

The Feast of the New Covenant

BY THE RIGHT REV. ARTHUR F. ALSTON, M.A.

I

TO arrive at a Scriptural doctrine of the Lord's Supper, two facts must be borne in mind : they are both of primary importance. In the first place, the basis of a right view is found in the record of the original institution in the upper room at Jerusalem on the night in which our Lord was betrayed. This is in accordance with Article VI : " Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation : so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." Obviously Christ was visibly and objectively present at the original institution. There was no moment before or after consecration when He was not there. Without Him the whole service was meaningless.

At every celebration the communicant goes back to the memorable scene and its solemnities. It is His last night on earth before His death : the cross is near : the fellowship of His followers is about to be broken up. He takes the unleavened bread of the passover feast and one of the cups. He shares it with them saying, " Do this in remembrance of Me ". In other words, Do this, and it will be as if I were actually present, as if you saw Me, heard Me, felt Me there in your midst. We recall Him at the moment of His supreme self-offering, handling the symbols of His sacrifice on the morrow. Thus we shew forth His death " till He come ".

Every celebration of the Lord's Supper is a reproduction, a " going over again " of what happened then. It is an acted parable : a drama : a moving picture consisting of certain words and actions. It is a mistake to speak of the Holy Communion as the " Sacrament of the Presence ". " The primary idea of the Eucharist is that of Christ-active (for our blessing) rather than of Christ-present " (Bicknell).

The sacrament does not effect His presence. It is the Holy Spirit, not the Holy Communion, who mediates the presence of Christ (St. John xiv. 16-18). The Holy Communion is a special application of the Lord's congregational presence (St. Matt. xviii. 20). It is not a ' special presence ' (whatever that phrase may mean) to be experienced by no other means ; nor does it effect a unique operation of divine grace. The Queen may be present in the morning to grant an audience to the Prime Minister : in the afternoon to review her troops. But it is the same presence on both occasions : *only for a different purpose*. The believer is conscious of the divine presence when reading the Bible or at divine worship, but in the Lord's Supper He is there to give a new assurance of forgiveness and all other benefits of His passion *under the seal of His body broken and His blood shed*. There the believer touches his salvation in a special and unique way. Archbishop F. Temple used to say, " The purpose of Holy Communion is not to effect a presence but to seal a promise ".

The idea prevalent in some circles that in the Holy Communion there is infused in the believer the virtues of Christ's glorified life is quite foreign to the formularies of the Church, and receives no warrant from the New Testament. Since Christ's bodily presence was withdrawn at the Ascension, His body in the Lord's Supper is "given, taken, and eaten only after a heavenly and spiritual manner" (Article xxviii). He Himself is emphatic that His presence by the Spirit, whether at the Holy Communion or at any other time, is superior to His physical presence (St. John xvi. 7). While He was in the flesh, He could not be everywhere at the same time; His presence was necessarily intermittent. If He was present at Jerusalem He could not be at Capernaum. His presence by the Spirit is not limited by space. It is an abiding presence (St. Matt. xxviii. 20). It is an internal presence, not only *with* us but *in* us (St. John xiv. 16-17). Thus He tells His disciples, "It is expedient for you (i.e. to your advantage) that I go away" (St. John xvi. 7). It is suggestive that the Risen Lord, on the first Easter morning, discouraged Mary Magdalene's craving to retain the bodily presence of her Lord. He said, "Touch Me not . . ."; i.e. Do not keep clinging to Me (St. John xx. 17). This reproof warns us against views concerning this blessed sacrament which are inconsistent with the 'mode' of the presence of the now risen and glorified Christ.

