

The Holy Spirit and the Sacraments

WHEN we think even for a moment of the Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass and the Communion of the Lord's Supper in a Baptist Church we realise how wide is the difference of opinion and belief in regard to the sacraments of the Christian Church. When to this we add the recollection that one group within the Church does not practice the sacraments at all we begin to see the magnitude of our difficulties. Who would dare to say that the members of the Society of Friends are not within the Body of Christ? Guided by what they call the Inner Light they have made a notable contribution to the Church Universal. Are we to gather from this that the Holy Spirit and the sacraments are not necessarily bound up together? Privileged to hold converse some years ago with Canon Raven, the present writer, when the conversation was almost concluded, mentioned the relationship between fellowship and the Spirit. Canon Raven turned and said, "Yes, there is room for a sound investigation of that problem."

In the same scholar's *The Creator Spirit*, there is an illuminating chapter on the Spirit and the Church, and in that chapter Canon Raven writes: "But despite the feuds of schools and sees, through the long ages of enslavement to the Catholic hierarchy and of the divisive individualism of the Protestant reaction, there remains something of the love and joy and peace to bear its fruit in the splendours of St. Francis or the early Quakers, and to testify that Christ is more human, more divine than His official representatives, that the eternal Spirit manifested in Him cannot be barred out by creeds nor confirmed by ceremonies nor trafficked in by priests, but lives native in the spirits of His children." Any enquiry into the relationship between the Spirit and the sacraments must always have these considerations in mind. It is of the very nature of Spirit that no one sect should possess a monopoly of it and it is also of the very nature of Spirit that its full apprehension is an impossible ideal: the Spirit will continue to lead us into all truth until we stand in the Presence of Him who is truth, and even then, we may find ourselves launched out on further voyages of amazing discovery.

The history of the early Church can, of course, be interpreted along various and even conflicting lines, but the writer believes that early in the history of the Church the emphasis was placed on the authority of the Church and, in consequence, salvation

came to be bound up with that authority. The conception grew up of salvation by means of infused grace and this tended inevitably to relegate the Spirit to a secondary position. In fact, it is not going too far to say that the Spirit came to be regarded with some suspicion by the guardians of authority. However misguided Montanus might have been, the movement which sprang from his exaggerations was, in point of fact, a protest against the mechanical view of the Spirit which even at that early day was gaining ground. We can, in like manner, regard the early Quakers as a legitimate protest against a hardness which can and does creep into ecclesiastical organisations.

Yet from the other side there is much to be said. Think, for a moment, of such a writer as Von Hügel, a Roman Catholic with wide and deep sympathies and great learning. In the Second Series of his *Essays and Addresses* there is an essay on "The Place and Function of History and Institutions" and there Von Hügel deals with this problem of the relationship between Spirit and cultus. He therein affirms that "*a simple mental cultus is too brainy for mere man,*" a contention with which one must agree and which, once allowed, leaves us with the problem with which we are here concerned—the relationship between the cultus, or the sacramental aspect of Christianity and the operation of the Holy Spirit. In 1946 there was published a book by E. L. Mascall entitled *Christ, the Christian and the Church*. This book appears to have escaped the notice of Free Church scholars and yet it is a work which we must take into consideration in any attempt to arrive at some understanding of our subject. E. L. Mascall is Lecturer in Theology at Christ Church, Oxford and Priest of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd. On p. 161 he writes:—

"Christ unites our human nature to his, so that we may be able to offer his offering, or, rather, that he may be able to offer it through and in us. For, as we have seen, it is not a mere metaphor, but the literal truth, that the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ has only one body, that which he took from his mother the Virgin Mary, but that Body exists under various modes. As a natural Body it was seen on earth, hung on the cross, rose in glory on the first Easter Day, and was taken up into heaven in the Ascension; as a mystical Body it appeared on earth on the first Whitsunday and we know it as the Holy Catholic Church; as a sacramental Body it becomes present on our altars at every Eucharist when, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, and the priestly act of Christ, bread and wine are transformed into, and made one with, the glorified Body which is in heaven."

