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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Nature and Character of Christian Sacramental Theory and Practice.

SINCE the work of Reitzenstein and Bousset we have been familiar with the idea that a high sacramental theory and practice is to be attributed to St. Paul. But these scholars put forward the thesis that this was a perversion of essential Christianity due to Pauline borrowings from the Mystery Cults. It was, for them, a Hellenizing of the Gospel and a contradiction of its essential Hebraism. This latter claim was repudiated by Schweitzer, who, while admitting the high sacramental doctrine and practice in St. Paul, related it to eschatological notions, essentially Hebraic, and part of the original Gospel of Jesus. From another point of view the Liberal Protestant thesis was repudiated by P. T. Forsyth in his *Church and the Sacraments,* and more recently it has been repudiated in a most thorough-going, scholarly manner by Wilfred Knox, in his *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles.* This paper is an approach to the same problem from another point of view.

I

I must first begin by saying something about the necessity and nature of the Church. For Christianity, the necessity and nature of the Church are grounded in the fact and character of Revelation; for the Church is the Fellowship (ἡ κοινωνία), and the whole work of creation and redemption—God's activity on and within the historical plane—is just *God's bid for fellowship.* It has been our interpretation of the doctrines of creation and redemption in mechanical or legal (transactional) terms, rather than in personal terms, which has made us blind to this truth. In mechanical and legal relationships the narrower logic of the schools always holds good, and so we have produced our completely rational theologies. But in *personal* relationships this narrower logic is never adequate. In this realm a higher form of reason than logic holds sway. No longer do we find that:

> *the embranglements of logic are the prime condition of all Being, the essence of things.*

All completely rational theologies (in the narrower sense of the word "rational") are sub-personal; for there is that in

personality which is supra-rational. Personality is the real miracle of the universe. It is not a mathematical entity, subject to the laws of addition and subtraction. One and one do not make two in the realm of personality. And beyond personality is supra-personality, which is *fellowship*—the inter-penetration of personality, or the sharing of personality without its loss:

this Individualism which is man's true Socialism.

Such an idea of fellowship is the guiding notion of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and it stands in complete contradiction to all forms of pantheistic mysticism, which teach the absorption of the individual into the World-soul and talk of

A shoreless, soundless sea
In which at last our souls must fall.

Fellowship, which is the Christian gift to the world, transcends the contradiction between the individual and the whole. It is of the nature of a higher synthesis; and as the Christian gift to the world it is simply the revelation of the truth about reality. So that the whole meaning of creation and redemption—of Providence—is to be found in God's bid for fellowship; for fellowship is the hidden structure of reality.

For the Christian, the ground of this assertion is to be found in Revelation, which is the unfolding of the hidden secret—a placarding of the fact on the plane of history—something *objectively* set forth. In Nature, God is not necessarily seen as personal, nor is the world seen as ordered fellowship. The mystery is never wholly revealed. But in Revelation—the Word of God in its manifoldness, first acted and spoken and finally made flesh—it is completely set forth. This difference between God as revealed in Nature and God as revealed in History—in significant action—is the whole difference between Jewish and Christian thought on the one hand, and all sorts of Pantheisms, non-personal Mysticisms, and Nature Cults on the other; and it should never be forgotten when the Christian sacraments are in question. In another sense it constitutes the difference between all types of Deistic transcendence on the one hand, and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Both Judaism and Christianity see God at work in History rather than in Nature, and this means that the character of revelation is in the realm of personal dealing and is *moral* and *spiritual*, and not theosophic. If this had always been remembered we should have been spared certain doctrines of the Church and of the sacraments which have appeared in history, and certain weakening reactions to these doctrines which have also appeared.

