

The Scriptural Argument for the Time of Communion.

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IN the CHURCHMAN for June there is an article by the Rev. W. S. Hooton on "The time of Communion at Troas." In this article Mr. Hooton comments on a passage in the Bishop of Salisbury's "Ministry of Grace," referred to by me in my little book, "The Church of England as Catholic and Reformed." Mr. Hooton contends, in opposition to the Bishop, that the Communion at Troas took place on what we should call Monday morning.

It would be interesting to know how the Bishop would defend his opinion¹ that the service was in the early hours of the Lord's Day—a view which Mr. Hooton himself admits to be "reasonable," and to have "great authority behind it." Anyhow, the fact stands out, as the Bishop has remarked, that "the only account we have of the hour of a Eucharistic service in the Acts puts it after midnight."

"All other indications in Scripture," so Mr. Hooton says, "point to the evening hour." What are these indications? None, save the fact that the Sacrament was instituted in the evening. The Scriptural argument as to the time most appropriate to Communion hinges entirely on the reason for that. The time of day chosen was when the Passover was eaten, and that, we know, was at the beginning of the Day of the Passover, reckoning from sunset according to the Jewish method. It may be inferred from this, with the greatest confidence, that when the Lord's Day came to be observed as the day peculiarly appropriate to Christ's memorial, the Holy Communion would be celebrated at the beginning of the day, as in the case of the Passover. In due course, when the Roman day took the place

¹ It is needless to say that this article was in print before the lamented death of Bishop Wordsworth.

of the Jewish, the hour of Communion would be pushed forward from the evening to the morning, so that the usage might be kept up of consecrating the day from the beginning, and Bishop Wordsworth sees "the first indication of the new arrangement" at the Communion at Troas.

As regards the Christians of Palestine, we know full well that they made no violent break with the past. Not only do we find the Apostles at the outset observing the accustomed Jewish hours of prayer, but towards the end of the narrative of the Acts we read (Acts xxi. 20) how James and the elders assured Paul that the thousands of Jews at Jerusalem which believed "were all zealous for the law." It is practically certain, therefore, that, with their strong conservative instincts, they would observe their special Paschal feast in commemoration of Christ's sacrifice at the same time of the day as that on which the Paschal lamb was eaten. It seems most unlikely that they would go counter to immemorial usage and reserve the celebration of the Eucharist for the latter part of the Lord's Day, which no Jew would have dreamt of doing in the case of the Passover. It is to be remembered, too, that the Sabbath was still observed by Christians on the seventh day of the week separately from the Lord's Day, which practice, indeed, was kept up for the first three centuries.¹ The Sabbath would thus be the day of preparation for the Lord's Day. What more probable, then, that, as the Sabbath drew to an end at the sunset hour, the Christians would assemble in readiness to take part in the Holy Communion when the Lord's Day began? Is it imaginable that they would let the evening pass, and all the long day following, and reserve their gathering together for Eucharistic worship for the close of the Lord's Day?

Mr. Hooton is of opinion, indeed, that, as the appearances of the Risen Lord to the assembled Church occurred on the Sunday evening, there is a "distinct presumption" that the gatherings of early Christians for Holy Communion would have taken place after sunset on Sunday, which, by the way, would have

¹ See the article on "The Sabbath" in Hastings' "Bible Dictionary."

been really in the early hours of Monday, not on the Lord's Day at all, according to the Jewish computation. But surely there were obvious reasons why the Lord should not have showed Himself to the disciples on the day of the Resurrection till the quiet and leisure of the evening had come, when they could conveniently meet together, and no inference can be drawn from this as to the superior suitability of the evening of the Lord's Day, or rather of the first hours of Monday, for Holy Communion over the equally quiet hours of the previous evening at the beginning of the day. After all, was it not the actual Resurrection in the early dawn that made the day so sacred? And surely it must have seemed to the disciples much more appropriate to celebrate the Lord's memorial at the beginning than at the close of the day. We may well believe that this was one of the governing reasons, coupled with the change from the Jewish to the Roman day, which caused the substitution of an early-morning Communion for one at the hour consecrated by the Passover usage; and it is a much more likely supposition that when the change came the time was pushed forward by a few hours from the Passover time than backward from Monday.

There is another yet more important deduction to be drawn from the institution of the Holy Communion at the time corresponding to the beginning of the Jewish Passover. The Passover was not only a memorial, but a sacred meal, partaken of, on the first occasion, preparatory to the Exodus. The Israelites were bidden to eat it, with special reference to the journey on which they were about to start, and the recollection of that journey and of its peculiar circumstances was always associated with subsequent celebrations of the feast. It is to be inferred from this that the first Christians learned to partake of the Holy Communion as a preparation for the due observance of the day which was to commemorate their deliverance from their bondage to sin and death.

On this point the Christian Church from the beginning has given no uncertain witness. It derived from the Jewish Church, we may say, the suggestion of the consecration of the weekly

festival of the Resurrection by Holy Communion in the earlier hours of the day, and the practice has been kept up in the greater part of the Church till quite recent times. Even at the Reformation the idea of celebrating the Holy Communion on Sunday evening does not appear to have been mooted in England at any rate, and it is only within the last sixty years or so that there has been any departure within the Church of England from this Catholic rule, as we may well call it.

