eucharist, p, 126.]

We are now possessed of the true historical and spiritual perspective from which to examine the accounts of the institution and discover the meaning of the ordinance. In the first place, and generally, it is to be noted that the Lord's Supper is closely associated with the Passover, out of the celebration of which it clearly and naturally grew. It is obvious, therefore, that the Lord's Supper was intended to be to the Christian Church the exact analogy of the Passover feast to the Jews, a feast associated with, and commemorating a great deliverance.

At the same time it is scarcely accurate to speak of the Lord's Supper as the Christian Passover except in the meaning of the Passover feast. The Passover was the deliverance from death in Egypt, and the antitype to this is our Lord Himself in His Atoning Death ("Christ our Passover," 1 Cor. 5:7). Then came the

Passover feast to which our Lord's Supper, as one ordinance, rightly answers, though of course not fully, for the entire Christian life is now a continual Passover festival (εορταζόμεν, 1 Cor. 5:7), based on the great Redemption.

This close connection of the Lord's Supper with the Jewish Passover must be constantly kept in mind. It is one of the keys to the true meaning of the ordinance. St. Matthew three times calls the meal in which our Lord and His disciples took part a "Passover," and this fact undoubtedly sheds great light on the significance of the Lord's Supper. The Passover feast was a memorial feast to keep in memory the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and the Lord now virtually bids His disciples to forget Egypt and to think of a far greater deliverance in their redemption from sin.

He took the venerable institution, so replete with glorious memories, and lifted it into a higher region, and with sublime audacity He associates the Passover, thus transformed, with Himself as "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world."

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