It must be remembered that God is Spirit (St. John iv. 24). The localised presence of a Spirit is a confusion of ideas. We make a sharp distinction between spirit and matter. Matter occupies space and moves in space. But it is far otherwise with spirit. Spirit does not occupy space. A box can be put inside another box, but not so spirit. Spirit uses matter as its instrument and expresses its purpose through matter; but spirit cannot be *in* matter (see Romans i. 20). God is Spirit: and man is a spirit-being also, and has a body. The Incarnation was the coming of the Son of God into our personality (not into our bodies merely) to redeem and inhabit it. His material body was the medium of His self-expression. In the Lord's Supper the benefits, as the Catechism tells us, are "the strengthening and refreshing of our *souls* by the Body and Blood of Christ as our *bodies* are by the bread and wine". Notice how carefully the phrase avoids the idea that the spiritual gift is received by the physical body of the communicant. A spiritual gift must be spiritually received. There is no suggestion, as is maintained by the Roman Church (and by some in our own Church), that in the reserved sacrament "God is here". Spirit cannot be approached by feet and inches. We are back in the region of magic if we imagine that merely to partake confers spiritual benefit. There must be spiritual receptiveness on our part, trusting faith, and earnest purpose. See Article XXIX and the last paragraph of Article XXV.

These considerations throw light on the meaning of our Lord's words in the original institution of the sacrament, "This is My Body . . ." Do His words imply that the substance of the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Christ, so that what looks, feels, and tastes like bread and wine are not really so, but have become, by virtue of consecration, His real body and blood? Bear in mind that *His corporal body and blood do not exist now*. His physical body is

now glorified. Therefore the word "is" cannot be taken literally.

Consider the significance of the word in this connection. Suppose someone comes into my drawing-room and sees a portrait of my eldest son. He asks, "Who is that?" I reply, "Oh, that is my son". Actually, of course, it is a piece of sensitised paper on which his portrait is printed. Suppose that presently my son himself appears. I introduce him and say, "This is my son". It is obvious that there is a difference in the meaning of the word "is". In the first instance, it is the "is" of *equivalence*: in the second that of *identity*. In the first instance the meaning is the portrait *stands for, represents, is the equivalent of*. It is obvious which is the correct interpretation when at the original institution Christ spoke the words, for He Himself was already bodily present.

Consecration does not alter the nature and substance of that which is consecrated: *it changes its use, purpose, function*. A church which is consecrated still remains a building of brick and stone, but henceforth it is reserved for the worship of Almighty God, and is used for no other purpose. A bishop still remains the same man after he is consecrated with all his characteristics and frailties, but he is 'set apart' to be a chief pastor and leader of the flock. Similarly a sovereign after he or she is crowned remains the same person, but is treated with a new reverence and dignity.

The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. William Temple, was fond of using a national flag to illustrate the significance of consecration. The flag is made of silk or 'stuff' of a certain form, shape and colour. The pieces are sewn together in a certain way and order. After it has been made, the material is still silk or stuff: it is not changed into something it was not before. *But it is now used for a special purpose*. It has become the symbol of the country it represents. To stamp upon a national flag is to insult and rebel against the country. Reverence is paid to it. The Queen or her representative stands beneath it at a review and the troops salute it as they march past.

The consecrated elements are not to be adored. See the last rubric at the end of the Communion Service: "the sacramental bread and wine remain still in their very natural substance, and therefore may not be adored". But the elements are now not ordinary bread and wine. As such they are to be treated with reverence and to be received 'kneeling'. Further, "if any remain of that which was consecrated it shall not be carried out of the Church . . ." (see previous rubrics). There is a very general custom that the priest, after the blessing, shall then cleanse and wipe the vessels before leaving the church to ensure that the elements are not put to any other use. It is noticeable that in the actual administration the priest is directed to place the consecrated bread "into the hands" of the communicant, and not (as is done in some churches) upon the tongue (see rubric after the prayer of consecration). This is to suggest that *personal appropriation* is required on the part of the communicant if he is to receive the benefits of Christ's death and passion. He is to claim and make his own by 'taking' and 'eating' all that our Lord did for him on the Cross.