We may not forget in this connection what great store St. Paul set on adhesion to time-honoured and general practice among Christians, on grounds of edification as well as of order, and how decisively, if not curtly, he pronounced against a certain innovation among the Corinthians by saying: "We have no such custom, neither the Churches of God." There is a strong presumption that customs having wide and long acceptance, that are traceable up to the very first days of the Church, do testify to the "mind of the Spirit" in such matters.

We are fain, all of us who hold the Catholic faith, to lay stress on the significance attaching to the consensus of the Church on that subject. We believe that it was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the faith was defined in the first five centuries, and that it has been under the same guidance that the faith has been assented to by the majority of Christians from century to century. Dr. Sanday, in his "Christologies Ancient and Modern," has declared his own convictions in this matter in a singularly impressive passage, where he says: "In the last resort the key to the position is that there is a God in heaven who really shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will. I believe that in His hand is the whole course of human history, and especially the history of those who deliberately seek His guidance. I therefore trace His influence in the ultimate decisions, the fundamental decisions, of the Church of the Fathers; and it is to me incredible that He should intend the course of modern development to issue in direct opposition to them."

It so happens that the Rev. A. W. F. Blunt, in his article

on "Orders and Reunion" in the *CHURCHMAN* for June, employs what is in effect the same argument with reference to episcopacy. Speaking of the "continuous guidance of God's Holy Spirit in the Church," he says: "We must recognize that antiquity has a claim to our respect, that continuous tradition has a moral authority over us. . . . If we wish to link ourselves on to the past ages of the Christian Church, we must desire to carry on, through whatever developments and alterations, the fundamental principles of the Church's historical existence—those principles which were the sources of its vitality and the basis of its system from the beginning."

In a precisely similar way it may be contended that the greatest consideration should be given to the continuous use of the Church in celebrating the Holy Communion at the beginning of the Lord's Day, as a sacred meal to fortify Christian people for the due observance of the day throughout.

It is to be remarked here that this witness of the Church is not to be confused with the tradition in favour of fasting Communion. That tradition has its own significance, but it does not accord with Apostolic usage, and has not been so continuous and widespread as the tradition in favour of Communion in the early hours of the Lord's Day. The fasting tradition demands respect in so far as it shows what has been for a long period the mind of the Church in regard to the self-discipline and self-denial which are indispensable to worthy Communion, though the practice may have commended itself to some for superstitious reasons, and been pressed beyond the dictates of common sense. There will be a good many who, while claiming and exercising a rightful liberty on the question as to whether it is best for them to abstain or not to abstain altogether from food before communicating, will feel morally bound to pay the utmost deference to the much more authoritative usage of the Church as to the time of Communion.

This antecedent judgment, on grounds of what may be called, in the proper sense of the phrase, Catholic loyalty, will in many cases have received confirmation from personal experience.

When once the habit is formed of receiving the Holy Communion in the earlier hours of the Lord's Day, the loss will be felt when the privilege is not available. Over and over again will the devout communicant have been conscious of unspeakable comfort and support as the direct consequence of partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, and for this reason he would deprecate, for the sake of others, the practice of encouraging Christian people to defer the great refreshment till the sacred day is well-nigh over. Surely, in the interest of the due observance of the Lord's Day, it would be well if the Church were, in conformity with Scriptural usage, to advocate the reception of the Holy Communion as a means of giving its proper consecration to the whole of the Lord's Day. If the circumstances of some in modern life make it difficult for them to sanctify the early part of the day by public worship, our wisdom and our duty is surely to endeavour to produce a revision of popular custom and habit in this regard—not to yield to popular custom, but to make such custom give way to the ancient rule of the Church; and especially is it advisable that everything that can be done, whether by legislative enactments or otherwise, should be done to restore the good old usage of spending the last hours of Saturday quietly and thoughtfully, in preparation for the Lord's Day.

The time of Communion may seem, after all, a slight matter, on which Christians may be well content to agree to differ; but in these comparatively slight matters there may be important issues involved, such as that of the unity and good order of the Church. Individual action on the part of one section of men in the Church often provokes individual action on the part of others by way of protest and opposition. It is thus that the Church is kept at variance when God is calling us to knit up our forces, so that we may present a strong and united front to those spiritual foes that are sapping the very foundations of national religion and morality. We shall never come to a good understanding with one another unless we resolve to regulate our private judgment by a proper deference to the authority of

Scripture first of all, and then to the collective and continuous voice of the Church, so far as it can be ascertained.

It is on these grounds that, finding myself, as I do, in such full sympathy on many points with those who favour Sunday evening Communion, I would venture to plead with them that they should reconsider this point, and "try it anew," to quote Hooker's famous sentence, "argument by argument, with all the diligent exactness they can." They may discover flaws in my reasoning on the subject; if so, I trust I shall prove open to correction. At any rate, I would assure them that I have put forward my view of the matter with the utmost goodwill towards them, and from a simple and earnest desire for the peace and unity of the Church, and the consequent strengthening of its influence.

