

# Bertram and the Reformers

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It is now more than a thousand years since Bertram wrote his famous treatise “On the Body and Blood of the Lord,” against the rising error of the “Real Presence” and Transubstantiation; and unhappily the controversy still exists. Not only so, but the error is being steadily pressed forward by some of the clergy in the National Church, from whose standards it has been authoritatively rejected.

Bertram, or Ratram, lived in the ninth century. He flourished about the year A.D. 840, though probably the treatise mentioned was written a few years later—A.D. 845. His real name is supposed to have been Ratramnus, and this, with the prefix *Beatus* expressed thus, B. Ratramnus, was in process of time corrupted or abbreviated into Bertram.<sup>1</sup> He was a priest or presbyter in the Church, and a monk of the monastery of Corbie in France, in the diocese of Amiens. His reputation for learning was great, and he wrote two or three other treatises besides that on the Lord’s Supper—viz., on “Predestination,” and on “The Manner of our Lord’s Birth,” &c. The century in which he lived was a very important and eventful one in many respects. It was one of the dark, if not the darkest, of the Middle Ages; exceeded in this respect only by the tenth, according to Baronius. The famous image controversy was at its height, and, unhappily, the images carried the day, kings and councils notwithstanding. It was the century when the *forged decretals* first saw the light, those huge impostures on which the Papal supremacy to a large extent founded and bolstered up its increasing and gigantic despotism. It was a century when the externals of religion, ceremonies and sacraments, were being multiplied—the form of godliness without the power thereof. The worship of, or superstitious veneration for, relics became quite a mania among the people, and the priests were nothing backward in encouraging them, as well as in supplying them with appropriate objects. “To see clearly,” says Mosheim, “the heights which ignorance and perversity reached in this age, it is only needful to consider its extravagant or, more properly, senseless fondness for saints, and for their dead bodies and bones.”

In this the greatest part of religion and piety was placed. Everybody believed that God would never be found propitious to those who had not secured some intercessor and friend among the inhabitants of heaven. Hence arose the rage for making, almost daily, new objects of deification. And the priests and monks were most successful in dispelling the darkness that concealed the wondrous deeds of holy men, or rather in fabricating the names and the histories of saints that never existed; so that they might have patrons enough for all the credulous and senseless people. . . . The corpses of holy men, either brought from distant countries or discovered by the industry of the priests, required the appointment of new feast days, and some variation in the ceremonies observed on these days. And as the success of the clergy depended on the impressions of the people respecting the merits and the power of those saints whom they were invited to venerate, it was necessary that their eyes and their ears should be fascinated with various ceremonies and exhibitions. Hence the splendid furniture of the temples, the numerous wax candles burning at mid-day, the multitudes of pictures and statues, the decorations of the altars, the frequent processions, the splendid dresses of the priests, and *masses* appropriate to the honour of the saints (vol. i. p. 571).

Such is the description of the ceremonialism and superstition of the ninth century, and it is sad and painful to reflect that it is just as applicable now, not merely to the unreformed Churches of Christendom, but also to many of the churches of England. Between the ceremonialism of the ninth and the ritualism of the nineteenth century there is not much to choose. The latter portion of the extract given above would suit admirably for a verbal and literal account of what is taking place in our very midst.

It was in this rank soil that Paschasius Rhadbertus, Abbot of Corbie, first formally propounded and advocated the doctrine of the "Real Presence," and virtually that of Transubstantiation. This is confessed by Bellarmine, who says: "Hic auctor primus fuit, qui serio et copiose scripsit de veritate corporis et sanguinis Domini in Eucharistia."<sup>2</sup> The book to which Bellarmine refers, "De Sacramento Corporis, &c.," was first written in A.D. 831. It was enlarged and improved (?) in A.D. 845, and presented to the then emperor, Charles the Bald, grandson of Charlemagne. It was immediately opposed. Three of the most learned men of the age wrote against it. Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mentz; Johannes Erigena Scotus, the friend and companion of the Emperor; and Ratramnus, or Bertram, the monk. These two last mentioned, Scotus and Bertram, were requested to write by the Emperor, in order that the controversy to which the publication of Paschasius' book had given rise might be allayed, and the true Catholic doctrine might be authoritatively set forth. This we learn from the opening section of Bertram's book—"De corpore et sanguine Domini." The work of Scotus has perished. This is much to be regretted, as he was a profound philosopher and theologian, as well as an accomplished Greek scholar. Happily, that of Bertram has survived, and in the wonderful providence of God, after being, comparatively speaking, buried for seven hundred years, was again brought to light in the sixteenth century, to aid in the blessed work of our glorious Reformation.

