

THE BREAD AND WINE

For many centuries there have been two major schools of thought about the Holy Communion (or depending on which denomination we belong to the Mass, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or the Breaking of Bread). On the one hand there are those - mostly in the Catholic tradition - who hold to the doctrine of **trans-substantiation**, maintaining that when a priest who has been properly ordained into the apostolic succession which began with St. Peter, blesses the bread and the wine, they are at that very moment changed into the physical body and blood of the Lord Jesus, so that when we eat them we fulfil His words,

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.
(John 6; 54)

At the other extreme are those - mostly in the Protestant Reformed tradition - who hold that the bread and wine are merely **symbols** of the body and blood of The Lord Jesus and nothing more. As symbols they serve to remind us of the Cross of Calvary and of the redemptive sacrifice made there for our sins, but no miraculous change of state takes place in them just before we consume them. Our salvation rests upon our faith in the word of God, and needs no priestly intervention to make it sure to us, other than that of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

There is a third group of people - mostly Lutherans - who hold to a compromise doctrine somewhere between these two extremes called **con-substantiation** which like most compromises is so much of a mess that I shall not describe it here.

The doctrine of Trans-substantiation

Well, clearly it's not just any old Tom, Dick, or Harry who can bring about a miracle of trans-substantiation. It has to be somebody who carries the true priestly anointing without which there can be no miracle, no trans-substantiation, and consequently no real presence of Christ in the service. All that is perfectly clear.

Except that it's wrong. Peter himself refuted the above doctrine when he wrote,

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers ... elect ... ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ... Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 1;1, 2;5,9)

Peter taught that under the terms of the New Testament, ALL believers in Jesus Christ were a holy and royal priesthood, not just some of them. He was of course taking his teaching from the Lord Jesus Himself, who commanded,

Be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

Besides being un-scriptural, the doctrine of Trans-substantiation is also contrary to all sense. It makes its appeal not to faith but to superstition, and invites idolatry ("holding up a biscuit and calling it God"). It depends for its efficacy on, and is the principal justification for, a doctrine of priestly office which is at best old-testament and at worst pagan.

The doctrine of Non-Substantiation

But the non-conformist doctrine of "symbols only" doesn't satisfy either, being barren of life and impossible to reconcile either with Jesus' words ("this is my body ... this is my blood") or with Paul's teaching about the effects of eating and drinking unworthily (1 Corinthians 11). You don't get sick and die from mere symbols, from something that isn't really happening.

The Passover

From what takes place at the average Communion service the impartial observer would be hard pushed to connect whatever it is that's going on with the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt which took place in 1528 BC. It's never even mentioned. But that's what the passover meal was to Jesus, and it was at the passover before he was crucified that he told the apostles about the bread and the wine (which naturally they didn't understand at all). At the exodus God firstly slew all the firstborn, except those in houses covered by the blood, then He led the Israelites out of Egypt and towards the promised land, drowning Pharaoh and the whole pursuing Egyptian army in the Red Sea along the way. Their skeletal remains are there to this day.

The unleavened bread and the wine of the Passover meal were a memorial for the Israelites not of things which had their primary meaning for them, but of things which had spoken in the first instance to God. We know now from the New Testament that leaven (yeast) was a type (or fore-shadowing) of sin; but the Israelites of the exodus couldn't possibly have known that because the law which defined sin had not then been given, so the unleavened bread had significance only for God.

Likewise was the blood of the passover lambs, of which the Passover wine made memorial. At the very moment when it was being most effective for the Israelites it was completely invisible to them, because they were inside their houses where they couldn't see it. The blood spoke only to God, who did see it. The angel of death passed over those who were protected by it in the day of His judgment.

We have, in our typically self-centred fashion, traditionally thought of the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion in terms of their relationship to us; "*The body of our Lord Jesus Christ given for thee, preserve thy body and soul ...*" etc. But although they do relate to us, and we do feed on Him in our hearts by faith, their primary significance is still towards God, not us.

If you are a beneficiary under a will or testament, before you can receive your legacy you have to present yourself before the High Court of Chancery with two proofs: you must show proof of the testator's death (because no testament can take effect until the one who made it has actually died) and you must show also that you are truly the person to whom the legacy was bequeathed. This is our law and it is perfectly sensible. It is also the line of Hebrews 8 & 9.

Now if and when we assemble together in the Name of The Lord Jesus Christ (which, incidentally, we almost never do)¹ we present ourselves before the Presence of the Most High God. The One to whom we "*show forth His death till He come*" is God.

The bread and wine are not themselves God (as the Catholic and Orthodox sects teach), nor are they mere symbols (as the Protestant sects teach). Before the High Court of Heaven they are,

The legal credentials of our inheritance in Christ.

When we present before God, the supreme judge, the legally valid credentials which he himself ordained before the foundation of the world, He will certainly not fail immediately to grant us the inheritance willed to us by his Son, who willingly laid down his own life for our benefit.

By eating the bread we affirm before God that we are members of the One Body broken for us, the Christ, the seed² of Abraham to whom the promise made under the new will and testament was given. And when we drink the wine, we affirm before God that Jesus has shed His Blood and has died so that His new will and testament may become effective. The legacy we claim is that bequeathed to us by Jesus which was promised long before in Jeremiah 31, that God will write His laws in our hearts and that we will be His people, and He will be our God and will dwell in our midst exactly as He dwelt in the midst of the hosts of

¹ No assembly can possibly be "in His Name" unless we have His specific authority to act. For all our fine words, this is very rarely the case.

² The word is singular

Israel. By taking the Holy Communion we are offering to God, the Supreme Judge, proofs which He Himself has ordained, which are valid in his court, and upon which He will most certainly act.

Woe therefore betide anybody who thus presents himself before God and makes such a claim unprepared for its consequences. God is a jealous God and will not be mocked. I hope we can now see why Paul speaks of the consequences of eating and drinking unworthily:- the wages of sin is death! If you take a holy God at His word and invite Him into your midst you had better be willing to become holy too, otherwise His holiness will destroy you. Don't play with God.

The legacy we are claiming from Him is none other than that,

(1) God should forgive us our sins for Jesus' sake - accepting His sacrificial death in place of ours. For God has provided that HE will apply the blood of Jesus to the cleansing of our sins if we present ourselves before Him bearing the tokens which HE has ordained, and which speak TO HIM of the tokens borne for us in heaven by our High Priest, the Lord Jesus. If we do not so present ourselves before Him, HE is legally entitled to exact upon US the full penalty for our sins (though it is within His jurisdiction to take another's death in our place. This last is a most serious matter - see Isaiah 43;3,4 - of which we will not speak more here).

(2) That He should pour out continually upon us his own Holy Spirit. The One whom Jesus promised had been with the apostles and who was to be in them; the One whom Jesus said would come **in His Name**; the One who writes God's laws in our hearts - and there can't be two people writing the law. For the children of Israel God wrote his law on tables of stone with his finger; Moses was not expected to add his own contribution with an iron chisel. For the children of Jesus, God writes the same law on the fleshy tables of our hearts with his finger; we are not allowed to add our own contribution with an iron self-will.

APPENDIX

The Greek word διαθηκη (diatheke) incidentally, can and should I think quite properly be translated "will" or "testament" rather than "covenant", the prefix δια- (dia-) conveying the thought of something conveyed from one person to another. The usual covenant sense of an agreement of two equals would have been represented by συνθηκη (syntheke) a word not used anywhere in scripture. The bequest is one-sided, from God to us. We can contribute nothing.