The practice of non-communicating attendance is not in accordance with the original institution. The centre and heart of it is summed up

in the words, "Take, eat, this is My body; Drink ye all of this, for this is My blood". Obviously it is assumed that all present will communicate at the celebration. It is inconceivable that any of our Lord's disciples refrained from communicating when He instituted the sacred feast. *We are not doing this in remembrance of Him if we do not do all of it.* In such a case we are left with a service shorn of an integral and essential feature. It becomes an ordinance different in purpose from that which He instituted. If you read the Communion Office and the rubrics accompanying it you cannot fail to be struck with the frequency of such words as "take", "receive," "partake". It is not too much to say that non-communicating attendance, as a habit, is a mutilation of this most sacred of all services. There are occasions, it is true, when non-communicating attendance is permissible, e.g. when confirmation candidates are present, in order that they may become familiar with the details of the service, or on some national occasion when the congregation is so large that all cannot conveniently communicate, as at the coronation of the sovereign.

No doubt the custom has grown up from two causes: (a) the rigid insistence on fasting communion among a certain section in the Church; and (b) the multiplication of celebrations which has done much to obscure this important aspect of Holy Communion as the Feast of Fellowship. It is interesting to know that as late as 1893 the Upper House of the Convocation of Canterbury passed this resolution amongst others on the subject: "That regard being had to the practice of the Apostolic Church in this matter, to teach that it is a sin to communicate otherwise than fasting is contrary to the teaching and spirit of the Church of England".

II

Holy Scripture clearly teaches that the Sacraments of the Gospel are *covenant rites*. In Holy Baptism the child is baptized "into" the Name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, i.e. into covenant relationship with Him. The Lord's Supper is based on and is the sequel to the passover feast which was itself a covenant rite. The cup is "My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (St. Matt. xxvi. 28). It is unfortunate that the Authorized Version obscures this by rendering *diatheke* by 'testament' instead of 'covenant'. The Hebrew word for covenant (*br'eth*) is probably derived from a root meaning "to cut or carve". Time does not obliterate an inscription cut in stone or marble. It cannot be rubbed out: it does not fade. It is durable and lasting.

Now a covenant is not a casual arrangement between two or more persons. The term is a legal one: it denotes a contract drawn with legal precision and authority. To-day, most people are familiar with the word from the growing habit of giving 'covenanted' subscriptions to missionary and other societies, whereby the donor, on the one hand, undertakes to give a certain annual gift for an agreed number of years, and, on the other hand, the Treasury waives all Income Tax on it. The arrangement is binding on both sides. When a house is purchased a deed or covenant is drawn up, which guarantees possession of the property on consideration of a stated sum of money being paid by the purchaser. The covenant authenticates the contract made: it

validates the arrangement : it brings the agreement into the realm of Law, and makes sure the provisions contained in the covenant.

God has always dealt with man by means of covenants. The earliest form is found in the garden of Eden (Gen. iii.). Briefly, its terms are "obey Me, and you shall live : disobey Me, and you shall die". Our first parents failed to keep their side of the covenant and they were banished from the garden. Immediately, however, there emerges the germ of a new and better covenant founded on better promises, wherein is the promise of the coming of Christ, the woman's Seed, who shall bruise the serpent's head. This new and better covenant reaches its full terms in Jeremiah xxxi. 34 ; it is quoted twice in the Epistle to the Hebrews (chaps. viii and x). It promises (a) a full and free forgiveness of all past sins, and (b) the putting of God's laws in the mind and writing them in the heart : i.e. a new power, even the power of the Holy Spirit, to enable the believing disciples to keep the divine law. The two Sacraments of the Gospel are the 'signs' and 'seals' of this Covenant of Grace.

Article XXV, declares : "Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges and tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they *be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace*, and God's will toward us, by the which He doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him". A "sign" is effectual when it does the work of signing effectually, and not necessarily some other work.

