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The Word and Sacraments

GEOFFREY HART

Let me begin this paper with a story, a true story, in fact a story told by an archbishop. Although I do not necessarily subscribe personally to everything he says or to the terminology he uses, he tells the tale well and makes his point well, so here it is in his own words.

Some years ago, in the course of my work as Archbishop of York, I went to a certain town in my Province. It had as its main glory an ancient and famous church. The incumbent, with commendable vigour, had raised a large sum of money to refashion the church and to restore it to something of its former glory and to adapt it for greater usefulness under modern conditions. I was to be present at its rehallowing at a great Eucharist, and was to preach. The greatest possible care had been put into the preparation of the service. Architecturally, the great feature was the altar, central and resplendent. There could be no doubt that the Church of England was a sacramental Church, nor where it was that her children should kneel to be fed. The architect, the craftsmen, the silversmiths, all had given of their best. There was one focus. You could not miss it.

'This is very fine, Vicar. You have done magnificently. Now—you have asked me to preach. Where do I preach from?' 'They will bring you in a little stand, Archbishop, when the time comes.' And they did. A poor, paltry thing it was, liable to collapse if by chance I leaned upon it, the sort of temporary contraption from which any man might have scorned to give out the notices of the week. This was to be the thing from which the everlasting gospel was to be proclaimed. As soon as the sermon was over it was taken away into oblivion. And good riddance, too!

The service over, I was introduced to the distinguished architect. I complimented him on so much that was good in the work that he had done. But while I was musing the fire had kindled. Then spake I with my tongue. 'When will you ecclesiastical architects,' I said, 'give us Anglican ecclesiastical architecture? Is it not time that a visitor from some other tradition than ours should be able to see, by the very architecture of the building, that Anglicanism is "bifocal" in its means of grace, that the living God comes to us both in the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ and in the sacrament of the Word?' 'Yes,' said the architect, in reply to my protest and distress. 'Yes, I see what you mean. I appreciate the point. I did in fact talk it over with the Vicar. But he said there was no need for a pulpit. He just speaks off the cuff.'

(Donald Coggan: *On Preaching* (London 1978), pp. 4—5.)

'Bifocal Anglicanism' is a useful phrase, not to be overworked or made the answer to every issue, but useful nevertheless. It reminds us that God has given us both the Word and Sacraments.

This is reflected in Article 19 of the Thirty-nine Articles:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

That is the standpoint of classic Anglicanism. That is what Dr. Coggan meant by 'bifocal' Anglicanism.

It is further reflected in the Prayer Book Ordinal in the words addressed by the bishop to each ordinand:

And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; . . . Take thou authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the holy Sacraments in the Congregation, where thou shalt be lawfully appointed thereunto.

The Ordinal of the *Alternative Service Book*, 1980, says much the same. As the bishop gives the Bible to each ordinand he says:

Receive this Book, as a sign of the authority which God has given you this day to preach the gospel of Christ and to minister his Holy Sacraments.

And again in the words of the Proper Preface he says:

And now we give you thanks because within the royal priesthood of your Church you ordain ministers to proclaim the word of God, to care for your people, and to celebrate the sacraments of the new covenant.

Sacramental theology, like any true theology, must be biblical. It must be based and built on Scripture. All too often today, it is anything but. It seems to have developed a life of its own, independent of its wider theological context. The Church of England seems to be regarded in some quarters as little more than a eucharistic sect, whose distinctive eucharistic theology sits very lightly to Scripture.

Some years ago I attended a small week-end residential conference. We began with Holy Communion, but before we reached the end of the service the presiding bishop interrupted to say that we would now hold our conference and the following afternoon before we dispersed we would finish the service. The purpose of this bizarre proceeding was so that the entire conference would be 'within the eucharist'.

On another occasion I attended a bishop's memorial service. It was

Holy Communion and I could not work out satisfactorily whether I was there to remember with thanksgiving the life and ministry of a much loved bishop or to 'proclaim the Lord's death until He comes' (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Recently I was invited to another service to 'say good-bye' to a man leaving the diocese on his preferment. Again it was Holy Communion and I did not go. It was not that I did not want to 'say good-bye' to a much respected friend and colleague, but that I knew that for me it would be an occasion, which confused perfectly appropriate farewells with the remembrance of Christ's death for our sins.

Evangelical Christians are by no means exempt from such confusions and urgently need to recover a truly biblical understanding of the sacraments.

There is comparatively little direct biblical teaching on the sacraments. On Holy Communion, for example, there are the three Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, which was not itself Holy Communion, but marked the institution of it. There is the earlier record in 1 Corinthians 11 and other significant but scattered references. Our problems do not derive from an excess of source material but from our use of it.

