

contention about communion

extract from Proposition XIII § iv

§ iv. It is more than obvious what confusion the professors of Christianity have run into concerning this subject. Because they lack a spiritual understanding, they have tried (as in most things they have done) to tie the real supper of the Lord to that ceremony of breaking bread and drinking wine which Christ did with his disciples before his death. Though for the most part they agree with each other about this, yet how much they contend and debate one against another! How strangely they are pinched, pained, and squeezed to make the spiritual mystery correspond to that ceremony! What monstrous and wild opinions and imaginings they have invented to enclose the body of Christ and attach him to their bread and wine! Because of these opinions the greatest, and fiercest and most hurtful contests have ensued, both among the professors of Christianity in general and among Protestants in particular. There have also been such absurd, irrational and blasphemous consequences, that they make the Christian religion odious and hateful to Jews, Muslims, and heathens.

The professors of Christianity generally adopt one of three opinions on this subject:

The first group is those who say that the substance of the bread is transubstantiated into the very substance of the body, flesh, and blood of Christ, who was born of the virgin Mary and crucified by the Jews. They believe that after the words of consecration (which is what they call them) are spoken, it is no longer bread, but the body of Christ.

The second group is those who say the substance of the bread remains, but also the body is in, and with, and under the bread; so that both the substance of bread and the substance of the body, flesh, and blood of Christ are there.

The third group is those who deny both of the preceding opinions, and affirm that the body of Christ is not there corporally, or substantially, but yet it is really and sacramentally received by the faithful when they receive the bread and wine. But how, or in what way it is there, they do not know. They say we must believe it is there, although in a strict sense* it is only in heaven.

I do not intend to refute these different opinions, because all of their authors and advocates have refuted one another sufficiently. All of them are very strong in refuting the contrary party's opinion from both Scripture and reason, and by comparison they are weak in establishing their own opinion. . . .

There have been great efforts for reconciliation in this matter between Papists and Lutherans, between Lutherans and Calvinists, and even between Calvinists and Papists; but all these efforts have achieved nothing. Many statements have been drafted to which all of them might agree; but in the end this was in vain, because every one understood and interpreted the draft in their own way, and so they did no more than equivocate and deceive one another. The reason for all this contention is that they all wanted a clear understanding of the mystery, and were foolishly attached to the shadow and the externals. The ground of their contention lies in unnecessary things which are separate from the main point. This has often been the Satan's strategy: to keep people busy and amuse them with outward signs, shadows, and forms; he makes them contend about that, while in the meantime the Substance is neglected. In the struggles over these shadows he provokes them to malice, anger, revenge, and other vices, by which he establishes his kingdom of darkness among them, and ruins the life of Christianity. There has been more animosity and anger about this one particular subject, more bloodshed and contention, than about any other. Surely anyone must be ignorant about Protestant affairs if they do not know that

the contentions about this have been more damaging to the Reformation than all the opposition from their common adversaries.

Regarding this subject, the opponents agree on two general errors which give rise to all these uncertain and absurd opinions and the disputes they provoke. If they denied and abandoned these errors, as we have done, there would be an easy way to reconciliation, and we would all meet in the one spiritual and true understanding of this mystery. The absurdities which result from the three opinions described above, and all the contentions, would collapse entirely.

The first of these errors is in making the communion or participation of the body, flesh, and blood of Christ relate to that outward body, vessel, or temple which was born of the virgin Mary, and walked and suffered in Judea. Instead, the communion should relate to the spiritual body, flesh and blood of Christ, that heavenly Light and Life which in all ages has been the food and nourishment of those who are with God, as we have already proved.

The second error is in tying this participation in the body and blood of Christ to the ceremony which he used with his disciples in the breaking of bread, etc., as if communion only related to that ceremony, as if it could only be experienced in that ceremony, which is not the case. For this is that bread which Christ in his prayer teaches us to ask for, calling it τὸν ἄρτον τὸν ἐπιούσιον,¹ which is the supersubstantial bread as it says in Greek. The soul partakes

¹ "Our daily bread" The Greek word ἄρτον means bread; ἐπιούσιον is hard to translate because it is only found in Matthew 6:11 and its parallel Luke 11:3. It is usually translated "sufficient for each day" or "necessary" However in the Vulgate the verse is *panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie*, "Give us today our supersubstantial bread." Jerome apparently invented the word *supersubstantialem* to translate ἐπιούσιον. Like the Greek word, the Latin word is not found anywhere else.

of it without any necessary relation to this ceremony, as I shall prove later at some length.

Once these two errors have been laid aside, once all the contentions arising from them have been buried, everyone agrees on two main positions: First, that the body, flesh, and blood of Christ is necessary for the nourishing of the soul. Second, that the souls of believers do really and truly partake and feed upon the body, flesh, and blood of Christ.

But people are not content with the spirituality of this mystery, and instead, in their own wills and according to their own inventions, they try to stretch and twist the Scriptures in order to tie the spiritual communion in the flesh and blood of Christ to outward bread and wine and that kind of carnal ordinance. It is no wonder that, relying on their carnal understanding, they run into heaps and confusion.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XII § iv (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 380-384 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 292-295.