

CHURCH TEACHING ON THE LORD'S SUPPER

Church Association Tract 170

BY THE REVD CHARLES H. H. WRIGHT

*Bampton Lecturer (1878) in the University of Oxford, Donnellan Lecturer (1880-1) in the University of Dublin,
Examiner in Hebrew and New Testament Greek in the University of London.*

It would be a sign for good if the question were more often asked nowadays, "What saith the Scripture? "But, inasmuch as there is a great deal of misunderstanding abroad as to "the teaching of the Church of England," and of those sister Churches who adhere to the Thirty-nine Articles, it is important to point out with what distinctness our Church repudiates the very doctrines concerning the Lord's Supper, which are now taught by the Ritualists and their sympathizers. The Evangelical party in England and Ireland, whatever its shortcomings may be, have ever upheld the true doctrine of the Church in reference to the Lord's Supper, while the teaching of the extreme High Church party is closely akin to the doctrines of the Church of Rome.

It should never be forgotten that the Books of the Homilies are specially endorsed by Article XXXV. as containing "a godly and wholesome doctrine and necessary for these times." Consequently, although no clergyman is by his subscription to the Articles necessarily bound to endorse every interpretation of passages of Scripture set forth in the Homilies, it is most proper and just to refer to those Homilies for an authorized exposition of the doctrines formally set forth in the Articles, and more popularly treated in the Homilies, in order that those doctrines may be "understood of the people."

The Lord's Supper is (1) referred to incidentally in the "Homily for repairing and keeping clean of churches"; (2) in that which treats of "the place and time of prayer"; (3) more slightly in that "of Common Prayer and Sacraments"; and, especially, (4) in the Homily "of the worthy receiving and reverent esteeming of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ."

A brief review of these passages may be useful. In the first of the Homilies named we are exhorted not to "be forgetful towards that house of God, wherein be ministered the words of our eternal salvation, wherein be entreated the sacraments and mysteries of our redemption. The fountain of our regeneration is there presented to us; the partaking of the body and blood of our Saviour Christ is there offered unto us, and shall we not esteem the place where so heavenly things be handled?" It is unnecessary for our present purpose to explain the figurative language here used. That such language is not to be understood in a "High Church" sense is plain from the close of the second paragraph which follows, viz. "What dens of thieves the Churches of England have been made by the *blasphemous buying and selling* the most precious body and blood of Christ in the Mass, as the world was made to believe, . . . beside other horrible abuses, God's holy name be blessed for ever, we now see and understand. All these abominations they that supply the room of Christ have cleansed and purged the churches of England of, taking away all such fulsomeness and filthiness as through blind devotion and ignorance hath crept into the Church this many hundred years." The Homily closes with exhorting the people to keep the churches "comely and clean," forasmuch as they have been "scoured and swept from the sinful and superstitious filthiness wherewith they were defiled and disfigured." Alas! that many are seeking in our day to bring back again that "sinful and superstitious filthiness"!

The Homily of "the Place and Time of Prayer" asks sorrowfully: "Have not the Christians of late days, and even in our days also, in like manner provoked the displeasure and indignation of Almighty God, partly because they have profaned and defiled their churches with heathenish and Jewish abuses, with images and idols, with numbers of altars too too superstitiously and intolerably abused, with gross abusing and filthy corrupting of the Lord's holy Supper, the blessed sacrament of His body and blood, with an infinite number of toys and trifles of their own devices, to make a

goodly outward show, and to deface the homely, simple, and sincere religion of Christ Jesus?" "Finally, God's vengeance hath been and is daily provoked, because much wicked people pass nothing [do not care] to resort to the church, either, for that they are so sore blinded that they understand nothing of God and godliness, and care not with devilish example to offend their neighbours; or else for that they see the Church altogether scoured of such gay gazing sights as their gross fantasy was greatly delighted with, because they see the false religion abandoned and the true restored, which seemeth an unsavoury thing to their unsavoury taste; as may appear by this, that a woman said to her neighbour, 'Alas, gossip, what shall we now do at church, since all the saints are taken away, since all the goodly sights we were wont to have are gone, since we cannot hear the like piping, singing, chanting, and playing upon the organs that we could before?' But, dearly beloved, we ought greatly to rejoice and give God thanks that our churches are delivered of all those things which displeased God so sore, and filthily defiled his holy house and his place of prayer."

Let it be noted that "unsavoury taste" of the present Ritualistic reaction has brought back many of the "gay gazing sights" and the "piping, singing, and chanting" of the mediaeval age thus condemned by the Church.