It is important first of all to examine the word 'sacrament'. It is not itself a biblical word any more than, for example the word 'trinity'. It is a useful technical word in the Christian's vocabulary. It entered that vocabulary through the Vulgate, the Latin version of Scripture, which was largely the work of Jerome. He translated the Greek word *mysterion* (which occurs, for instance, in Ephesians 5:32) by the Latin word *sacramentum*, and so the word found its way into English. It is not a happy or helpful transition. *Mysterion* in Greek means a secret now revealed and in the New Testament it is used of God's plan of salvation hidden in the past and now revealed in the Gospel. But the history of the word clouds rather than clarifies its meaning.

The classic Anglican and Reformed definition is to be found in the Catechism and the Articles, though in fact it derives from Augustine of Hippo. Let us take the Catechism first:

- Question.* What meanest thou by this word 'Sacrament'?
- Answer.* I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.
- Question.* How many parts are there in a Sacrament?
- Answer.* Two; the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.

Article 25 of the Thirty-nine Articles says:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses,

and effectual signs of grace, and God's will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

They both define a Sacrament as essentially a Sign—outward, and visible, and effectual. It is effectual *as a sign* and it is important not to overshadow the noun by the adjective. It means that it is not a mere, or an empty sign. It is an effectual sign.

It is worth taking a moment to understand the sacramental principle, in a non-religious sense.

Let us consider a hand-shake, an everyday occurrence. It is a sign of friendship, of trust, of peace. It is an outward and visible sign of these inward and invisible qualities. The extended open and empty hand indicated that no weapon was held or intended. It was a man's sword-hand that was thus offered, pledging and assuring the spirit with which he approached a stranger. It is no mere, or empty, sign. It is effectual. It seals a friendship, a contract, or a reconciliation. It is sacramental. It is a sign—eloquent, powerful, and effectual.

Of course it can be used thoughtlessly and casually. It can be used with very little meaning at all—the royal handshake, for example, or the political handshake, which are often little more than a finger-touching exercise.

It can be rejected, which is very hurtful. It can be abused. It could be part of an act of treachery. A proffered handshake could be seized and used to throw a man off-balance while a knife was plunged between his shoulder blades. It is interesting to recall the sign that was used to betray Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:48–49). A kiss is an intimate sign, or sacrament, of deep affection or love. Here it is the sign, or sacrament, of base treachery.

Another secular illustration of the sacramental principle is a regimental colour or flag. Outwardly it is no more than a rectangular piece of coloured and embroidered cloth, yet men have fought and died for it. When Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill of the 24th Foot were killed after the Battle of Isandhlwana in January 1879, they were attempting to save the Queen's Colour of their Regiment and for their courage were posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. They did not die for a tattered piece of cloth, but for what it represented—Queen, Country, home, patriotism, regimental tradition and pride. These were invisible, either by their intrinsic nature or by distance, but the Colour was a sign, or a sacrament, of them. It was a very powerful and effectual sign. It aroused very strong emotions.

A more cynical generation may regard such things with bewilderment or even contempt, but there is no doubt that to the Victorians a regimental colour was a sign—eloquent, powerful, effectual.

In a purely secular sense both a handshake and a regimental colour are sacramental. They are outward and visible signs of what is inward and invisible. They are eloquent, powerful, and effectual.

What then of the Christian sacraments? How are we to understand them? In answer to those questions let me now quote Article 25 of the Thirty-nine Articles in full:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

There are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord.

Those five commonly called Sacraments, that is to say, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles, partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures; but yet have not like nature of Sacraments with Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God.

The Sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about, but that we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them unworthily, purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith.

Notice that the Church of England recognizes only two Sacraments. Confirmation and Marriage are not Sacraments of the Gospel, though there are sacramental ingredients in both. If a bishop announces that he will wear cope and mitre for sacramental services, one is entitled to think that Confirmation will not be among them, although in the contemporary confusion it often is.

Baptism and the Supper of the Lord (as the Article calls it), or Holy Communion, are true Sacraments of the Gospel. They signify the Gospel itself. They are Sacraments of the Word of God—eloquent, powerful, and effectual. We do not have a Gospel of sacraments; we do have Sacraments of the Gospel.

Let us look first at Baptism. This is the Sacrament of Christian Initiation. It is the sacrament of the beginning of the Christian life and since you can only begin something once, the Nicene Creed affirms: 'I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins . . .' A true baptism cannot be repeated. There is strictly no such thing as rebaptism or a second baptism.

It will be helpful to turn again to the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Question. How many Sacraments hath Christ ordained in his Church?

Answer. Two only, as generally necessary to salvation, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.

- Question.* What meanest thou by this word Sacrament?
Answer. I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.
- Question.* How many parts are there in a Sacrament?
Answer. Two; the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.
- Question.* What is the outward visible sign or form in Baptism?
Answer. Water; wherein the person is baptized *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*
- Question.* What is the inward and spiritual grace?
Answer. A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness; for being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace.