The famous work, however, was not wholly lost sight of during the interval. The seed sown by its means, and that of Scotus, in the ninth century, perished not. It sprang up in the eleventh, when Berengarius, Canon of Tours, openly maintained the doctrine they set forth. Under threats and persecution the poor man was again and again obliged to recant, and even with his own hands, it is said, was compelled to throw the work of Scotus into the flames; and again and again, as soon as he escaped the fangs of the persecutor, he returned to his convictions. He narrowly escaped being burnt at the stake; and indeed, had it not been that he was, from motives of personal friendship, shielded by the famous Pope Hildebrand, Gregory VII., there is but little doubt that he would have been put to death.

Three hundred years after, in the fourteenth century, we find our own famous countryman, the Rector of Lutterworth, Wickliffe, the morning star of the Reformation, fearlessly propounding the same doctrine, albeit he may not have known precisely from whence the light had been derived which guided him to a correct interpretation of the words of our Lord. The doctrine of transubstantiation had been formally defined in the preceding century, at the Council of Lateran, A.D., 1215, and it met with the most determined opposition on the part of Wickliffe. His famous piece, called the "Wicket," is a treatise on the words "Hoc est corpus meum," in which, with great ability and ingenuity, he proves that the bread is only "the figure or mind of Christ's body in earth; and that therefore Christ said, "As oft as ye do this thing, do it in mind of me;" and again, "All the sacraments that are left here on earth are but minds of the body of Christ; for a sacrament is no more to say but a sign or mind of a thing passed, or a thing to come; for when Jesus spake of the bread, and said to his disciples, 'As oft as ye do this thing, do it in mind of me,' it was set for a mind of good things passed of Christ's body; but when the angel showed to John (Apoc. xvii.) the sacraments of the woman and of

the beast that bare her, it was set for a mind of evil things to come on the face of the earth, and great destroying of the people of God.” As for the view that the bread is an accident without a subject, he denounced it as heresy; and yet this is the doctrine virtually put forth by the Council of Trent. Wickliffe was often in great danger, but through the powerful patronage of John of Gaunt he died in peace A.D. 1384. But his doctrine lived. It was immediately taken up by John Huss and Jerome of Prague, who suffered for their convictions at the stake A.D. 1415, by order of the Council of Constance. Their martyrdom gave an impetus to the cause of Lollardism, as it was called. Everywhere the human mind began to inquire into the reasons of things. The corruptions both in faith and morals of the clergy and the religious orders had scandalized the public conscience. The Papal schism, which had lasted for the space of fifty years, from A.D. 1378 to A.D. 1431—when two and sometimes three anti-Popes claimed the chair of St. Peter—had outraged Christendom. The usurpations of the spiritual on the temporal domain had provoked the antagonism of the civil powers; and, soon, the invention of printing and the revival of literature, betokened the near approach of the coming dawn.

In the early part of the next century, Luther in Germany, Zuinglius in Switzerland, and Calvin in France, were God’s chosen agents to reform the Church, and bring back the long-lost Gospel to the nations. As Burnet well says, “The design of the Reformation was to restore Christianity to what it was at first, and to purge it of those corruptions with which it was overrun in the later and darker ages.”

The emancipation of the Church of England was now at hand. Long had it lain under the galling yoke of the Papacy, not without many a fruitless effort to shake it off; but the hour and the man had now come. With the personal or political motives of Henry VIII. we have nothing to do; he was raised up as an instrument in God’s hands to burst the chain, break the bonds, and shake off the iron yoke of Rome. And, though he desired it not, this carried a reformation of doctrine along with it. Cranmer and Ridley had the chief hand in purging the public services of the Church, and drawing up the Liturgy and Articles of Religion. And now once more we meet the Monk of Corbie, Bertram, who seven hundred years before had, at the command of his Sovereign, stood up for God’s truth against mediaeval superstition.

