

A Defence of Evening Communion.¹

THAT Evening Communion was the practice of the Apostles and of the Church of the first century and a half there is absolute certainty. Professor Cheetham, who is one of the most learned and impartial writers that could be found, says that in the Apostolic Age Holy Communion was at the time of the evening meal—the Greek *δειπνος*, the Latin *cæna*. Baronius, the Roman Catholic historian, admits this in his narrative of the year 34, chapter lxi. From the nature of the case, when Christianity was an illicit religion, it was necessary that the peculiar rite of Christian Communion must have been celebrated in such a way as to attract the least possible attention. St. Paul's "breaking of bread" in the Troad, related in Acts xx. 7, 8, was after nightfall, and the service was not over at midnight. The heathen calumnies mentioned by Justin Martyr ("Dialogue with Trypho," chapter x.) show that the meeting of Christians took place after nightfall; and the same custom earned them the epithets of "latebrosa et lucifuga natio" (a people that sought darkness and shunned the light), which Minutius Felix ("Octavius," c. 8) tells us were bestowed upon them. Origen, too, tells Celsus (i. 3, page 5) that it was to avoid the death with which they were threatened that Christians commonly held their meetings in secrecy and darkness. And still in the third century, when Morning Communion had also been introduced, we find Tertullian, Cyprian, and others speaking of "Convocations nocturnal," "nightly gatherings," and of "sacrificium matutinum et vespertinum" (the morning and evening sacrifice) (Tertullian, "Ad Uxorem," ii. 4; "De Coronâ Milet," c. 3). In the latter passage Tertullian implies that Christians communicated at the evening meal, as well as in assemblies before dawn. Cyprian refers to some who in the morning sacrifice used water only in the chalice, lest the odour of wine should betray them to their heathen

¹ Authorities consulted and quoted: "Dictionary of Christian Antiquities"; "Holy Communion"; Canon Meyrick in "A Protestant Dictionary."

neighbours, and warns such not to salve their conscience with the reflection that they complied with Christ's command in offering the mixed chalice when they came together for the evening meal.

Apart from the Forged Decretals, the first distinct reference to any special morning hour is in a letter of Sidonius Apollinaris, who died in 489, who says that priests held service at the third hour, which is 9 a.m. As late as the twelfth century, on ordinary days Mass was said at the sixth hour, which is twelve o'clock (Honorius of Autun, "*Gemma animæ*," I. c. 3). On fast-days, and on Wednesday and Friday throughout the year, Mass was celebrated at the ninth hour, or three o'clock in the afternoon.

Midnight Communion continued to be celebrated on Christmas Eve, and the Eve of the Epiphany, Easter Eve, the Eve of Whitsunday, and four times a year on the Saturdays of the Ember weeks. On Maundy Thursday the practice of a distinct Evening Communion was maintained.

The practice of the First Century, and partly of the Second, is enough for all theological argument on the subject. Evening Communion continued till the Emperor Trajan's jealousy of club-meetings compelled the Christians of the second century to transfer the Lord's Supper, and for a time the social meal also, to the forenoon. It was not any objection to Evening Communion, as such, which produced this change of practice, but the pressure of Imperial Law enforced by secular and pagan magistrates through fear of conspiracies being hatched at evening meetings.

How is it possible to condemn a practice followed by all the Apostles and several generations of their converts—a practice ordered by St. Paul in all the Churches which he established, and which he refrained from altering, even when some great evils showed themselves as a seeming consequence of it—a practice which was not changed on any religious or ecclesiastical motive, but simply because the law of the land required it? Evening Communion, though less frequent, continued to beyond the time of Tertullian and Cyprian, and are mentioned by

them without condemnation. Staley, in "The Catholic Religion," puts forward the kind of argument with which we are now familiar, which has not a shadow of foundation. "The rapidity," he says, "with which the change was accomplished, and its universal acceptance, lead to the conclusion that it was made on the authority of the Apostles themselves." But Canon Meyrick well observes that no Apostle was living when the change was made; and that it was the compulsion of the Imperial Law which caused the rapid alteration.

"The Congregation in Church" pronounces Evening Communion to be a strange, irreverent, and possibly sacrilegious custom. This would be to condemn all the Apostles and their succeeding generations as irreverent and sacrilegious.

"The Ritual Reason Why" uses the same kind of absolutely baseless argument as Staley. It has the boldness to assert that early and fasting celebrations were commanded by St. Paul among the other things which he set in order when he came. The truth is the exact contrary. He settles the question of Evening and Fasting Communion in the 11th chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, and says it is the rest, other things beyond those he has mentioned, which he will set in order when he comes.

About thirty years ago the Bishops of the Province of Canterbury issued a very important and interesting letter on the subject of Evening Communion. They pointed out that from about the third century, Communion in the morning had been the rule, but they also recognized the facts of the first century and a half. They said that at the Reformation the Church of England had recovered her full liberty in all such matters; that there were reasons for Morning Communion; but that where, from the nature of the population, it was difficult for a number of parishioners to attend in the morning, and the opportunity of communicating in the evening would be a distinct advantage to them, that opportunity ought not to be denied.

