

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

THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE.

BY THE VEN. ARCHDEACON DAVIES, M.A., Principal of Moore Theological College, Sydney.

I.—WHAT IS MEANT BY THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE?

IN simple language the Sacramental Principle may be stated thus :—God uses material means in fulfilling His spiritual purposes. Man may not live by bread alone, but bread, and all that is implied by bread, material means of subsistence, does play a great part in maintaining vital activity. Mind is greater than matter, and controls it, but mind works through matter. The brain does not create thought, but it is the organ of mind.

There is great risk in using ordinary terms of speech, mis-called "simple" speech, rather than technical terms, in handling such a question as the sacramental principle. The risk is illustrated by the false antithesis that is so often drawn between "material" and "spiritual." Nevertheless the use of plain speech brings one into more direct touch with the foundations of the subject, and this paper has a practical end in view. The questions are intensely alive and practical. Their interest and importance are as wide as Christianity itself. They are not merely academic or ecclesiastical, or even partisan, though they differentiate parties.

The object of this paper is to get at a working basis for definite teaching as to the place and function of the Sacraments in organised Christianity, in public worship, and in personal conduct. A subtitle of this paper might well be "The Sacraments in the Christian Economy." "The Sacramental Principle" has been taken as the actual title because it is a widely current expression, and the ideas it suggests are used as the basis of very different systems of worship, doctrine and discipline. Briefly repeated, it is taken to mean that God uses material means in working out His spiritual purposes. From the other side it may be stated thus :—The "material" is but the outward expression and vehicle of the "spiritual."

The Sacramental Principle is a great truth, as it combines in itself the transcendence and the immanence of God. It does call attention to the fact that spiritual processes are at work in the material world, that the visible order of the universe is the expression of the

invisible Reality behind all things, that God is *in* the world as well as *over* the world, and that He does give gifts to men.

1. *The philosophical basis* of the Sacramental Principle is the unity of all life, of all things, spiritual monism, we might say, as against popular dualism on the one hand, and a materialistic monism on the other hand. The scope of this paper forbids more than this bare reference to a most important aspect of the subject.

2. *The Spiritual significance* of the Sacramental principle has already been indicated briefly. The word "spiritual" connotes meaning, purpose, personality. The Sacramental Principle asserts that the universe is not a closed mechanical automatism, but that what we call natural processes are full of meaning, are informed and directed with purpose, are really the personal working of the personal God who is over all, through all and in all things.

3. Herein lies its *practical religious* value. The external world becomes a help rather than a hindrance to the knowledge of God. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." The water of baptism speaks of the cleansing, renewing personal touch of God. The Holy Communion is the symbol, pledge and seal of God's sustaining, sanctifying grace, feeding and strengthening our souls. Nay, more, the Sacramental Principle, when applied to the daily experiences of life, transforms them into occasions and means of getting into touch with God. The Bible becomes the sacrament of revelation, preaching becomes the sacrament of the living message as wrought out in experience, "truth, through personality." The pastoral functions of the ministry, the word fitly spoken, the sympathy feelingly expressed, the warning sincerely uttered, the direction and advice wisely tendered, the personal influence discreetly applied, all take on a sacramental significance and become ways and means whereby God speaks and works through man upon man. Then, too,

"The trivial round, the common task,
Will furnish all we need to ask,
Room to deny ourselves, a road
To lead us daily nearer God."

The whole of life becomes instinct with sacramental meaning, and the presence of God in power becomes a fully realised fact, every experience adding its quota of assurance. Thus the Sacramental Principle is in line with the best philosophical thought of the age,

invests the whole of life with spiritual significance, and helps to give the religious interest its rightful pride of place in the daily round of life.

II.—THE PLACE OF SACRAMENTS IN WORSHIP AND LIFE.

Hence the Sacraments have always held a high position in the public ministrations of organised Christianity. Though there are Christian bodies that apparently neglect the institutions generally recognised as Sacraments, they form a very small minority and have shown no power of self-propagation to any extent. The largest and strongest churches are those that set a high value upon the Sacraments, not only in public worship, but in personal life. There have been men and women who have manifested a high level of Christian life and character without any apparent assistance from Sacraments, but such are few, very few, and history seems to show that among the many the neglect of the Sacraments is at least coincident with a low level of spiritual vitality, and that where the Sacraments are duly honoured and used spiritual vitality is stimulated and sustained. And even among the few who apparently neglect the recognised sacraments, the sacramental principle may be seen at work though not consciously realised and applied.

III.—WHAT INSTITUTIONS, THEN, MAY BE REGARDED AS SACRAMENTS ?

If the Sacramental Principle is universal, there can be no fixed limit to the number of sacraments, in theory at least. But, as a matter of history, the term sacrament has been limited to certain institutions, though almost every form of experience has, in practice, at one time or another, been found capable of bearing a sacramental significance.

Still, the principle of limitation has to be brought in if the Sacramental Principle is to receive its proper recognition, and we have now to decide how this limitation is to be applied.