The outward and visible sign in Baptism is water. The inward and spiritual grace signified is cleansing and regeneration. It is the sacrament of 'becoming a Christian', and for that to happen we have to be cleansed from sin and born again, or regenerate.

Paul expresses this with force and clarity in Titus 3:4–7:

... when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Of all this Baptism is the sign. It is a Sacrament of Salvation, a Sacrament of the Gospel itself. It cannot therefore ever be despised, or denigrated, or downgraded to the level of a social convention.

Evangelical Christians on the whole are better at saying what Baptism is *not*, but we need to understand that positively it is the sign, or sacrament, of what God does. It is the sacrament of cleansing and regeneration, and not, as some of our Baptist friends would say, of repentance and faith. This has very considerable consequences for our doctrine of infant baptism.

In what sense, however, is Baptism an 'effectual' sign, as Article 25 calls a sacrament?

Suppose I decide to take my family to Weston-super-Mare for the day. We drive down the motorway until we see a *sign* saying 'Weston-super-Mare'. I could at once turn onto the hard shoulder, park underneath the sign, unpack the deck-chairs, and buckets, and spades. The sea might seem a long way out and the motorway juggernauts a noisy distraction, but the sign is clear enough: 'Weston-super-Mare'.

The language of the motorway police patrol may be inappropriate for this paper, but they would no doubt make it very clear that I had not understood the nature of a sign, or what it is that makes it 'effectual'.

The effectualness of a sign generally depends upon two things—our understanding of both the nature and meaning of the sign; and our obedience to it. Without them the sign, however true and accurate it may be in itself, will do me no good. It will not be effectual.

If, however, I understand what a sign is, and do not confuse it or identify it with what it signifies; and if I understand what it means, or what in fact it does signify; and if I then obey the sign and do what it says I will reach my destination and enjoy its delights. If on seeing the sign, 'Weston-super-Mare' I turn off the motorway in the direction of the arrow and do what the sign indicates then I will reach my destination. The sign will indeed have been effectual.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to spell out the parallel with Baptism. I need to understand that it is a sign, that it points to God's cleansing and regenerating grace, and that if I obey what it is saying I will reach my spiritual destination, or perhaps the right word now is 'destiny'.

It is interesting in this connexion to read the final exhortation in the Prayer Book service for the Public Baptism of Infants, which unhappily has no parallel in the *Alternative Service Book*. Addressed to the Godparents it says:

Forasmuch as this Child hath promised by you his sureties to renounce the devil and all his works, to believe in God, and to serve him; ye must remember, that it is your parts and duties to see that this Infant be taught, so soon as he shall be able to learn, what a solemn vow, promise, and profession, he hath here made by you. And that he may know these things the better, ye shall call upon him to hear Sermons; and chiefly ye shall provide, that he may learn the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health; and that this Child may be virtuously brought up to lead a godly and a christian life; remembering always, that Baptism doth represent unto us our profession; which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him; that, as he died, and rose again for us, so should we, who are baptized, die from sin, and rise again unto righteousness; continually mortifying all our evil and corrupt affections, and daily proceeding in all virtue and godliness of living.

Ye are to take care that this Child be brought to the Bishop to be confirmed by him, so soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue, and be further instructed in the Church-Catechism set forth for that purpose.

Augustine of Hippo made this vitally important point with his usual clarity:

Visible sacraments were instituted for the sake of carnal men, that by the ladder of sacraments they may be conveyed from those things which are seen by the eye, to those which are perceived by the understanding.

In practice all this means that full preaching and teaching is essential for Baptism to be rightly understood and rightly used. The Prayer Book rubric clearly intended that Baptism should take place at public, not private, services 'when the most number of people come together'. The reason for this is spelt out:

as well for that the Congregation there present may testify the receiving of them that be newly baptized into the number of Christ's Church; as also because in the Baptism of Infants every Man present may be put in remembrance of his own profession made to God in his Baptism.

It is essential that Baptism should be understood and obeyed. Augustine regarded the Word as an essential ingredient in a true Baptism:

Take away the word, and the water is neither more nor less than water. The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of visible word . . . whence has water so great an efficacy, as in touching the body to cleanse the soul, save by the operation of the word; and that not because it is uttered, but because it is believed?

(81st Tractate on John, on John 15:3)

Anglicans have particular difficulties with some teaching in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Catechism, for instance, begins as follows:

Question. What is your Name?

Answer. N. or M.

Question. Who gave you this Name?

Answer. My Godfathers and Godmothers in my Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

Taken in isolation these words appear to teach a mechanical doctrine of baptismal regeneration, that every one who is baptized is automatically regenerate. Certain expressions in the Prayer Book services, taken in isolation, point in the same direction. This

superstitious view of baptism reduces it virtually to the status of magic, but it is curiously persistent in some Anglican circles.

