

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## THE TRUTH OF THE SACRAMENTS AND THEIR USE.

BY THE REV. J. W. HUNKIN, B.D., M.C., O.B.E., Tutor,  
Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

THE Latin word *Sacramentum* (sacred pledge) was used in the earliest Latin-speaking Church, the Church of North Africa, to translate the Greek word *μυστήριον* (secret) which had already had long religious associations in connexion with rites like those of the Eleusinian "mysteries." Both words were at first applied in a general way to religious forms which possessed an inner significance and meant more than appeared on the surface. Thus Cyprian says that the Lord's Prayer contains many great sacraments, and the three hours of prayer are "a sacrament of the Trinity." Later the word sacrament became more and more associated with certain rites of the Church. Peter Lombard in the twelfth century is said to have been the first to fix the number of the Sacraments at seven, a number accepted at the Council of Florence (1439), and ratified at the Council of Trent (1547). The Reformers of the sixteenth century reduced the number to two, as in the twenty-fifth of our Thirty-nine Articles.

Now although these limitations of the word sacrament may be convenient from some points of view, their effect has been to put Christian sacraments, whether two or seven, into a false isolation. "The sacraments of life are not two, or seven, or seventy-times seven."<sup>1</sup> Sacraments are, to quote the very words of the Article referred to (Art. xxv), *efficacia signa*, effectual signs, acts or things used for the purpose of conveying something spiritual from one spirit to another. To the mystic, life is full of sacraments. The invisible things of God from the creation of the world, as St. Paul says, may be clearly seen and understood from the things that are made. "The need of sacraments is one of the deepest convictions of the religious consciousness. It rests ultimately on the instinctive reluctance to allow any spiritual fact to remain without an external expression."<sup>2</sup>

Let us consider a specific instance of the operation of the sacramental principle in ordinary life. When the greatest of modern travellers, the late Charles Doughty, first took his wife to the East, he rose on the morning following their arrival long before daybreak in order to greet her on her waking with a mass of the beautiful yellow wild roses of Baalbek which she had long wished to see.<sup>3</sup>

Flowers given in this way by a husband to his wife are a sign both *declaratory* of his love and also *effectual* in actually conveying some-

<sup>1</sup> The Bishop of Birmingham in a sermon before the University of Cambridge, May 16, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, pp. 253, 254.

<sup>3</sup> See the obituary notice in the *Cambridge Review*, 1926, p. 326.

thing of that love to her. The effectualness of the sign in this respect depends primarily upon the intention on the part of both giver and receiver so to use the flowers, and secondly upon the appropriateness of the sign to such a use. It is possible also that it may further depend to some extent upon some psychic factor the nature of which has not yet been subjected to a proper scientific investigation.<sup>1</sup>

In any case it is important to notice that the flowers are the vehicle not merely of something with which they are invested by the mind of the wife but of something which has been attached to them by the husband.

A sacrament is always invested by the originator of it with something that is objective as well as spiritual. How much of that objective spiritual something is absorbed by the receiver of the sacrament depends upon his receptivity. But it is "there" to be received by him who is able to receive it.

Thus it might be maintained that flowers so received by a wife from her husband are no longer mere flowers. They are still flowers physically, chemically, biologically, and nothing but flowers so far as Natural Science is concerned. But their significance has been completely altered. By the husband's express intention they are now essentially vehicles of love to his wife. Flowers they still are in all their physical, chemical and biological properties; flowers and nothing more. But what they hold for his wife is not primarily but, at the most, only secondarily, botanical.

On the analogy of Thomas Aquinas' theory of the Sacraments we should say that while the accidents of the flowers (i.e., all their properties belonging to the world of which we are cognisant through our senses) remain, their substance (the inmost spiritual something which determines their significance) has been changed. Before they were mere *flowers*, now they are essentially *bearers of affection*. But in order to avoid misunderstanding we must lay stress upon the fact that their *effectualness* depends, at any rate in the main (so far as we know), upon the recipient's knowledge of the intention of the giver. It is, to say the least, very doubtful how far material objects can of themselves convey that spiritual something of which we have spoken to a person who knows nothing of the intention with which they have been sent.