In the Homily "of Common Prayer and Sacraments" St. Augustine's description of a "sacrament" is favourably noticed—namely, that it is "a visible sign of an invisible grace; *that is to say*, that setteth out to the eyes and other outward senses *the inward working* of God's free mercy, and doth, as it were, seal *in our hearts* the promises of God. And so was circumcision a sacrament, &c." "The exact signification" of sacraments is in another paragraph explained to be "visible signs expressly commanded in the New Testament, whereunto is annexed the promise of free forgiveness of our sin and of our holiness and joining in Christ," a very important statement which excellently explains the statements made on that very point at the close of the Catechism. Further on the Homily declares that "to administer a sacrament is by the outward word and element to preach to the receiver the inward and invisible grace of God." So far are the Homilies from teaching anything like the magical transmission of "grace" as something given in combination with, or in, the "elements" of either one or other of the two sacraments.

We pass by, as outside our present purpose, those passages of this Homily which give Justin Martyr's account of the Lord's Supper, the special object of that citation in the Homily being simply to show that prayer was in that early time offered up in a language understood by the worshippers. We pass on, therefore, to consider the Homily which specially treats of "the worthy receiving and reverent esteeming of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ." The Church in that Homily distinctly and unequivocally condemns the practice of non-communicating attendance at the Lord's Supper, now so extensively recommended and practised by "High Churchmen." For it speaks of Christ's "heavenly Supper," "where everyone of us must be guests and not gazers, eaters and not lookers, feeding ourselves and not hiring other to feed for us; that we may live by our own meat, and not perish for hunger while others devour all." "To this constant practice," the Homily says, Christ's "commandment forces us" (Luke xxii. 19, 20; I Cor. xi. 24, 25; Matt. xxvi. 27). "So then, as of necessity; we must be ourselves partakers of this table, and not beholders of other."

The doctrine of the Lord's Supper is, as might be expected, most fully handled in that special Homily. In the opening words of its third paragraph:—

"Before all other things, this we must be sure of specially, that this Supper be in such wise done and ministered as our Lord and Saviour did, and commanded to be done, as His Holy Apostles used it, and the good fathers in the primitive Church frequented it. For, as that worthy man St. Ambrose saith, 'he is unworthy the Lord that otherways doth celebrate that mystery than it was delivered by Him; neither can he be devout that otherways doth presume than it was given by the Author.' We must, then, take heed, *lest, of the memory, it be made a sacrifice*; lest, of a communion, it be made a private eating; lest of two parts, we have but one; *lest, applying it for the*

dead, we lose the fruit that be alive. Let us rather in these matters follow the advice of Cyprian in the like cases; that is, cleave fast to the first beginning; hold fast the Lord's tradition; do that in the Lord's commemoration which He himself did, He himself commanded, and His Apostles confirmed."

Let it be carefully noted that in this passage, the Church most distinctly condemns the vain imagination which would turn the Lord's Supper into the "Sacrifice" of the Mass. Observe, too, how "Private Mass," *i.e.* the partaking of the Lord's Supper by the minister alone without "company to receive with him" (compare the 4th Rubric at the end of "the Communion of the Sick," in the Book of Common Prayer) is condemned. "Half-Communion," or "Communion in one kind," is denounced as in Article XXX.

Note also that "Masses for the dead" are likewise condemned, as in Article XXXI, in which those "Masses" are stated to be "blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits."

So little does the Church of England contemplate "prayers for the dead" at the Lord's Supper; so far is the Church's teaching as set forth in her Homilies, removed from that novel teaching, now falsely termed "Church teaching"!

The Homily further urges: "Let us, therefore, so travail to understand the Lord's Supper, that we be no cause of the decay of God's worship, of no idolatry, of no dumb massing, of no hate and malice: so may we the boldier have access thither to our comfort."