It is interesting to note how the prologue of the Fourth Gospel deals with this matter. The writer is dealing with the manifestation (a much better word than "revelation", which has come to have theosophic meaning), or showing forth of the *character* of God on the plane of History, and it seems to me that he is definitely writing to contrast the Christian way of looking at things with two others. First there is Judaism, which had rejected Christ and which, in the writer's scheme of things, stands for Deistic transcendence—a one-way movement, the movement from God to us. Secondly, there are certain types of Theosophy and Anthroposophy, as we should now call them, which can be characterised as "flights away from reality"—attempts to escape from the real concreteness of things and events. And these again represent a one-way movement—the movement from us to God, the upward lift of all subjectivisms and humanisms. Over against these he sets the doctrine of the Word of God, who *comes* and is *received*. Here in contrast is a double movement, from God to us and back from us to God, involving the paradox of transcendence and immanence, but immanence of a personal and concrete type. As the writer saw it, looking back into the Scriptures, it was a process which had involved selectivity, but selectivity of a personal (apocalyptic) kind. This selectivity had involved crisis-acts, the striking down of God, the declaration of an "eternal now" in the midst of time. This selectivity of a personal kind is the ground of both Church and sacraments. Both for pre-Pauline Christianity as for Pauline Christianity, the Church was the "Israel of God", and the Christian sacraments found their parallel in Jewish prophetic symbolic action, which action was never something purely didactic, but was an actualising and realising of the thing symbolised. This symbolic action had always an eschatological element in it, but it was *realised* eschatology in the sense that the far-off event was actually within the action, already accomplished *sub specie aeternitatis*, and experienced as an earnest in the time event. And this, too, is a characteristic of the Christian sacraments in the Pauline understanding.

For the Jew, as for the Christian, the Word of God was never primarily a spoken word. It was given in *act* rather than in phrase. It was not an ideology, not, when properly understood, a law involving a legal system of ethical and ceremonial righteousness, not something marked by narrow logical consistency. It was rather something "full of grace and of truth"[1]—a *living* word, a compelling certainty within a given

[1] Even the word "truth" for the Hebrew had not the same significance as it had for the Greek. It meant "truthfulness," "keeping faith," "loyalty." It had no meaning apart from personal relationships.

set of existents; so that our faith in it is not dependent upon anything so subjective as value-judgments, but upon judgments of existence. We do not get beyond history and reach out into the eternal by regarding the historical as the insecure element in religion and seeking to build upon some necessity unrelated to the time process, and therefore to what seems relative and evanescent. Such attempts to ignore history, which were the very stuff out of which the pagan sacramental systems were built, can never achieve the result they set out to achieve; for they reduce us to reliance upon judgments of value over against judgments of existence. And all such reliance is mere subjectivism—the creation of religion for ourselves. All this is, I think, important for the understanding of the sacramental system of Primitive and of Pauline Christianity.

II

Now Christianity, in its most primitive form, did not begin as a system of speculative thought or a reasoned theology. It began as a way of worship and of life, based upon a faith. And faith was not assent to intellectual propositions enshrining a metaphysic about reality or a cosmological phantasia. Faith, for the early Christians, seems to have been trust in and loyalty to Jesus. And dogma was not a given set of propositions to be believed, but a set of *given facts*, which had happened in history. These facts were regarded as having a certain meaning and value for life. To put it simply, they were regarded as being, in an absolute sense, acts of God on and within the plane of history. The earliest compilation of these facts of which we have any record is that given by St. Paul writing to the Corinthian Church about A.D. 53.[2] He there assures the Corinthians that he delivered to them *first of all* that which he received, evidently referring, as Eduard Meyer claimed, to the instruction given him by the messenger of the Damascus Church before his baptism, perhaps some fifteen years earlier. These facts were:

1. Christ Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures.
2. He was buried.
3. He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.
4. He was seen of Cephas.

Here, then, we have four happenings in history; and faith, for the pre-Pauline Christian, meant relying on these happenings as the redemptive acts of God. From this followed the exaltation of Jesus as Lord (maran) and the beginning of Christian worship centring in two redemption rites, which were dramatic symbolic acts, setting forth *and actualising* the holy action of God within

[2] See 1 Cor. xv. 3-5.

history. In worship, which was corporate *action* rather than *words,* Christians constantly saw the holy action of God represented in symbolic forms. In Baptism they saw set forth the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and the personal action of God was again made intimate and actualised in the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what makes the question of immersion so secure, and any other form of the rite of Baptism a serious impairing of it. Apologetic for immersion should be shifted from the linguistic to this deeper ground. In the Eucharist, to use St. Paul's striking phrase, they again saw Christ "visibly depicted crucified," [3] in the breaking of the bread, and His holy action was made meaningful and powerful in the fellowship which shared His life and was willing to be identified with Him in treading the path of love and in witnessing (martyrdom).