We have gone into some detail in considering this simple example of the operation of the sacramental principle in ordinary life in order to make the points referred to as clear as possible. If we had time we might profitably consider other examples of various kinds. We should observe that while all sacraments are signs, some are more decisively effectual than others. Indeed we could arrange a series beginning with those in which the effectual element is most prominent and ending with those in which that element is reduced to the vanishing point. When the vanishing point is reached and the effectual element disappears the sacrament (now simply declara-

<sup>1</sup> c.f. the references to Psychometry in the Proceedings of the S.P.R. e.g., Parts lxxxix, p. 91; xc, p. 127.

tory) is no longer a sacrament proper but rather a mere ceremony or symbol.

We should note also great differences in the value of the inner "substance" of the sacraments. Flowers given sacramentally are of great spiritual value; but a man's gift of a few flowers to his wife, for example, would be a poor substitute for the provision of adequate means for her support.

Let us now try to apply these considerations to the two Sacraments of the Church which our Articles single out as being historically connected in a special sense with our Lord Himself: the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. For the sake of clearness we will confine ourselves to one of them; and as certain new considerations immediately arise, not quite relevant to our present purpose, in the case of Baptism, we will concentrate our attention upon the Lord's Supper.

The earliest authority to give us an account of the institution of the Lord's Supper is St. Paul. From his First Epistle to the Corinthians we gather, what on general grounds is highly probable, viz., that the observance was already firmly established in the Church before St. Paul himself had become a Christian.

The Christians believed themselves to be acting in accordance with their Master's expressed wish when they broke bread and drank of the cup of wine, remembering Him and shewing forth His death. The observance has continued in one form or another to the present day.

The definition of the term "sacrament" which has been adopted in this paper is based upon the twenty-fifth of the Thirty-nine Articles: a sacrament is *efficax signum*, an effectual sign, an act or a thing used for the purpose of conveying something spiritual from one spirit to another.

We shall miss the true significance of the Lord's Supper unless we connect it directly with our Lord Himself and regard it essentially as a means whereby something spiritual is conveyed from Him to us. When He committed the observance of the rite to His followers, and so to His Church for all time, He left no details, so far as we know, as to the precise mode in which it was to be carried out. His Church was to carry it out, His Church regarded as one holy universal Church. As to how the observance should be modified if the Church should fall into divisions (as it has fallen) no directions were given. Indeed we cannot but regard all details as strictly secondary.

A traditional procedure gradually grew up which became ever more complicated until the original significance of the rite was obscured by a mass of accretions. We owe the Reformers of the sixteenth century, and especially Archbishop Cranmer, a great debt of gratitude for simplifying the service and making clear once more its direct connection with our Lord.

The symbols are appropriate: bread which supports life, wine which, as the Psalmist says, makes glad the heart. And these symbols, regarded as coming from our Lord to us, become effectual symbols, and convey to us His "blessed body and blood," as He

Himself said the same night that He was betrayed, "this is My Body." Surely it is obvious that He meant something entirely spiritual, something of Himself imparted to His disciples, entering into them, uniting them in the closest spiritual intimacy with Himself.

In no Communion Office in Christendom is the connexion between what we do now and what our Lord did on that last evening of His life made so clear as it is in our present Communion Office. In the Canon of the Mass which, though pruned in various ways, was substantially retained in the Prayer Book of 1549, after the recital of the words of institution there is still a long prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer before the elements are actually partaken of. In the Prayer Book of 1549 itself, the Exhortation, Confession, Absolution, Comfortable Words and Prayer of Humble Access are all interposed at this point before the reception of the elements.

