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CHRIST THE LIVING BREAD

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

II

By D.B. KNOX

The Protestant Faith

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One of the unique features of Christianity is that its founder, Jesus Christ, made Himself the centre of religion. He taught this in many different ways, using many different pictures and images to make clear the central position which He held in true religion. For example, He said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life : no one comes unto the Father, but by me". Again, "I am the door", "I am the bread of life", "I am the true vine", "I am the light of the world", "I am the resurrection and the life". From these statements it is clear that we cannot have true religion unless Jesus Christ is the centre; for, says the Bible, "He that honours not the Son honours not the Father".

Our Lord's miracles underline this central position which He occupies. For example, in St. John chapter 6 is the account of our Lord's feeding of the 5,000. The day following, Jesus engaged in a long discussion with those who had shared in that miraculous meal of the five barley loaves and the two small fishes. He used the miracle as an illustration to underline the fact that He Himself was the only food and sustenance of our spiritual life. He told his hearers "My Father gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life unto the world." His hearers asked, "Lord, evermore give us this bread." Jesus replied "I am the bread of life : he that comes to me shall not hunger, and he that believes on me shall never thirst." "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: yea and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world:. You will notice that Jesus explained clearly how it is that we are to feed on Him, the living bread. It is by faith in Him. In verse 35 He said "I am the bread of life: he that comes to me shall not hunger; and he that believes on me shall never thirst." Coming to Him in faith, and believing on Him, is the way of receiving the eternal life. Christ made this still more clear in a verse or two later when He said "...this is the will of My Father, that everyone that beholds the Son, and believes on Him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." We see then that beholding Christ with the eyes of the soul and believing on Him, this it is that gives us eternal life, this is the way we feed on Christ the living bread. It is



through faith in His death that our souls are fed. On the cross He died for our sins and when, through faith, we see Him dying in our stead, then we received from Him eternal life.

This was Jesus' meaning when He said "the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world", and "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." It was on the cross that Jesus' flesh and blood were given for us, and to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ is to put our faith in His death for us, and is the only means of obtaining eternal life. In order to put the matter beyond possible misinterpretation, at the end of his talk with the Jews, Jesus warned them that he was not meaning anything literally when He spoke of feeding on Him. Not His bodily flesh, but His words are life-giving. Thus He concluded His remarks by the statement "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life." We see then from the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 and from our Lord's talk and discussion on the subject that followed, that Jesus Christ is the only food of the soul; and that we feed on Him by receiving him into our hearts through believing Him as He makes Himself known to us in His Word.

The Roman Catholic church, however, has taken this 6th chapter of St. John's Gospel to support the doctrine of transubstantiation, which is that in the Holy Communion the worshipper eats literally with his mouth the actual body of Christ, the same body that was born of the blessed virgin Mary in Bethlehem; that in the service the bread and the wine is completely changed, or transubstantiated, so that the bread and wine no longer exist and their place is taken by the body and blood of Christ, with His soul and divinity whole and entire, in each particle of the bread and in each drop of the wine. This doctrine of transubstantiation was made part of the faith of the Roman Catholic Church in the Fourth Lateran Council in the 13th century. Nowadays, it is supported by quoting verses from this 6th chapter of St. John.

However, it is not difficult to show that our Lord's discussion in that chapter has no direct reference to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It was delivered well over a year before the institution of that sacrament, yet Jesus did not say in John 6 "except ye shall eat" but used the present tense "except ye eat". He was telling his hearers of a present duty to feed on His words by faith and not of some future duty to partake of the sacrament.

