

THE SACRAMENTAL PRINCIPLE.

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II.

SUMMING up the New Testament evidence on the Sacraments, three conclusions seem inevitable :—

1. Two Sacraments, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, were instituted by Christ.

2. They were practised at once by the earliest Christians as distinctive Christian rites (Acts ii. 41, 42, 46).

They are linked to the New Covenant as its signs and seals, corresponding with the relation of circumcision and the passover to the Old Covenant.

Baptism is nowhere linked with the actual word "covenant," but it is frequently mentioned in close association with the terms of the New Covenant as in Acts ii. 38. The Holy Communion is definitely linked with the Christian covenant in the account given by all three synoptists, and some alternative readings describe it as the "New" Covenant. It has been suggested (Wright, *Synopsis of the Gospels in Greek*), that the Eucharist was no new ceremony on the night of the Last Supper. At the miracles of feeding the multitudes our Lord introduced a custom of breaking the loaves before distribution, whereas the ordinary practice was for the breaking to be performed by the partaker as the loaf went round. It may have been this personal trait that opened the eyes of the disciples at Emmaus (Luke xxiv. 30, 31). The Last Supper was the occasion when a deeper meaning was attached to the ceremony by our Lord Himself, and it became a permanent institution of organized Christianity.

These three positive points, then, emerge in the New Testament :—

1. The two Sacraments of the Gospel were instituted by Christ Himself.

2. They were practised at once by Christians as soon as the Church began at Pentecost.

3. The two Sacraments thus instituted and practised were signs and seals of the New Covenant.

To these may be added as negative points :—

4. No theory of the Sacraments is formulated in the New Testament, they are simply instituted and practised.

5. Their administration is not definitely limited to any class, or group, or set of officials in the Church, though the apostles naturally take the lead.

6. They are not in any sense magical rites. The gift of the Holy Spirit is closely associated with baptism. Yet the baptism of Cornelius (Acts x.) followed the bestowal of the spiritual gift, while Simon Magus was duly baptized but did not receive the gift. The New Testament gives no ground for any *ex opere operato* theory of the Sacraments.

7. There is no evidence in the New Testament that the Sacraments owe anything to the heathen "mysteries" as the source of their suggestion, though the "mysteries" may have affected, and probably did affect, the later developments of Sacramental theory and ritual.

8. The Sacraments are never placed before the preaching of the Word, they always follow it. It is those who receive the Word who are admitted to the Sacraments.

9. The Sacraments are never made the basis of salvation. Salvation comes to man as the free gift of God, through the finished work of Christ, to be personally appropriated by faith, by taking God at His Word. Repentance and faith are the conditions of salvation laid down in the New Testament. The Sacraments follow as signs and seals of the covenanted blessings. They are means of grace because they are means of assurance. They are personal transactions, not mechanical contrivances. Theoretically they are not necessary, but practically they are inevitable and yield a test of loyalty in members of the Church.

The limits of this paper and the wide scope of the subject have compelled the writer to be somewhat dogmatic, but the statements have been put into that form for the sake of clearness as well as brevity. What has been stated has been strictly confined to plain and legitimate inferences from the New Testament as the one standard of what is necessary to salvation. If the sacraments are what a persistent propaganda in our Church claim to make them, then the New Testament is no longer the final authority, for it gives them no such position as is claimed. The development of sacramentalism can be clearly traced in Church history. What is adver-

tised as "Catholic teaching" on the sacraments is the product, not of New Testament study, but of the neglect of the New Testament in those dark ages of medieval barbarism over which a false romantic glamour has been cast, but whose real grim history is largely unprintable. When and where the open Bible was placed freely before the people, medieval sacramentalism mostly disappeared in the new won light of recovered revelation. To this day, and always, the plain teaching of the New Testament is the best answer to pseudo-Catholic assertions. The New Testament is sufficiently clear upon the origin and value of the Sacraments of the Gospel, setting them forth as organic expressions of personal religion, individual and corporate, rather than as exclusive functions of a mechanical system.

V.—THE TRUE BASIS OF THE SACRAMENTS—PRECEPT OR PRINCIPLE ?

