

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSUBSTANTIATION

by
D. B. KNOX

St. John has written his Gospel around seven great "I am" sayings of Jesus, such as "I am the Resurrection", "I am the Way", "I am the Door", "I am the Light of the world". Often a miracle illustrates the saying, as the raising of Lazarus from the dead illustrates "I am the Resurrection", and the healing of the blind man illustrates "I am the Light of the world". In chapter 6 there is the account of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 from the five small loaves and two fishes and this is followed by Jesus' sermon on the text "I am the Bread of life". By comparing Himself to bread our Lord makes clear that He is the sustaining food of our spiritual life, saying in verse 57 "He that eateth me shall also live by me".

Some of His hearers had difficulty in understanding how they could eat Him and in verse 63 Jesus explains that it is His words and teaching which brings life and that He is not speaking of any literal eating of His flesh. The verse runs "It is the spirit that quickens: the flesh profits nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life". Earlier in His talk He had made it clear that the way we feed on Him as the Bread of Life is by coming to Him and putting our faith in Him. Thus verse 35 reads "Jesus said unto them, I am the Bread of Life, He that comes to me shall not hunger, and He that believes on me shall never thirst"; and in verse 40 He repeats this teaching that it is through faith in Him that we receive His life; and again in verse 47, saying "He that believeth hath eternal life. I am the bread of life. ... If a man eat of this bread he shall live for ever", and He added "The bread which I give is my flesh for the life of the world", so making clear that

it is His death, when He gave His life for us, that is to be the focus of our faith in Him.

Jesus was speaking to a crowd that did not see anything special in Him. They regarded Him as one amongst the ordinary run of religious teachers. In contrast, Jesus spoke of Himself as the only true Bread of life, the soul, and in verse 33, speaking of Himself, He said "the bread of God is that which comes down out of Heaven and gives life unto the world". We do well to remember how that Jesus taught clearly that He alone is the way to God. We are inclined to think along the same lines as the crowd, that we can come to God apart from Jesus if we want to. But He made it clear that He is the only source of spiritual life. Using the same imagery of eating and drinking He said in verse 53 "Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you have no life in yourselves. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day".

Notice how our Lord repeats twice over the same absolute truth, putting it first negatively, then positively, that unless we partake of Christ, we have no spiritual life in us, and that all who partake of Him have eternal life. This reminds us of what Jesus said to Nicodemus, in chapter 3, that whosoever believes in Him has eternal life. However, Roman Catholics have taken this verse as referring to the Holy Communion, to support their doctrine of Transubstantiation; but a moment's reflection will show that this cannot be so for it is not true that we must partake of the Holy Communion to be saved, for although the service is helpful and ordained by Christ Himself, it is not absolutely necessary, else, for example, no children

could be saved. Nor is it true of the Holy Communion that all without exception who eat and drink it have eternal life. Neither Roman Catholics nor Protestants teach this. And therefore in these verses Jesus cannot have been referring to the Holy Communion, when He said without exception that unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood we have no life in ourselves, while on the other hand everyone who partakes of Him has eternal life. These sentiments are not true if applied to the sacrament; but they are true when applied to faith in Jesus, and as I say, the whole chapter makes clear that it was of faith in Him, and particularly in His death, that Jesus was speaking. He alone is the source of spiritual life, and we obtain this life through faith, that is through hearing His Word and believing it, and coming to God through Him. This is the only way of salvation.

Besides finding no basis in this chapter, there are some further difficulties in the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation. This doctrine teaches that by the words of the priest the bread and the wine in the Holy Communion, or Mass, cease to be, and in their place there comes Jesus Christ with His true human body and all that belongs to it; so that by eating what seems to be bread we eat, in fact, Jesus, with His whole personality, His divinity and His humanity in its completeness. This doctrine was made part of the Roman Catholic faith in 1215 A.D., but it is full of intellectual difficulties. I may mention three: Firstly the elements continue to look like bread and wine, to taste like them, to weigh like them

and in every other external appearance to be like bread and wine, yet it is said that there is nothing to which these appearances belong, because of course it cannot be said that Jesus looks like bread and wine. The appearances then are just held into being by the power of God with no substance to which they are attached, an extraordinarily difficult concept and one which appears to contradict the truthfulness of God by saying that He uses His power to make things appear to be what they are not, or more accurately to make things appear to be, when there is absolutely nothing belonging to these appearances. But God is a God of truth, He does not deliberately deceive our senses which He Himself has given us. He is always straightforward and truthful in His dealings with us. But Transubstantiation would seem to contradict this characteristic of God.