The Sacraments are to the covenant what a seal is to a legal document. They authenticate and give assurance to the provisions in it. What, for example, was the significance of the rainbow vouchsafed to Noah (Gen. ix. 8.) ? It was the sign, the seal, the 'token' to strengthen the faith of His servant, that God would never go back on His word, and again destroy the world by a flood. Similarly, the rite of circumcision was the outward and visible sign of the covenant which God made with Abraham (Gen. xxvii. 4-10). Later, God confirmed the covenant by an oath, and because "He could swear by no greater", He swear by Himself that He would bless him and his seed. Thus Abraham had a strong consolation of the divine faithfulness, an anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast and which entered into that within the veil (Heb. vi. 13-20).

Thus the sacraments of the Gospel may be rightly viewed as the "signs and seals" of the new and better covenant of grace. That covenant was made with our Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf, for He Himself is the Mediator of it (Heb. viii. 6), and He sealed it with His blood on the cross of Calvary. The sacraments 'convey' all the blessings of the covenant not after the manner in which medicine contains and conveys healing virtue, or a pipe conveys water, but *like the giving of money by cheque, or of an estate by deed*, as Article XXV above teaches. As such, they may be likened to the title deeds of a property, or to a will duly signed and sealed.

This was the interpretation of the function of the sacraments given by the learned Reformation divines of the 16th and 17th centuries (e.g. Bishop Jewel). The Lord's Supper is the "Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death". It is not a bare memorial of His

death, but an "effectual sign" of it. It has, as it were, legal authority in the courts of heaven, inasmuch as "to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the Bread which we break, is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ" (Article XXVIII). Archbishop Ussher writes of Holy Baptism (and his words apply equally to the Lord's Supper): "All the promises of grace were in my baptism enstated upon me, and sealed up unto me, on God's part: but then I come to have the profit and benefit of them when I come to understand what grant God, in baptism, hath sealed unto me, and actually to lay hold on it by faith".

The believing communicant can, therefore, humbly but confidently say as he draws near to the Table of the Lord, "As surely as I eat this bread and drink this wine, consecrated to be to me the body and blood of my once crucified Saviour, so surely may I claim and appropriate to the strengthening of my soul, the forgiveness of all my sins, the manifold grace of His Spirit, and all other benefits of His cross and passion".

In this blessed ordinance God comes out of His normal invisible method of working in the human heart, and through the material means of hallowed bread and wine, confirms and strengthens faith. By no other means provided by the Lord is His Love aroused into more conscious activity whereby "He doth work invisibly in us" (Article XXV). By no other means do we have a more sure guarantee of our part and lot in His blood-bought redemption. The challenge to the communicant is, in the words of Obadiah (ver. 21), "Possess your possessions". Under your house may be a gold mine of untold hidden wealth, but it is only yours in actual possession if you dig and delve for it. In Christ, under the seal of His Covenant of Grace, there is "given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Pet. i. 3). They are ours by divine right, and in the covenant purpose of God, but we come to enjoy them as we make them our own by faith and personal experience.

Thus the Lord's Supper is the feast of the New Covenant. Among certain Arab tribes there is a suggestive method of pledging loyalty and fellowship. A few drops of blood from each member participating is allowed to fall into a common cup. The mingled blood is then drunk by all, thus making a pledge of life-long friendship. Christ shed His precious life blood for us. In the Lord's Supper we partake of that blood. "To the end that we should always remember the exceeding great love of our Master and only Saviour, Jesus Christ, thus dying for us, and the innumerable benefits which by His Blood shedding He hath obtained to us; He hath instituted and ordained holy mysteries, as *pledges of His Love*, and for a continual remembrance of His death, to our great and endless comfort" (Third Exhortation, Communion Office). Would that these Exhortations were sometimes heard by our congregations instead of a sermon!

Christ by His death has fulfilled His part of the 'pledge'. Are we communicants allowing Him to have the full worth of us, His dearly bought possession? To what lengths are we prepared to go in our fellowship with, and service of, Him?