It was about the year A.D. 1545 that Ridley was led, we know not how, to peruse the book of Bertram; where he found it, who gave it him or recommended him to read it, we are ignorant. But he was a scholar; and perhaps in his researches into the true and ancient doctrine of the Church of Christ on this, at that time, the all-important question, he came across the treasure. Like Luther finding the Book of God in the ancient library, so Ridley finds the book of Bertram. It had, indeed, been printed at Cologne in A.D. 1532, and perhaps a copy of that edition had fallen into his hands, or, as some think, the edition published at Geneva A.D. 1541. Whichever it was, and however obtained, its perusal led him to abandon the views of Rome in which he had been brought up, and to embrace the doctrines which are now, and that mainly through his instrumentality, those of the Reformed Church of England. Let us hear what he says himself on this subject. In his disputation at Oxford, April, A.D. 1555, he says:—

Here, right worshipful masters, prolocutor, and ye, the rest of the commissioners, it may please you to understand that I do not lean to these things only, which I have written in my former answers and confirmations, but that I have also, for the proof of that I have spoken, whatsoever Bertram, a man learned, of sound and upright judgment, and ever counted a Catholic for these seven hundred years, until this our age hath written. His treatise, whosoever shall read and

weigh, considering the time of the writer, his learning, godliness of life, the allegations of the ancient fathers, and his manifold and most grounded arguments, I cannot (doubtless) but much marvel, if he have any fear of God at all, how he can, with a good conscience, speak against him in this matter of the sacrament. *This Bertram was the first that ever pulled me by the ear*, and that first brought me from the common error of the Romish Church, and caused me to search more diligently and exactly both the Scriptures and the old ecclesiastical fathers in this matter. And this I protest before the face of God, who knoweth I lie not in the things I now speak (Ridley, p. 206. P.S. Ed.).

Here we have the frank acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Bertram. "He was the first that pulled him by the ear." How momentous the result of that pull to the Church of England! To that, under God, we are indebted for Ridley's altered views, for their incorporation into the theology of our Church, and for the noble testimony he bore to their truth at the martyrs' stake at Oxford.

In two previous conferences with Secretary Bourn in the Tower he had referred to him, among others, thus:—

"Sir,—It is certain that others before these (Berengarius, Wickliffe and Huss) have written of this matter; not by the way only and *obiter*, as do for the most of all the old writers; but even *ex professo*, and their whole books entreat of it alone, as Bertram."

"Bertram," said the Secretary, "what man was he? and who was he? and how do you know?" &c.

"Sir," quoth I, "I have read his book. He propounds the same which is now in controversy, and answereth so directly, that no man may doubt but that he affirmeth that the substance of bread remaineth still in the sacrament."

In reference to this book Dr. Gloucester Ridley says:—"Few books have drawn after them such salutary consequences as this has done. This first opened Ridley's eyes, and determined him more accurately to search the Scriptures, and the doctrine of the primitive fathers who lived before the time of this controversy betwixt Bertram and Paschasius."

At his degradation Ridley once again referred to Bertram. When all that foolish ceremony was over, the disinterested Reformer, as they declined to talk with him further, said to Dr. Brooks, Bishop of Gloucester: "My Lord, I would wish that your Lordship would vouchsafe to read over and peruse a little book of Bertram's doing concerning the sacrament. I promise you that you shall find much good learning therein, if you will read the same with an indifferent judgment."

So far as it regards Bertram's influence on Ridley. But the matter did not end there. Ridley brought the subject under the notice of Cranmer. This we learn from Burnet (vol. ii. 197, Poccoke's edition), as also from Cranmer himself. The former, after recounting how Ridley had been converted to the truth by Bertram, proceeds: "He communicated the matter with Cranmer, and they set themselves to examine it with more than ordinary care. Cranmer afterwards gathered all the arguments about it into the book which he writ on that subject." He refers to Cranmer's great work "On the Lord's Supper," in which many of the arguments of Bertram, and indeed his very sentences, are sometimes reproduced.

The following is Cranmer's own statement on the subject, in his examination before the Pope's delegate, Dr. Brooks, Bishop of Gloucester:—

"I grant," he says, "that then I believed otherwise than I do now; and so I did until my Lord of London (Ridley) did confer with me, and, by sundry persuasions and authorities of doctors, drew me quite from my opinion" (p. 218, P.S. Ed.).