The Church of England has, in fact, as it has been pointed out by Canon Meyrick, laid down no rule about the time at

which Holy Communion should be celebrated. It is clear that the Prayer-Book expected that it would take place after Morning Prayer; but it is left to the discretion of the ministers. Neither Early Communion nor Evening Communion probably occurred to the minds of the reformers of the sixteenth century; the latter had been unknown, except on exceptional days, for so many centuries, that they did not think of it: nor indeed, until about fifty years ago, were there any services known which we should describe as evening—evening took place in the afternoon. At the time of the Reformation, also, the population was so small and the occupation so leisurely, that there was no difficulty in attending the midday or morning celebration. Had there been any need at that time for Evening Communion there can be no doubt that the Reformers, in accordance with their principles, would have adverted to the practice of our Lord, the Apostles, and the first century and a half.

As a matter of fact, Evening Communion was revived in the Church of England after the lapse of so many centuries by Dr. Hook, the High-Church Vicar of Leeds, as an accommodation for his vast working population. As long as he was vicar, every Saint's day there was an Evening Communion for their benefit.

It was only on account of the recrudescence of the belief in the Real Corporal Presence of Christ in the Elements, in the train of the results of the Oxford Movement, that objections were made to this practice. An accompaniment of this materialistic belief was the dogma that the Communion could only be taken fasting, because ordinary food must not meet the actual Body and Blood of Christ in the digestive organs of the recipient. Such a view is unknown to the Church of England, which declares that the Body and Blood of Christ are taken after a heavenly and spiritual manner, and the means whereby they are received is faith; which deliberately also cut out every direction about fasting reception, and laid down purely spiritual conditions. Its view is well put by Bishop Jeremy Taylor: "That the Lord's Supper is sacredly and with reverence to be received is taught

us by the Apostles : but whether this reverence ought to be expressed by taking it fasting or not fasting, the Apostles left the Churches to their choice."

Fasting Communion cannot be shown to have become the general custom before the fourth and following centuries ; and the reason of it was the heaviness of the one great meal of the day. The kind of fasting Communion at that date was a totally different thing from the fasting Communion ordered by the Papal Church, and urged by the Ritualistic party, which dates only from the thirteenth century. The rule laid down by Thomas Aquinas, A.D. 1270, which is binding on the members of the Papal Church, is that no meat or drink must have passed the lips since the previous midnight, in order that the stomach may be empty of food when Christ enters it. But in the Early Church anyone was considered to be fasting who communicated before the midday dinner. The order of meals was this : In the early hours a light refecton or breakfast, called *jentaculum*, was taken ; about midday came the dinner, called *prandium* ; and in the evening the supper, called *cæna*. Until a person had eaten his prandium he was said to be *impransus*, and was regarded as fasting. There is no distinction to be drawn between such a Communicant and a Communicant of the English Church, who approaches the Lord's Table three or four hours after a moderate breakfast, at which, since the recent introduction of coffee and tea, no intoxicant is taken, and which is always of moderate proportions. What we should aim at is such a state of body as will not interfere with the sober devotion of the soul. To some persons there is a certain devotional attraction in the early hour, and the absence of food. To most there is greater help to devotion in quiet family prayers, a moderate breakfast, and an hour's public worship in the Church, with the well-known confessions, prayers, hymns, and lessons.

It is sometimes objected that by the time of an Evening Communion the recipients will have had the principal meal of the day, and will be tired with the experiences of the hours which have passed since the morning. But Evening Communion

exists largely for the sake of the working people. Working people have their chief meal soon after midday, and the effect of it will have passed away long before the evening. Such an argument does not apply to labourers, servants, or shopkeepers. Where a congregation consists largely of these classes, then an Evening Communion cannot be considered on such grounds undesirable. Early Morning Communion, and those at midday, are impossible for the large class of domestic servants to attend.

The practice of our Lord, the Apostles, and the Church of the first century and a half would alone be enough to justify this custom completely and abundantly. We are additionally fortified when we consider that the main objection to it is founded on the materialistic superstition introduced into the Western Church by Paschasius in the ninth century, and into the reformed Church of England by Robert Isaac Wilberforce about fifty years ago, as to the Corporal Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. It was to purify the Church from such dogmas that the Reformers devoted their energies: to arguments drawn from such sources no attention whatever need be paid. If ancient English canons are quoted, a disuser of even forty years is sufficient in Canonical Law to abrogate them, much more a disuser of three hundred and fifty. There is a certain force in the consideration that it is undesirable to give offence to the weak brother; but the offence is so unreasonable that it is wise and right quietly, unostentatiously, and uncontroversially, to maintain the true position. In this, and in many other kindred matters, the Christian minister has no right to subject himself to the bondage of adverse opinion. It is his duty as well as his privilege to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made him free.