Moreover, the language is figurative throughout the passage and cannot be taken literally. For Jesus said "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves." This is true of feeding on Him in our souls, because He is the only source of spiritual life and if He is not in our hearts, we have no spiritual life; but it is not true of the Sacrament of the Holy Communion; otherwise children and others who do not partake would be lost eternally. Moreover, Jesus said "Except ye.... drink his blood, ye have no life in you", but for centuries the Roman Catholic layman never drank of the wine in the Communion, nor is it customary for him to do so now. Again, Jesus said "He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." This is true of all who spiritually partake of Christ by faith; but it is certainly not true of all who partake of the Lord's Supper, for many wicked people have eaten the bread and the wine in the service, but who certainly have not eternal life nor will go to heaven. But Jesus said 'whoever eats my flesh, I will raise him up'. Plainly He means eating spiritually, not literally. Again, Jesus said "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven". If this were to be taken literally it means that His flesh came down from Heaven, while we know that he took flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary. Thus to apply the passage literally makes nonsense of what Jesus said; nor was it taken literally in the early church. Interestingly enough St. Augustine in his third book on Christian doctrine chooses out this very chapter of John as an example of figurative, non-literal language. He says "It is a figure, teaching us that we partake of the benefits of Christ's passion, and that we must sweetly and profitably



treasure up in our memories that His flesh was crucified and wounded for us". This is also the Protestant view.

The Roman Catholics support the doctrine of transubstantiation by a second passage of Scripture, namely our Lord's words at the last supper when He took bread and gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them saying "This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. And the cup in like manner after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." Notice that Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper as a remembrance service "Do this in remembrance of me", He said. Again it is plain that the words 'This cup is the New Testament in my blood' are figurative, the cup standing for the wine that was in the cup; nor was the wine the testament or agreement, it was the sign and seal of that agreement between God and men made on the basis of Christ's shed blood and through which we are saved. There is, therefore, here a double figure. With regard to the words "This is my body, the Roman Catholics insist emphatically that these are to be taken literally, although the rest of the passage is so plainly figurative. Yet here too the meaning is figurative. It is a common way of speaking to say of a picture or of a statue or anything that represents something else, 'this is so and so'. So it was at the Lord's Supper. "This is my body" means "This represents my body". It is a grave mistake to believe, that by saying these words Jesus changed the bread into His body, for the rest of the New Testament confirms the figurative interpretation, which after all is the most natural one. Three times over in I Cor. 11, St. Paul calls the consecrated elements which are eaten in the Lord's Supper, bread, but on the doctrine of transubstantiation this is a misnomer, for it is not bread that is eaten but our Lord's literal body. Yet St. Paul three times over described it as bread, which would be incredible if he believed it to be something else.

There are numerous and grave consequences which result from this mistaken notion of transubstantiation. I mention two only. Firstly, worship is offered to the bread and the wine, imagining it to be the true body of Christ, that same

body that walked and talked in Palestine and is now seated at God's right hand in Heaven. Of course, to worship the consecrated elements is natural and indeed required, if the doctrine of transubstantiation were true. The fact that this worship of the consecrated elements did not arise in the Church till late in mediaeval times confirms that transubstantiation was not held in the early church, because such worship is so obvious a deduction from that doctrine. However, since it is not true, such worship cannot be described by any other term than the ugly one of idolatry. For idolatry is the worship of a creature instead of the Creator, under the mistaken notion that what is worshipped is the Creator. And even when it is well intentioned, idolatry is fatal to spiritual growth. It prevents the mind from arising to a true knowledge of God as He is revealed in His Word.

Secondly, the doctrine of transubstantiation confuses the sign with the reality. The sacraments were given to us in order to lift the eyes of our hearts to Christ Who is the only food of our soul, so that by receiving Him into our heart and life through faith we might grow into His likeness. The sacraments were intended to put us in mind of His death for us, and so to be a means by which we might express our faith in that death and obtain its benefits. The sacraments are signs pointing to Christ who is the reality. They point away from themselves to Him. We should not put our faith in the sign, but rather look through the sign to the One to whom it points. Much less should we confuse the sign with the reality, and believe that the reality is present there, for so our hearts are not lifted up to where Christ is, but we put our trust in the sacrament itself, and what was intended to be a help towards faith in Christ becomes a stumbling-block and prevents us from really feeding on Him in His Word by faith.

Christ is the food and sustenance of our spiritual life. But just as bread must be eaten, if it is to strengthen us, so if Christ is to profit us, we must put our faith in Him in actual practice. He said, "I am the bread of life; he that comes to me shall not hunger and he that believes on me shall never thirst.

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