The two conclusions reached so far are :—

1. The Sacraments of the Gospel are derived from the personal institution of them by Jesus Christ. Their sufficient basis is the Lord's example and precept as recorded in the New Testament.
2. The Sacramental Principle states a great truth, but is of itself an insufficient basis for determining the number and value of Sacramental ordinances.

The first point has already been explained, but the second point calls for further explanation as it raises the deepest issue of religion, namely, what is the final authority in belief and conduct ?

The truth of the Sacramental Principle has already been recognized in the earlier part of this paper, together with the need of applying, in practice, the principle of limitation. The question now arises, who or what is to set the limit, and where is the line of limitation to be drawn ? If religion is to be entirely based on a *priori* intuitions or abstract principles, who or what is to decide on the validity of the intuitions and principles ? Which intuitions are to be accepted, and which rejected ? How are conflicting principles to be reconciled in practical application ? Is the Christian religion to be reduced to the evolution of intuitions or the elucidation of principles ? Or is it to be a life of personal loyalty to the Personal God made accessible through the Personal Saviour, and maintained and expanded through the Personal Spirit of God ? Is Christianity

to become merely the conforming to a code of casuistry coupled with assent to a system of dogma? The Pauline battle between law and grace is not yet over, but revives again and again as personal religion freezes into formalism.

Now the Sacramental Principle, while it states a universal truth, and thus has immense philosophical and religious value, does not of itself explain the unique power of the two Sacraments of the Christian Gospel, for it degrades them to merely particular instances of universal fact. Of course this aspect of the two Sacraments is vastly important as sanctifying common life and vindicating the universal presence of God in power to bless men. But to dwell exclusively on the Sacramental Principle as the basis of the Sacraments of the Gospel is to reduce them to the level of other religious ordinances of the Church, and to make them the Sacraments of the Church rather than of the Gospel. For if everything may be sacramental, then, in practice, unless the principle of limitation is applied, nothing is distinctively sacramental unless it is definitely recognized as such. This recognition is the function of an authority which itself can claim recognition. The Church has this authority, and accordingly sacraments came to be regarded as institutions of the Church, so that the only limit to their number was the limit set by the Church. This is what has actually happened in history. The two Sacraments of the Gospel were added to until they became the seven Sacraments of the Church—a long process, as marriage became a sacrament only in the thirteenth century. The only reason why the number was limited to seven is that the Church said so. Thus it came to pass that the professed sacramentalists, for all their talk, degraded the sacraments into mechanical operations ordered by the Church rather than spiritual ordinances given by God to man. The *ex opere operato* view follows closely in the wake of the unduly asserted Sacramental Principle.

Hence the Church, in order to indicate the supreme importance of the Sacraments, has to distinguish them by an elaborate and significant ritual, has to rely on all possible external aids of pomp and circumstance which made the "Mass" a painful contrast with the severe simplicity of the Original Last Supper.

An elaborate ritual and impressive organization of external adjuncts are necessary if the Sacraments are chiefly institutions of the Church. But such spectacular displays are not at all necessary

if we regard as Sacraments only those ordinances which have as their authority the direct personal command of Jesus Christ. This is one reason why our present Holy Communion office is so much superior to the "Mass," and to the proposed alterations which would bring it back nearer to the "Mass." The Holy Communion office in the Book of Common Prayer is a much better representative of the Sacrament as our Lord instituted it and as the primitive Church of the Apostolic age practised it.

The undue assertion of the Sacramental Principle, as already shown, magnifies the authority of the Church at the expense of the personal authority of the personal Saviour of men, Jesus Christ. For the final authority of the Gospel is the authority of the Lord Who gave that Gospel, and when we go back to the only written records we have of His life we find that He instituted two Sacraments. He did *not* state the Sacramental Principle and then select two particular instances. The Sacraments of the Gospel derive their authority, not from an abstract principle, interpreted and applied by an external organization, but from the command of a Divine Person. He told His disciples to baptize and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. They were to baptize in His Name, and to eat and drink the bread and wine in personal remembrance of Him. The Sacraments of the Gospel are essentially personal in their institution, and in their fulfilment. Our Lord did not commission His Church to institute Sacraments. He instituted them Himself. The two Sacraments He instituted were directly personal to Himself, and were His gifts to His Church. Accordingly they are part of the trust of the Church. No other alleged Sacraments can claim this position.