III

All this which, in its essence, is essentially Hebrew in character, moral and personal, and not theosophic, is not different from the doctrine of the Church and sacraments which we find in St. Paul. In his doctrine St. Paul gives it more coherent expression, but he does not depart from personal and moral ideas. It is no mere figure of speech when he calls the Church "the body of Christ." He is speaking of something real. The Church is that concrete reality by which Christ becomes manifest in the world, and by which He acts in history. He goes even further when, more than once, he suggests that "the Christ" is not simply the historic Jesus glorified, but the glorified Christ plus the Church.[4] It is this daring *identification* of the Christ with the Church which underlies his discourse on Christian marriage in Ephesians—"We are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." And it underlies, too, his amazing statement in Colossians—"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which was lacking of the afflictions of the Christ, in my flesh, for His body's sake, which is the Church." [5] But it is all in the personal realm, for he is speaking of an experience of fellowship so real and so close that it involves that inter-penetration of personality which is the hidden secret of reality. In the Corinthian Epistle this is all related to his discourse on the Eucharist, and in Romans and Colossians to Baptism.

Now this is not the theologising of St. Paul, borrowed from

[3] Gal. iii. 1.

[4] See 1 Cor. xii. 12, where "so also is the Christ" would seem to mean "so also is the Church."

[5] Col. i. 24.

pagan sources; for, in the first place, its personal and eschatological character differs from what we know of either Greek or Oriental influences surrounding the Church.[6] And, in the second place, it is implicit in all the showing forth of God in the Old Testament from the time that Abraham went forth, not knowing whither he went. We catch the authentic notes of it in "the suffering servant" and "the Son of Man." We see it in the action of Jesus in choosing the Apostles "to be with Him," and we see it in the life of the pre-Pauline Church, which regarded its own life as a continuation of the action of Jesus, the beginnings of which alone had been given in the Gospel story.[7]

IV

Here we may turn aside to contemplate the rich devotional meaning which the two sacraments must have had for many Christians of St. Paul's day, and might have for us if regarded in the same way; and incidentally we shall see how essential to this meaning is the action and symbolism of the sacraments, and how necessary it is to retain that symbolism intact. The facts of the Gospel—the birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—which declared Him to be the Son of God, were *simple,* and yet they were *sublime.* What a simplicity there was about the birth of Jesus! Could any one ever have imagined that the high God, acting in history, would act like that? No earthly monarch would dare to do so. Where is the great high God of heaven when He penetrates into history? A Babe is born in a stable, and cradled in a manger, and the parents are simple country folk from the despised village of Nazareth! It is so simple that it seems ridiculous. Who but God could ever have devised such simplicity of action (and yet such overwhelming grandeur of the true and right kind) that a Baby should be born to redeem Israel, not with trumpet and pageantry, not as a king, but an infant laid in a manger, and as a Man upon a Cross? How simple, and yet how sublime!

Again, in this action of God, we note the *intimacy,* when Jesus is able to be *with* people, so moving and so intimate; and yet, at the same time, the paradox is complete, for not only was there intimacy, but remoteness also. We remember, for instance, how on the last journey up to Jerusalem, as He neared the city, He was going on before and they followed, *for they were afraid.* There was always about Him something of *intimacy* and of *ultimacy,* of *simplicity* and of *sublimity.* And so the redemption rites which embodied the facts of the Gospel had about them

[6] See an article I contributed to *The Interpreter,* April, 1924.
[7] See the prologue to Acts.

