

Was Ever Another Command So Obeyed?

Sermon by Christopher Epting
New Song Church
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The seven little verses we had as our Gospel reading today are arguably the most controversial and hotly debated ones in the whole of John's Gospel! The debate, of course, is about just what is meant by Jesus talking to his followers about "eating his flesh and drinking his blood!" John tells us that some of his original audience "disputed among themselves" about it. And we've been "disputing among ourselves" about it ever since!

Generally, Catholic scholars have taken the text quite literally and cannot understand how anyone could miss the clear Eucharistic significance of these verses. In medieval times this approach morphed into complicated Aristotelian formulations about just "how" the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist could be Christ's flesh and blood. One idea was that of transubstantiation which understood the physical attributes of the bread and wine remaining the same, but the inner "substance" being transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. This was an attempt to rein in some kinds of popular piety with people having visions of "bleeding Hosts" and all kinds of other rather unpleasant manifestations. But it didn't do much good! Those things continued.

Protestant scholars mostly rejected any sacramental understanding of this passage and preferred to interpret it as meaning "accepting Christ", his very Being and Life, into one's heart by faith and becoming one with him. "Those who...abide in me and I in them." So, unfortunately, a lot of the debates about this passage have been clouded by 16th century theological positions and arguments that Jesus, and even John, could not have possibly known – or cared less – about!

What both these approaches miss is the fact that these verses occur only in the last-to-be-written, most "spiritual," most theological of the four Gospels – the Gospel of John. This book was written seven or eight decades after Jesus lived and died and was raised from the dead. All four Gospels were, of course, written after the fact and each of them reflects something of the life and experience of the first-century churches in which their authors lived. But this reaches a high-point in John's writing. He and his church community had decades to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry, to participate in the great sacraments of the church, and to try and figure out their significance.

John is also a master story teller. Virtually every account in the book has two or three levels of meaning he wants to convey. Even the miracle stories are called “signs,” indicating that they point beyond themselves to something else, something even greater. We also need to be reminded that John does not tell about the institution of the Eucharist at all in his account of the Last Supper Jesus had with his friends.

There is no Breaking of the Bread or sharing of the Cup at their last Passover meal in John. All the emphasis is on Jesus washing the disciples’ feet as a sign of his servanthood...and theirs. **This** chapter, this 6th chapter of John which we are reading over these summer Sundays, is John’s way of talking about the Eucharist, the Eucharist he and his community celebrated together, and how they had come to understand it.

Historically, Anglican scholarship has been reluctant to get sucked into the debate about just “how” the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist become Christ’s Body and Blood. We have tried to hold together the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrament (an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace) with the Protestant understanding of the Lord’s Supper as a memorial meal, a reenactment of that Last Supper Jesus had with his friends. The sentences of administration in Thomas Cranmer’s first Book of Common Prayer make this very clear. When the priest administered Communion, instead of what we say today, “The Body of Christ, the Bread of heaven,” the lines were these:

“The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.” The first sentence was very Catholic (The BODY of Christ); the second very Protestant (Take this IN REMEMBRANCE...and feed on him IN THY HEART BY FAITH...with Thanksgiving).

Queen Elizabeth the First, who was no mean theologian as well as being a superb politician, may have put it best when asked to explain how she understood all this: She replied, “Christ was the word that spake it. He took the bread and brake it; And what his words did make it; That I believe and take it!” Isn’t that wonderful? It’s a very experiential view of the Eucharist! Whatever Jesus meant at the Supper on that last night...that’s how I understand it!

I guess that’s always been my view. I have received the Eucharist regularly for well over half a century. Sometimes daily, often several times a week, rarely less than weekly. And my testimony is that this is surely more than a play-acted meal. And these Elements more than **merely** bread and wine. Because of the One who first instituted it, and because of the centuries of faithful disciples passing along this tradition, when we participate in this action we surely encounter the Risen Christ...we know not how.

Perhaps the brilliant liturgical scholar and Anglican Benedictine Dom Gregory Dix put it best:

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. (We) have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination...; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc -- one could fill many pages with the reasons why (we) have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christ(ianity), (we) have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei*-the holy common people of God.

YOU!

C. Christopher Epting August 19, 2018