Furthermore, the Sacraments of the Gospel are sacraments of the New Covenant. Our Lord definitely linked them with it. Baptism was linked with the proclamation of the New Covenant, the Holy Communion was instituted as its perpetual sign and seal and pledge to those who had accepted and obeyed the proclamation. No other alleged sacraments are thus definitely attached to the New Covenant, at any rate not in the New Testament, which is the documentary basis of the Christian Faith.

Most sacramentalists draw a distinction between the two greater and the five lesser Sacraments, but it is surely more scientific, because more in line with the facts, to draw an absolutely clear and sharp distinction between the ordinances instituted by Christ

Himself as part of the New Covenant, and those practices and customs, however useful and even sacred and necessary, which have grown up in another way, possess other sanctions, and which do not serve the same purpose nor show the same direct connexion with the Church's Commission from her Lord to preach the gospel. Christ is the personal centre of the Gospel, and surely we ought to reserve the term "Sacrament" specifically and solely for the two institutions which have come to us direct from that Personal Centre. We ought to find another term for institutions and ordinances which have other sanctions, and come to us with a much less direct authority.

It will be found as a matter of history that where the value of the Sacraments has been deduced mainly from the Sacramental Principle, the human side of religion has been over-emphasized, the needs of man have been set above the claims and the glory of God, and religion has become man-centred, and therefore a man-organized thing, until the Church has taken the place of God as the object of devotion and even of worship, and a church system has usurped the direct personal communication between man and God.

The Sacramental Principle is a great truth, but it is not the only truth. The worst heresies have been evolved from isolated and overworked general principles. The Sacramental Principle, when over-stressed, creates the danger its enunciation was meant to avoid, by materializing the spiritual to such an extent that the visible becomes more real than the invisible, and the spiritual is finally identified with the material. Thus the road is made open to sheer idolatry, and the less instructed multitude readily take it. Sacramentalists are notoriously materialistic in their views of the sacraments, as seen in their ritual and cult developments, their liturgical experiments, and their popular teaching. The emphasis on the Sacramental Principle, by concentrating attention on the outward thing, is really an invasion of religion by naturalism which tries to justify itself by a weak infusion of idealism. In order to assert itself the Sacramental Principle has to advertise itself by an elaborate and gorgeous ritual with all the resources of symbolism, that marvellous art by which anything may mean anything. The Two Sacraments of the New Covenant do not need such advertisement, as they derive their appeal from the Lord's command. It is by regarding the sacraments as rites of the New Covenant in Christ

that we get a more truly objective value set upon them, while avoiding the *ex opere operato* cultus which is so closely akin to the mechanical view of nature. The use of the Sacraments as mechanical operations encourages a passive attitude towards religion, whereas the personal valuation of them, as spiritual ordinances given us by Christ, ascribes to God His due, and yet brings home to man his personal responsibility towards God and his neighbour.

People do not really want "magic," but rather the personal touch of Almighty God. The Sacramental Principle, if taken as the basis of sacramental valuation, imports into the sacraments the idea of natural law, which tends to destroy the personal touch. Yet the Sacramental Principle, when kept in its place, does convey a truth that is directly relevant to the general practical value of the sacraments, though not directly relevant to their unique value in the Christian religion. This unique value is best realized by their vital connexion with the New Covenant. A sacrament based on a law of nature is a discovery of man rather than a gift of God. In no sense is the New Covenant a discovery of man. It is entirely and freely the gift of God to man. The two Sacraments of the New Testament are means of grace by the fact and method of their institution, for they are gifts bestowed as pledges of grace, that is, of the personal free favour of God towards us. *For grace is no impersonal influence, but the actual personal presence in power of God Himself.* The Sacraments are means of grace also because they are gifts of God, and gifts confirm friendship and increase it. They are the unique means for putting us in touch with the fact of God, not by magic, but by faith, that is, by personal response to, and appropriation of, the gift of God offered freely to us. The Sacraments follow the Word, as in the Pentecostal history. They are the visible signs and seals of the grace proclaimed and given in and through the Word, and they themselves are means of grace when faithfully received.

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