the air of simplicity and of sublimity, of intimacy and of ultimacy. They used the simple substances of water and of bread and wine; and yet there was about them that sublimity, that beauty of character, that wonderful fulfilment and transcendence of all that is temporal, that penetrating power which they have of taking us into the very presence of God Himself. We notice also the sense of intimacy. The most intimate thing we do is to eat and drink together, to share the same bread and the same cup. Think of the intimacy as relating to Baptism, in which we surround ourselves with the element of water, we are immersed in it, penetrated by it—such intimacy! It is an intimacy which in any other setting would be almost too intimate, whether we think of sharing the same bread and the same cup, or of the very nakedness almost of our Baptism. Yet about these rites there is also the remoteness of ultimacy; for that which we do in the sharing of the bread and the wine we know also to be the sharing of the Body and the Blood of our Lord. And that which we do in the intimate act of being plunged in the font of water, being overwhelmed by the element, we know also to be our death and our living again. To tamper with the symbolism not only means that we are in danger of destroying the power of the sacraments to witness to the Christian Gospel—to show forth the death of Christ—and of opening the door for their witnessing to quite a different gospel; but it also means that we take upon ourselves the prerogative of improvers of art which, in its simplicity and sublimity, is beyond improving, and so impair, pervert, or destroy the devotional value of the sacraments.

V

The identification of the Christ and the Church in the moral-personal form in which it appears in the New Testament is closely related to sacramental doctrine and practice. The key-notions lying behind sacramental theory in the New Testament are "personal," "ethical," and "concrete," as over against "mechanical," "legal," and "abstract-mystical." In sacraments, rather than in creeds, at first the Faith (in the sense in which I have described it) was preserved and dramatically set forth. In Baptism and in the Eucharist Christians saw the Crucifixion—the death, burial, and resurrection of their Lord—repeating itself in the life and profession of the disciples, and proclaiming to the ages that He who was to come had come (the eschatological note). Christianity was the Good News about God's action as Holy Energy, *personally* directed and morally conditioned. Such Holy Energy, acting in the field of human experience, was bound to act sacramentally, allowing for what was objective (God's

part) and for what was subjective (man's response). So far as objectivity was concerned the work of grace could not be left to depend upon man's psychological condition, for this might leave him in a perpetual state of doubt as to whether God had acted at all. Rather, it depended upon the fact and nature of God's holy action, which is an eternal reality, but which is set forth on the historical plane in the life and death of Jesus Christ, God's personal response to our need. And this holy action was perpetuated and actualised in the dramatic action of the sacraments. So far as subjectivity was concerned, it was sufficiently guaranteed by faith and penitence in the disciples, which constituted the moral response to the *given* thing. It was the *Real Action* of God in the sacraments which was central in early Christian thought, rather than the *Real Presence*. Thus we see what St. Paul meant when he said to the Galatian Christians, "before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth crucified among you." In the original language he uses the strongest terms, "Jesus Christ was placarded crucified before your eyes." Now, the Galatians had never seen Him crucified. They had been living in Galatia at the time. When, therefore, had they seen Him visibly depicted crucified? They had so seen Him every time new converts had been won for the Faith, and had descended into the bath of water. They had seen there enacted the very tragic act of the crucifixion of their Lord; for the convert had died, had been buried, and had risen with Him, and the whole drama of the crucifixion had appeared before their eyes in reality. And, again, it was this they had seen every time they had gathered for the Lord's Supper. The Bread had been broken and the Wine out-poured, and in an eschatological moment they had joined themselves in history to that moment when His body had been marred and broken on the Cross, and His blood had been shed, and at the same time had stood within the moment of its fulfilment in His coming again. So Christ had been once again visibly depicted crucified. He who had died thus once for all had set within their midst that which was ever to unite them to the one act which was the act of God eternal.[8]

[8] In the developed rite as it appears in the earliest liturgies the whole life of Jesus is made to appear before the worshippers as act succeeds act. This is still the *motif* so far as Eastern liturgies are concerned. In my own Church this simple primitive rite is still the rule. Our first act is to stand together in the presence of God in penitence and adoration. In this we identify ourselves with those in Israel who were awaiting the coming of the Holy One. In this act we make our confession of sin. Then follows an act of praise objective in character, and here we identify ourselves with the angel choir who hailed His coming. After that the Word of God is read in our midst, both the word of prophecy and its fulfilment in the Gospel. This symbolises the Word made flesh dwelling