"Ridley was a scholarly divine," says Mosheim, "who had been led to the rejection of transubstantiation by the reading of Ratramnus' famous piece. This he reasonably viewed as a conclusive argument against the antiquity of the Romish doctrine; and by introducing the book to Cranmer's notice he brought him, too, over to the same opinion" (vol. ii. 454).

How marvellous the working of Divine Providence! Bertram was used of God to the conversion of these two great men, and these two were the principal agents in laying the foundations of the Reformation.

How wonderful, too, the chain in the succession of the truth as it regards this doctrine! Bertram proves his views from the word of Christ, the language of the Apostle Paul, and the testimony of the Fathers Augustine, Ambrose, Isidore, Fulgentius, and Jerome, and contends for the old catholic faith. After Bertram we have Berengarius, Wickliffe, John Huss, and Jerome of Prague, Ridley, Cranmer, and the other Reformers. Yes, truth is undying, and the Word of God still springs up from age to age. The sacred lamp of truth is passed on from hand to hand, and thus kept alive in the dark centuries, until at length it bursts forth in an effulgence of glory at the martyrs' stake in Smithfield and Oxford. The candle is then again relighted, never, we trust and believe, to be put out in England. God never leaves himself without witness, and we see an illustration of this in the case of Bertram and his works. How the truth still lives on, and in God's good time receives its triumphant vindication!

A few words as to the doctrinal value of Bertram's work.

It was written, as already stated, in reply to Paschasius, who maintained in his work chiefly the three following particulars:—

"That the true body and the true blood of the Lord Christ existed in the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist; that the substance of the bread and wine, after consecration, no longer remained; and finally, that it was none other than the identical body which was born of the Virgin Mary." (Mabillon, "Annal. Bened.," ii. 538, *vide* Mosheim, ii. 561.)

In reply to these statements, Bertram propounds two questions:

(1) Whether the body and blood of Christ, which are taken in the church by the mouth of the faithful, be so in a mystery or in reality? and (2) whether it is the very same body which was born of the Virgin Mary? To these questions he gives answers distinct, clear, and unambiguous. He says: "The bread and wine are, *figuratively*, the body and blood of Christ" (sec. x.). Again: "From all that has been said, it is demonstrated that the body and blood of Christ, which are received in the church by the mouths of the faithful, are *figures* according to their visible nature, but according to invisible substance—*i.e.*, the power of the divine word—they are truly the body and blood of Christ" (sec. xlix.). He strongly maintains that in the desert the Old Testament saints fed on Christ when they ate the manna, and drank His blood when they drank of the water that flowed from the rock. And he says that in the same

way as Christ converted the manna into His flesh, and the water into His blood, fifteen hundred years before He was born, so He now converts the bread into His body and the wine into His blood—*i.e.*, in spiritual efficacy to the worthy recipient.

Wonderful truly. He had not yet assumed humanity, nor yet for the salvation of the world had He tasted death, nor yet by His blood had He redeemed us; and yet our fathers in the wilderness, by the same spiritual meat and the same spiritual invisible drink, *did eat His body and drink His blood*. . . . For He who now, in the Church, by His almighty power spiritually converts bread and wine into the flesh of His own body and the stream of His own blood, He then also invisibly *made the manna given from heaven His own body, and the water flowing from the rock His own blood* (sec. xxv.).

We here see in what sense Bertram holds that the bread is changed into the body of Christ, precisely in the same sense as the manna was turned into His body, and the water into His blood. Cranmer accepts this argument, and presses it with great power.

They say that the fathers and prophets of the Old Testament did not eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. We say that they did eat His body and drink His blood, although He was not yet born nor incarnated (i. 74).

In answer to the second question he says:—“*Great is the difference between the body in which Christ suffered and that which is daily celebrated by the faithful, and taken by the mouth*” (sec. lxix.). “They differ from each other just as much as a pledge and that on account of which a pledge is given; as an image and that of which it is an image; as a resemblance and the reality” (sec. lxxxix.).

He also maintains that in this body, which is celebrated in a mystery, is *the figure*, not only of the true body of Christ, but also of the people who believe in Christ. For it bears the figure of each body” (sec. xcvi.). But “even as not corporally but spiritually that bread is said to be the body of the faithful, so also is it necessary that the body of Christ be not corporally but spiritually understood” (sec. lxxiv.). As for taking His flesh and blood literally, “it would be not an act of religion, but a crime” (sec. xxxiv.).