Two illustrations will bring out the meaning of this principle of limitation. (1) While it is true that every day should be regarded as holy unto God, the principle that God has a claim upon our time is best asserted and recognised by setting apart one day in seven as pre-eminently the Lord's Day. (2) Again, while we should pray without ceasing, we are more likely to form the habit and maintain

the attitude of prayer if we set apart regular times for that spiritual exercise. What may be done at any time is never done at all unless times are fixed for doing it.

So, too, while every outward act may in its turn become an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace, the fact that everything may be sacred to God is best safeguarded by definitely fixing upon certain acts and investing them with sacramental significance. The Sacramental Principle, therefore, is best safeguarded by applying to it the principle of limitation in its modes of expression. Certain acts must be marked out as specially significant, and must be reserved for that significance. The real question arises when we ask who or what has the authority so to mark them out. The Church Catechism supplies the answer in its definition of a sacrament as "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."

Two institutions answer to this definitely, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but as a matter of fact we find five other institutions, "commonly called Sacraments" (Article XXV), namely, Orders, Confirmation, Penance, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction. The two former are sometimes described as the greater, the five latter as the lesser, sacraments. Another way of stating the distinction is to say that the Holy Communion and Baptism are sacraments of the Gospel, whereas the others are sacraments of the Church. But there is a large body of Christians who include the seven as sacraments of the Church.

IV.—THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEW OF THE SACRAMENTS.

If the Sacramental Principle is of such universal validity, and if the sacraments are so necessary to vital Christianity, we may reasonably expect to find in the New Testament some definite guidance and authority for deciding what constitutes a sacrament. There are scholars who deny that there is any specific direction in the N.T. as to the observation and ministration of the Sacraments, and who regard the Sacraments as institutions that grew up under influences which may be seen at work in the N.T., but which are not peculiarly Christian. Most Christians trace the institution of the Sacraments to the direct command of Christ, but these scholars deny any such command, and ascribe the growth of the sacramental system partly

(1) to ideas and tendencies at work in the pagan environment of the early Church, partly (2) to the need of strengthening the organisation and discipline of the Church, and partly (3) to the influence of ideas carried over from the Old Testament. Some of these scholars accept the validity of the Sacramental Principle, while others assert that the growth of the sacramental system was a departure from the simplicity of the original Gospel of Jesus Christ, was a hindrance to its spiritual efficiency, and is an illustration of the tendency of vital religion to harden and crystallise into a mechanical formalism. Others, again, have regarded the development of sacraments as a legitimate adaptation of methods to circumstances.

But the main question at present before us is whether what we regard as sacraments are to be found at all in the N.T., or whether they are based upon the specific direction of Our Lord. The great majority of Christians have always regarded the sacraments of the Gospel as instituted by Christ Himself.

1. *Baptism* is enjoined in Matthew xxviii. 19. Whatever doubt may be cast upon this text by scholars, they would still have to explain Peter's action on the Day of Pentecost when three thousand were baptised (Acts ii. 41). The other instances of baptism are familiar, at Samaria (Acts viii. 12), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts viii. 38, 39), Cornelius (Acts x. 47), Paul's actions at Philippi (Acts xvi. 33), and Ephesus (Acts xix. 1-5), and his statement in 1 Corinthians i. 13-16, must be placed alongside his rhetorical declaration in 1 Corinthians i. 17, which simply meant that the first work of the apostle, and indeed of any minister of the Gospel, is to proclaim the Gospel. The sacraments follow the Word and pre-suppose its proclamation and acceptance. But they follow as a matter of course, not only baptism, but the breaking of bread, as the Pentecostal story indicates.

2. The institution of *the Lord's Supper* is traced to our Lord's words, "This do in remembrance of Me," as recorded by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians xi. 24, 26. The evangelists do not record these exact words. St. Luke has them in the Textus Receptus, but their presence in his gospel is not attested by sufficient evidence, and in any case he, being Paul's companion, merely repeats Paul's testimony. But a careful examination of the passage in 1 Corinthians shows that Paul records the words of our Lord with the strongest assertion of their genuine authority, and under the fullest sense of personal

responsibility (1 Cor. xi. 23). Christians at Corinth had disgraced their worship. Paul provokes them to shame by reminding them of what he had taught them, recalling the very actions and words of the Lord at the Last Supper. To the words already quoted Paul traces the origin and purpose of the Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. The words "This do in remembrance of Me," as uttered by our Lord plainly point to a future observance of the rite He was then performing. They are as definite an act of institution as if our Lord had uttered an instituting formula. At any rate the disciples knew Him after the resurrection in the "breaking of bread" (Luke xxiv. 30, 31), and the breaking of bread was performed immediately after the Day of Pentecost, if not on the very day itself (Acts ii. 42, 46). Besides the Pentecostal story we have references to the Holy Communion in Acts xx. 11 and in 1 Corinthians x. However, the Holy Communion is not mentioned in the N.T. as often as Baptism, mainly because the N.T. records only the beginnings of organised Christianity, and baptism is the sacrament of initiation. Still, *both* sacraments are mentioned, and their matter and form described, though the term "Sacrament" is not actually used, nor is its Greek equivalent—if there is one in the New Testament.

DAVID J. DAVIES.

(To be concluded.)