VI

Finally, in primitive Christianity, the sacraments had no meaning apart from the corporate society. They were corporate, not individual, acts; but corporate in the sense of *fellowship*, and not in the sense of mass-controlled or mass-delegated actions. They were the Church at worship. The whole Church was the priestly body and the worshippers were in and with the action. Worship was fellowship, fellowship between God and man as between man and man, the place where the heavenly and the earthly planes met in sacramental action. Even in its most primitive form, the Eucharist, which had its origin not only in the crisis-experience of the Last Supper, but in the daily fellowship meals which Jesus had shared with His intimate followers (which themselves were of an eschatological nature), appears to have been a great Churchly service, in which the Church, as a royal priesthood, offered worship, but not of a pattern of her own designing, nor one determined by her own preferences. Rather, she offered worship through her great High Priest, who was there set forth in His holy redeeming act as *sacrificium*. Upon this sacrifice the Church spiritually fed in communion, which was God's giving and their receiving, something essentially personal. It was that which had divine character which was being done; and, whilst faith was necessary for obedience in such a truly personal relationship (an emphasis which has been weakened where legal and metaphysical notions have been substituted for personal conceptions), yet the value of what was being done did not depend upon anything so fluctuating as the psychological states of the worshippers—it was not primarily to be measured by "spiritual uplift." It would appear that the early Christians—in line with Jewish thought generally—were

in our midst. We then join ourselves in prayer in "the prayers of the brethren"—the *oremus dilectissimi* of the most ancient liturgies—which represents the disciples coming to Jesus with all their wants. Then is delivered to us the Word of Exhortation, which symbolises the teaching Jesus in the midst. Then the mood of the service changes. We move from the happy events of the life of Jesus to the point where He set His face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, joining ourselves with Him, determined to go up with Him. This is symbolised in the Offering, followed by the Offertory Prayer. This means that we offer ourselves, as well as our substance, completely identifying ourselves with Him in His sacrificial act. Then there is silence. We are with Him in the agony of the Garden, and now at the foot of the Cross. The Bread is significantly broken, and we are joined to Him in the moment of His death. The Wine is significantly outpoured, and we join ourselves to Him in the act of eating and drinking, identifying ourselves with Him in His supreme act of self-giving. Finally we move on to the climax of the service when, at the very close, we celebrate in a hymn of triumph the great act of His resurrection. Not a dead Christ, but the risen, living, triumphant Christ is the Christ whom we worship.

quite clear that there must be divine action on and within the historical plane, and that both *events* and *things* had significance for such action. But it would also appear that they safeguarded themselves against superstition and against reducing divine action to the level of the sub-personal because things were for them significant only as they were within the realm of action. But within that realm they *were* significant, not in the sense that they acted as memory-quickeners, but in the sense that the whole action effected what it symbolised. We can best think of it as a kind of realised eschatology. Past, present and future were gathered together, as it were, at a single point. Thus the believer experienced everything that Christ experienced: he suffered *with* Him, he died *with* Him, he was buried *with* Him, and he rose *with* Him. It was not simply a recollection of a *past* experience, nor a foretaste of a *post* experience. It was *co-experience*, experience with Him here and now, and yet a "here and now" in which the past, present and future were gathered together in significant action which transcended the limits of time and space. In such a moment conflict might still be going on in the time process, but the victory was already won as an eternal reality and *actually realised*.[9]

W. Robinson.

[9] Hence the name Eucharist, which at an early date became universal, and the mood of praise and victory which pervaded the early liturgies, and still pervades Eastern rites as contrasted with the penitential mood of Western rites.

Dr. Walter O. Lewis, the General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, in recently sending his annual subscription from Washington, wrote: "I am interested in the recording of Baptist history. I am more interested in the making of history. The Baptists of Britain are making history now that I hope may be recorded for the inspiration of future generations."