In their context it is clear, of course, that they are only one side of the coin, as the two following questions and answers in the Catechism make clear:

Question. What did your Godfathers and Godmothers then for you?

Answer. They did promise and vow three things in my name. First, that I should renounce the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh. Secondly, that I should believe all the Articles of the Christian Faith. And thirdly, that I should keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of my life.

Question. Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe, and to do, as they have promised for thee?

Answer. Yes, verily; and by God's help so I will. And I heartily thank our heavenly Father, that he hath called me to this state of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. And I pray unto God to give me his grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life's end.

It is necessary for both sides of a coin to be stamped if the coin is to be legal tender and what God promises in Baptism needs the response of repentance, faith, and obedience for them to be realized and for the Baptism to be effectual.

In using the *Alternative Service Book* the worst difficulties can be overcome by holding Baptism with Morning or Evening Prayer.

It is appropriate to conclude this section by quoting in full the words of Article 27, Of Baptism:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

Turning now to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, this is the Sacrament of Christian continuance, or nourishment. It is, therefore repeated, unlike the 'once-and-for-allness' of Baptism. It is helpful to start with the words of the Catechism:

- Question.* Why was the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordained?
Answer. For the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ, and of the benefits which we receive thereby.
- Question.* What is the outward part or sign of the Lord's Supper?
Answer. Bread and Wine, which the Lord hath commanded to be received.
- Question.* What is the inward part, or thing signified?
Answer. The Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper.
- Question.* What are the benefits whereof we are partakers thereby?
Answer. The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ, as our bodies are by the Bread and Wine.

In the Sacrament of Holy Communion we feed on Christ, who has been crucified for us. The bread is the sacrament, the outward and visible sign, of His Body given for us; the wine is the sacrament, the outward and visible sign, of His Blood shed for us. We feed on Him in our hearts, not in our mouths—what an abhorrent notion! We feed on Him by faith—how else? This is made clear in the robust words in Article 29:

The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth (as Saint Augustine saith) the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing.

Here then is the Sacrament of our continual and spiritual nourishment, 'generally necessary to salvation' (The Catechism). It is a sign, eloquent, powerful, and effectual, when it is received with penitence, faith, and love. To quote again from the Catechism:

- Question.* What is required of them who come to the Lord's Supper?
Answer. To examine themselves, whether they repent them truly of their former sins, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life; have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ, with a thankful remembrance of his death; and be in charity with all men.

In practice Holy Communion is essentially a congregational rite, expressing not only and primarily our fellowship, or communion, with Christ, but also our fellowship, or communion, with each other in Him (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16–17). There is something seriously

defective in an early morning or midweek service, where I am only concerned with 'making my communion'.

Liturgically the Prayer Book Service of Holy Communion is a masterpiece of doctrinal purity and devotional depth and the four eucharistic prayers of the *Alternative Service Book* reflect the doctrinal disarray and confusion of modern sacramental theology rather than 'the rich variety of liturgical insights' as we are urged to believe. The best modern-language version is without doubt *The Alternative Service Book's* 'The Order following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer', which is perfectly acceptable.

The inclusion of 'The Peace' in modern liturgies is now generally acceptable, though the time and attention given to it is sometimes out of all proportion to the central meaning of the service, in thankful remembrance of His death' (The Catechism). The exhortation to 'Greet one another with a holy kiss' (2 Corinthians 13:12) is not, of course, in the context of Holy Communion at all originally and would seem to be a practice more appropriate before or after a service. In J. B. Phillips's translation he adapted the meaning to our Anglo-Saxon culture with the words, 'A handshake all round, please,' which is no translation but conveys the sense. It is true that more exuberant expressions of affection are becoming normal in our society, particularly among the younger generation.

Let it be said in conclusion that Word and Sacraments belong together. The last Great Commission of Jesus Christ contains four words of command:

Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them . . .
(Matthew 28:19-20)

Here clearly evangelism, and baptism, and teaching, are inseparable. Certainly, as we have seen, the Word is primary, illuminating and explaining the Sacraments. There is no true Gospel, which consists of no more than 'be baptized and come to Holy Communion'.

It is hardly surprising if after more than seventy years of a spiritual diet of Holy Communion and a seven-minute sermon, we see fewer and weaker Christians, and a weaker Church. Bishop Francis Chavasse of Liverpool said many years ago: 'I see more services of Holy Communion, but I do not see more Christians'; his son, Bishop Christopher Chavasse of Rochester, said much later: 'Sermonettes produce Christianettes'

Let there then be full and joyful preaching and teaching of 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27); and let there be with them the glad and joyful celebration of Baptism and Holy Communion.

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