But it is not necessary to quote any more to prove that substantially the doctrine of Bertram is that of the Reformers. He does, indeed, as do most of the early writers, use strong sacramental language, but allowance must be made for the time when he wrote, and for the fact that transubstantiation had not yet been defined as at Lateran, A.D. 1215, still less as at Trent, A.D. 1551. It is evident that he only held a real presence of Christ to the soul of the faithful in blessing and grace. Many of the Reformers quote from him, especially Becon, the learned chaplain of Archbishop Cranmer (*vide* vol. iii. pp. 444-449, P.S. Ed.)

The doctrine of Bertram is absolutely incompatible with either transubstantiation or consubstantiation—the former the doctrine of Rome, the latter that of the Romanizers in our Church. As to transubstantiation, which is the change of the substance of the bread and wine in the Supper of the Lord, Bertram asserts that there is no such change. “According to the substance of the materials, what they were before consecration, this afterwards they continue to be. They existed as bread and wine before, in which species also, now that they are consecrated, they are seen to remain” (sec. liv.).

As to consubstantiation—the doctrine, namely, that whilst the bread and wine remain after consecration, they truly become the real body and blood of Christ, objectively or externally present on the table—Bertram is equally decisive. “Great,” he says, “is the difference between the body in which Christ suffered and that body which is daily taken by the mouth of the faithful” (sec. lxix.). Again: “Things which differ from each other are not one and the same; the body of Christ which died and rose again, now dies no more. But this which is celebrated in the Church is temporal, not eternal; it is corruptible, not incorruptible; it is on earth, not in heaven. They differ, therefore, from each other; wherefore they are not the same” (sec. lxxvi.).

Nowhere does he teach that two distinct substances really co-exist in the sacrament—viz., bread and the body of Christ, but that one and the same substance is at once bread in nature, and the body of Christ in signification and blessing.

The doctrine of Bertram is thoroughly at one with that so clearly taught by the Church of England in the Twenty-eighth Article, as follows:—

“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.

“The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner, and the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the supper is Faith.”

In Sec. lxxxviii. Bertram quotes the language of the priest in the public services of the church, and argues from them as follows:—“May Thy sacraments, O Lord, effect in us what they contain, so that those things which now we celebrate in a figure (*specie*) we may receive in the truth of the things themselves.” Because he says that they are celebrated in a figure, it is evident they are not in reality; that is, they are celebrated by a representation, not by the exhibition of the thing itself. Figure and reality (*species et veritas*) are very different things. Wherefore the Body and the Blood, which are celebrated in the church, differ from that body and blood which are acknowledged to be now glorified by the resurrection. And this body is a pledge and figure; but that is the truth itself. This is celebrated until we come to that; but when we come to that, this shall be done away.

He thus brings his arguments to a conclusion in the following sections:—

(xcix.) “Let us also add, that the bread and cup which is called the Body and Blood of Christ, represents the memorials of the Lord’s passion and death, even as he says in the Gospel: ‘Do this for a commemoration of me.’ Expounding which the apostle Paul says: ‘As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye declare the Lord’s death till he come.’”

(c.) “We are thus taught by the Saviour, and also by the Apostle Paul, that this bread and this wine which are placed upon the altar, are placed for a figure or memorial of the Lord’s death; so that it may recall to the present memory that which was done in the past; and that we may be reminded of his passion; by it also are we made partakers of the divine gift, whereby we are freed from death. Knowing that when we shall come to the vision of Christ, we shall no more have need of such outward means, by which we may be reminded of that which divine goodness endured for us. For beholding Him face to face, we shall not be influenced by the outward admonition of temporal things; but by the contemplation of the reality itself (*ipsius veritatis*) we shall perceive in what way we ought to give thanks to the author of our salvation.”

(ci.) “Notwithstanding, although we say these things, let it not be thought that, in the mystery of the sacrament, the body and blood of the Lord are not taken by the faithful. Since faith receives, not what the eye beholds, but what itself believes. For it is spiritual food and spiritual drink which spiritually feeds the soul, and bestows on it the life of eternal happiness.”

Well would it be for the future of our Church if all her clergy held the wise, sober, and scriptural views on the Lord’s Supper set forth in these extracts from the Book of Bertram.

## **W. F. TAYLOR**

Endnotes:

- 1) Mosh. i. 544, *Note*.
- 2) Mosh. i. 544, *Note*.