It then explains "that in the Supper of the Lord there is no *vain* ceremony, no *bare* sign, no *untrue* figure of a thing absent, but, as the Scripture saith, *the table of the Lord, the bread and cup of the Lord, the memory of Christ, the annunciation of His death—* yea, *the communion of the body and blood of the Lord* in a marvellous incorporation, which *by the operation of the Holy Ghost*, the very bond of our conjunction with Christ, is *through faith wrought in the souls* of the faithful, whereby not only their souls live to eternal life, but they surely trust to win to their bodies a resurrection to immortality. The true understanding of this fruition and union, which is betwixt the body and the head, betwixt the true believers and Christ, the ancient catholic fathers both perceiving themselves, and commending to their people, were not afraid to call this Supper, some of them, 'the salve of immortality, a sovereign preservative against death,' &c." "And," the Homily continues, "to be brief, thus much more the faithful see, hear, and know, the favourable mercies of God sealed, the satisfaction by Christ towards us confirmed, the remission of sin stablished. Here they may feel wrought the tranquillity of conscience, the increase of faith, the strengthening of hope, the large spreading abroad of brotherly kindness, with many other sundry graces of God. The taste whereof they cannot attain unto who be drowned in the deep dirty lake of blindness and ignorance. From the which, O beloved, wash yourselves with the living waters of God's Word, whence you may perceive and know both the spiritual Food of this costly Supper, and the happy feastings and effects that the same doth bring with it."

The Homily proceeds to point out that one of the most important points to be realized at a season of holy "communion" is "to have with this knowledge a sure and constant faith, not only that the death of Christ is available for the redemption of all the world, for the remission of sins, and reconciliation with God the Father, but also that He hath made upon His cross a full and sufficient sacrifice for thee, a perfect cleansing of thy sins; so that thou acknowledgest no other Saviour, Redeemer, Mediator, Advocate, Intercessor, but Christ only, and that thou mayest say with the Apostle (Gal. ii. 20), 'He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*.' For this is to stick fast to Christ's promise made in His institution, to make Christ thine own, and to apply His merits unto thyself. Herein thou needest no other man's help, no other sacrifice or oblation, no sacrificing priest, no Mass, no means established by man's invention. That faith is a necessary instrument in all these holy ceremonies, we may thus assure ourselves, for that, as St. Paul saith, *without faith it is impossible to please God* (Heb. xi. 6)." "The meat we seek for in this Supper is *spiritual* food, the

nourishment of our soul, a heavenly refection and not earthly, an invisible meat and not *bodily* . . . so that to think that without faith we may enjoy the eating and drinking thereof, or that that is the fruition of it, is but to dream a gross carnal feeding, basely Objecting* and binding ourselves to the elements and creatures; whereas, by the advice of the Council of Nicene, we ought to 'lift up our minds by faith,' and leaving these inferior and earthly things, there seek it where the *Sun of Righteousness* (Mal. iv. 2) ever shineth."

The Homily further affirms, in strict accordance with the teaching of Article XXIX., that "the unbelievers and faithless cannot feed upon that precious body [of Christ]; whereas the faithful have their life, their abiding, in Him; their union, and as it were, their incorporation, with Him."

We would fain give further extracts from the second part of the same homily in reference to the character of faithful recipients. But we must conclude with an extract from the sermon for Whit Sunday:—"Christ commended to His Church a sacrament of His body and blood. They [the Romanists] have changed it into a sacrifice for the quick and the dead. Christ did minister to His Apostles, and the Apostles to other men, indifferently under both kinds; they have robbed the lay people of the cup, saying that for them one kind is sufficient. . . . Which thing being true, as all they which have any light of God's Word must needs confess, we may well conclude, according to the rule of Augustine, that the Bishops of Rome and their adherents are not the true Church of Christ, much less then to be taken as chief heads and rulers of the same. 'Whosoever,' saith he, 'do dissent from the Scriptures concerning the Head, although they be found in all places where the Church is appointed, yet are they not in the Church.' A plain place, concluding directly against the Church of Rome."

Such is the teaching of the Church of England as set forth in her Homilies, which contain an authorized exposition of the doctrines propounded in the Thirty-nine Articles which have been subscribed to by all her clergy. We have sought fairly to give a summary of all the passages in which reference is made to the Lord's Supper, and have omitted no passage tending to throw light on the subject. The doctrine of the Homilies of our Church is thus seen to be opposed in all parts to many of those doctrines which are now put forward as "Church teaching," but which are plainly contrariant thereto. May God enable our people to be on their guard against the false doctrine in reference to the Lord's Supper which is "privily being brought in," and which is as opposed to the Church's teaching as it is to that of Holy Scripture.

* [This passage is remarkable as being the only instance in which the phrase "objecting" occurs in our formularies. Out of the eight original editions of the Homilies in the British Museum, five read "Objecting," and are dated 1563, 1570, 1571, 1587, and 1595. Ritualists have re-introduced the term "*objective* presence" to describe the very thing which this Homily censures as materialistic, carnal, and "of the earth, earthy." ED. *Ch. Intell.*]