There you see the Holy Spirit is that power which transforms bread and wine into the Body and blood of Christ and there, too, a place is found for the priest, since the priest upon the altar is the one who specially performs the priestly act of Christ. Let us put by the side of that High Anglican doctrine our own faith and practice. We gather around the Lord's Table; we do so at

His command and by His invitation. With us the concept of sacrifice is almost entirely absent. Yet with us it is more than a memorial feast because we believe that Christ, in the Spirit, is present. But Christ in the Spirit is present, not by virtue of any act performed, nor because of any specific words used, nor again by the presence of any specific order of men, but simply by faith and by faith alone. Yet, being present, the Holy Spirit is there to help, to strengthen and to bless the worshipper. In precisely the same way the Holy Spirit is present in the worship of the Church, in the reading of the Word and in the proclamation of the Gospel. Therefore, with us the Holy Spirit's presence is due, not to the specifically sacramental act, but to the mere fact that believers are gathered together. When believers worship in spirit and in truth then the Spirit is there present. The stress is here on believers whereas in Fr. Hebert's book *The Form of the Church* the stress is on a regular ministry duly qualified to celebrate the sacraments of the Church and who by their very regularity guarantee the presence of the Spirit. No one would doubt Fr. Hebert's manifest sincerity, but what are we to say about a passage like the following?—

"Above all, a society which has for the centre of its faith the real existence of an invisible spiritual King, to whom the allegiance of all men is due, must certainly have an order of Ministers to act in His name—not to administer a religious system on behalf of an absentee ruler who has deputed all power to them, but to make real to men the present authority of a living and reigning King; not to exalt itself by claiming dominion for itself over men's consciences, but to proclaim and make effectual His dominion, to speak His words, to announce His pardon, to bring to men His gifts. That human nature should ever be able to discharge such a responsibility must be called flatly impossible, apart from the presence with it of the Spirit of God, to strengthen its weakness, to restrain its waywardness, and to enable it to do the one thing that of itself it cannot do, namely to renounce the self. Hence we read that at the inauguration of this Ministry He breathed on the Apostles and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost"; and this is still the formula of ordination. The contrast that certain scholars sought to draw fifty years ago between an official and a charismatic Ministry in the primitive Church was radically false. The official Ministry is charismatic; every function of it presupposes the presence of a Divine Spirit acting through human weakness. When there is guilty failure on the part of ecclesiastics, the fact remains that that to which they have been called is a ministry of the Spirit; the severest condemnation of a worldly priest is that he should be reminded of what he is."

From this it is evident the whole weight is placed upon the official ministry and that the writer is really more concerned with asserting that ministry than with showing how the Holy Spirit operates within and through the sacraments of the Church served by that ministry. Now the idea of the Church is best seen in her view of the sacraments and, in regard to the Lord's Supper, our Baptist

faith and practice leaves no doubt as to what we think about the Church and as to where we place the emphasis. We regard the Church as composed of believers, and we believe that whenever the Church is met the Holy Spirit is present to guide, to help and to bless. That the Holy Spirit is specially present at the Lord's Supper is due to the *meaning* of that Sacrament and to the fact that when we meet around the Table we renew that New Covenant which our Lord instituted in the Upper Room. Without the presence and power of the Spirit the sacrament would be of no value at all, but we regard the presence and power of the Spirit to be guaranteed by the promise of Christ, a promise made to all believers and which is fulfilled whenever and wherever two or three are met in His name.

We may have appeared to labour this point, but have done so because we wish to draw attention to a fact which seems to have escaped those who discuss the problem of the Apostolic Succession. That doctrine is usually regarded as a claim, on the part of those who hold it, to transmit either the true teaching of the Church or the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. In actual practice it is really a claim to transmit the Spirit, since for any valid celebration of the sacrament the duly ordained priest is an absolute necessity. The Holy Spirit, according to this theory, operates in the sacrament by virtue of the duly ordained priest who officiates. In contrast with this we hold that the Holy Spirit is present by virtue of the presence of believers and we hold this truth on the basis of the evidence of the New Testament.

But this does not mean that we deny that the sacraments mediate the Spirit. We hold that they do. Just as the prophets of Israel used what has been described as "prophetic symbolism" in the proclamation of their message so the sacraments are acted parables whereby we are brought nearer to Christ, and therefore brought nearer to the power of His Spirit. In this life we have no experience of disembodied spirit or pure spirit; our body is a real element in personality, and while we remain in this condition outward symbols will play their part in our spiritual experience. The symbols of bread and wine were regarded as necessary by our Lord and they are necessary for His followers. The Holy Spirit works in and through the sacraments, but we refuse to limit in any way whatever the Spirit's sphere of action. It is one thing to say that the Holy Spirit is specially present in the sacrament and quite another thing to hold that only in the sacraments do we realise the power of the Spirit.