The second problem connected with this doctrine is that it maintains that the whole Christ is present and is eaten, with all His qualities which make up His humanity, including the quality of extension in space. But although this quality of extension is said to be present (for otherwise Christ's human presence would be imperfect) it is acknowledged that in fact there is no extension in space. It is difficult to see how we can avoid a meaningless contradiction if we say that something is present (i.e. the quality of extension) when its very essence is absent.

The third difficulty is the fact that it is taught that Christ's human body is present in

innumerable places at the same time; not only on every altar where the elements are reserved, but also He is said to be present innumerable times in each fragment of wafer or drop of wine itself; because His human body, born of the virgin Mary, is said to be present in every crumb into which the wafer can conceivably be broken, or in every drop, however small, into which it is possible to divide the wine. For only by saying this can the concept of breaking Christ's body in half be avoided. It seems difficult to see how this idea of Christ's body innumerable times present in the same locality preserves Christ's true humanity. We believe that God is present everywhere for God is infinite and Christ in His divine nature is present everywhere, but how can a truly human body be present in all its parts in an innumerable, though a finite, number of places on earth at the same time, and yet remain truly human. It is against the nature of a human body to be present in more than one place at once. Thus the doctrine of Transubstantiation brings into question the doctrine of the continuity of Christ's true humanity.

However, we must remember that Christ is the centre of our spiritual life, for He is the Son of God. We cannot please God, or grow in our spiritual life if we bypass Jesus, and seek to worship God apart from Jesus Christ. He is the only way to God. He must be the centre. The doctrine of Transubstantiation at least directs the attention to Jesus; even though, by misunderstanding His words, it does so in such a strange way.

Transubstantiation also compels the worshipper to keep alive his belief in a Supernatural God. Because of the climate of

opinion to-day we are inclined to be timid in believing in a supernatural God. For example, we are tempted to explain away Christ's miracles. But God is a supernatural God, in control of nature, and of every event in our lives. Although there is no ground for thinking that He performs the strange miracle that Transubstantiation requires, in refuting this error we must not loose our hold of the truth that God is in control of nature, and that Christ is the centre of true religion.

Roman Catholics have developed the doctrine of Transubstantiation with all its difficulties because they have made the mistake of taking literally, words which are plainly pictorial, for when Jesus said of the bread at the Last Supper "This is my body", He meant it metaphorically: "This represents my body"; just as we may say of a picture, this is 'so and so'. The bread and the wine are symbols of Jesus' death for us, and as we take them in the Communion service our faith looks up beyond what we have in our hands to Christ Who died for us, and so our faith in Him is strengthened and our hearts and minds feed on Him, the only Bread of life.

The mistake of taking our Lord's words literally ought to have been excluded had careful attention been paid to what St. Paul the Apostle wrote. Thus in chapter 11 of I Corinthians he says quite clearly and repeats it three times over in three successive verses that what we eat in the Communion is bread. He writes in verse 26 "As often as you eat this bread you ... proclaim the Lord's death till He come". But Transubstantiation teaches that we do not eat bread, but we eat Jesus in His completeness, His body and blood, His soul and divinity, as it is put in

the Creed of Pope Pius IV, which is subscribed to by every Roman Catholic priest. But St. Paul teaches that we eat bread, in remembrance of Jesus; and this is plainly also the meaning of our Lord's words. When Jesus said in John 6, "I am the bread of life" He made it clear that He was not speaking literally, but using a metaphor, adding "He that believes on me has eternal life", and "The words that I speak unto you are life". Thus we are not to think of Jesus as associated locally with the bread and the wine at Communion as taught by Transubstantiation, and by the pale reflection of the doctrine, sometimes found in other denominations. Christ is not in the bread and wine, but He dwells in our hearts by faith, and He has given us these symbols and this action of eating and drinking, in order to strengthen our faith in Him, for faith is the real thing which God looks for. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life".

12 April 1964

7/64