But in the Prayer Book of 1552 the very words of the New Testament form the climax of the Consecration Prayer and are immediately followed by the distribution of the bread and the wine to the communicants; the idea plainly being, that the communicants receive them as from their Lord Himself. The officiating minister falls into the background; the elements themselves are not only brought into the closest possible association with the Lord's words, but are never for one instant separated from that association.

And as our Lord is present only in a spiritual manner, so we feed on Him "*in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.*" And having so entered into the most intimate communion with Himself, we then in the prayer of oblation, which by a stroke of religious genius Cranmer, in this Prayer Book of 1552, placed after the Communion itself, offer and present ourselves, so united with Him, "our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice."

The whole emphasis of our present Communion Service lies on the thought that we take the elements as direct from our Lord. By our prayer we set them apart from all lower use ready to be employed by Him. When we receive them we receive them as from His own hands: so receiving them we receive "His most blessed body and blood." If any of the elements remain over after all present have received they are to be regarded as hallowed through their having been solemnly and with prayer set aside for the Master's use, and are to be reverently disposed of.

All theories which lie behind the reservation of the elements for purposes of adoration attach the presence of our Lord too mechanically to the material elements themselves. Such theories apply the categories of time and space to spirit, and they are not applicable to spirit in this way.

How precisely the spiritual and the material are connected we cannot say. "The reciprocal action of spirit and matter is the one great mystery which, to all appearance, must remain impenetrable to the finite intelligence."<sup>1</sup> The theory of Thomas Aquinas is, as we have already seen, suggestive up to a point. But taken

<sup>1</sup> W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 258.

literally to mean that the "substance" of the bread and wine is entirely removed while the "accidents" are unchanged, the theory involves a hypothetical separation between "substance" and "accident" which as Cranmer maintained again and again, is untenable.

Cranmer himself gave up the attempt to describe the *modus operandi* of the sacrament further than to say that while the mouth receives the bread and wine, the worthy soul receives and feeds upon the very body and blood of Christ<sup>1</sup>; and we shall do well to imitate his reticence. "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."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, we must never forget that any spiritual use of material elements depends for its significance upon the whole context of life in which it is set. For a man, otherwise cruel to his wife, to present her with flowers might be the mere mockery of a sacrament. "Why call ye me Lord, Lord," our Lord still asks, "and do not the things which I say?" Sacraments cannot have their full meaning and effect except as expressions of a love which proves its reality in the whole of life.

<sup>1</sup> Cranmer seems to have learned to express himself in this way from Ridley in 1546 and thereafter to have held consistently to this mode of expression. Ridley himself appears to have reached this view about 1545, through a study of the treatise of Ratramnus (9th century), *De Corpore et Sanguine*. Martin Bucer and the Strassburg school held the same doctrine, which their Lutheran opponents derided as Suvermerianism. (See C. H. Smyth, *Cranmer and the Reformation under Edward VI*, pp. 23 ff.)

<sup>2</sup> Article xxviii.

The *Anglican Theological Review* is an American publication which can be obtained in this country through Mr. Humphrey Milford of the Oxford University Press (4s. 6d. net or 16s. annual subscription post free). It is interesting as representing some aspects of the scholarship of the American Church. In the April number there are four chief articles—The Ministry of Women, Wenley's Stoicism and Its Influence, Paul and Thecla and The Nicene Creed and the Social Gospel. There are some pages of Notes, Comments and Problems dealing chiefly with recent publications. One of the most interesting sections is headed "The Five Best Books of 1925." It gives a selection classified under the Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Systematic Theology, Religious Education, and History of Religions. We must confess that we are a little surprised at some of the works included in the list, but it is interesting as an American estimate, especially of some of our English writers.

*Great Logicians*, by J. N. Ruffins, B.A. (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 5s. net) takes us back to the Barbara, Celarent, Darii, etc., of our student days, and gives many rules from eminent logicians for the overthrow of opponents, among whom Aristotle, "the most remarkable man perhaps who ever lived and the greatest of all logicians," is given the largest space.