So far we have thought of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. How about the sacrament of Baptism? As Baptists we have often been criticised here by those who think that we stress far too much the physical element of water and neglect

that baptism of the Spirit about which the New Testament speaks so frequently. Actually, we do not in any way minimise that baptism of the Spirit, and we hold that Baptism with water only is of no avail. Believer's Baptism pre-supposes an action of the Spirit which must be prior to the sacrament of Baptism itself. For how can anyone believe in the Lordship of Christ without the Holy Spirit's aid? That Baptism of itself confers the Holy Spirit we do not hold. The New Testament affords us no warrant for any such assumption. But we do know by experience that those who pass through the waters of baptism thereby receive a fresh experience of the grace of the Lord Jesus mediated to them by the Spirit. Without such a belief and without such an experience the sacrament would be without meaning and purpose.

The problem of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments can be resolved if and when we realise that from the Christian point of view life itself is sacramental and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are special experiences of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is operative throughout the whole of Christian experience. Baptism is the outward symbol of being born into Christ, and the Lord's Supper is the divinely and appointed means of the continuance of Christian fellowship life. Canon Raven in *The Creator Spirit* writes:—

“One of the greatest obstacles in the path of religion is due to the age-long habit of consecrating special times and places by secularising everything else. All of us who minister in sacred things are liable half-unconsciously to do so. Unless I can see that we only build churches in order to realise that every home and shop and factory is a house of God, that we celebrate the Sacraments to become sensitive to the spiritual value of the universe and of its every particular aspect and activity, that we say our prayers and read our Bibles to make the whole of our lives a communion with the Spirit, than almost I could feel that churches and means of grace are defeating their own ends. Let there be no confusion here, for the matter is vital, and it is hard not to believe that over it there exists a fundamental cleavage of Christian opinion. Is there, or is there not, a radical disparity between the supernatural and the natural. Are Church and State not merely separable in function, but eternally diverse and mutually exclusive? Are the ordinances of religion the richest activities of common life, or do they belong to another order of reality? Those are the questions upon which there is obvious uncertainty and possibly sharp division. And they, not the trivial problems of sectarianism, raise the true issue of the time.”

At the time when Canon Raven was writing those words one of the great minds of the Free Church was at work upon his greatest book, and eventually John Oman published his *Natural and Supernatural*. The whole purpose of that work was to show that the Natural and the Supernatural are not two worlds, sharply divided, the one from the other, but that they are one universe, through which the Spirit of God works. Oman writes: “The

awareness of the reality of the Supernatural is not something added to the sense of the Holy and the judgment of the sacred by some kind of argument, say from the natural world. Where they are divorced, religion is identified with theology, and theology hung in the air without any word of its own to work in; and the reality is sought in the theology, instead of theology, being, like other sciences, the study of a reality already given. The Supernatural must be enquired into, like the Natural, as a world in which we live and move and have our being, if it is to be enquired into with profit." It is in the context of this truth that we must come to see the relationship between the sacraments and the Holy Spirit. In that context the sacraments are seen as special means whereby the Spirit enters into our human experience; they are of special value only as we approach them in the right mind and heart, and the presence of Christ in the Spirit is to be found, as Hooker long ago said, not in the bread and wine, but in the devout receiver of the same. God is able and God does, through the Spirit, touch life at all points. The whole universe of God is filled with the Spirit of God, and it is in the sacraments of the Church that the believer comes to feel the full impact of that Holy Spirit of God which is, none the less, by no means confined to the sacraments. For a worthy celebration of the sacraments only one requirement is necessary, and that one requirement is faith. Where faith is present there is the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the believer approaches the sacrament of Baptism with full assurance that he will receive the Holy Spirit and he comes to the Lord's Table with a faith which through experience has become stronger and is still and always will be in a state of growth. To such growing faith the Holy Spirit responds and the promise of Christ is realised.

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Freedom in Action, by Peter R. Ackroyd. (Independent Press, 3s. 6d.)

This series of studies in the *Acts* was originally delivered in lecture form to the Bishop's Stortford Free Church Federal Council. The author has not set out to write another commentary but, in drawing attention to the main outlines and showing the significance of some outstanding incidents, has provided a useful introduction. Careful study has gone into this readable, popular presentation. It would be useful for study-group purposes.

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