

The Place of Sacraments

BY THE REV. A. M. STIBBS, M.A.

SACRAMENTS are essentially an expression of relations between people. They are a form of personal communication, of giving and receiving. They involve the use of material things and physical actions as outward and visible signs of personal intention, donation and reception. They afford assurance; providing seals to guarantee and confirm words of promise. They facilitate conveyance; because the visible handling of, and symbolic action with, deliberately chosen elements or material things provides a formal means between people both of handing over and of taking possession. So, rightly used, they complement words of promise and profession, providing actions in which the parties concerned participate, which are a symbolic expression of the performance or fulfilment of the giving or responding which is verbally indicated by the words of promise and profession.

The full place and highest use of sacraments in connection with the Gospel of Christ cannot be appreciated without some preliminary recollection of the nature and destiny of man, and of the primary and final place in human experience of man's relation to God Himself. Man has been made by God, in God's image and for God's company; his chief end is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." As indispensable to this high calling man is a rational and morally responsible creature—a being to whom God can speak in words, a being capable of understanding the meaning of such words, and a being who by his own free choice and obedience, and in co-operation with his fellows, can and ought to respond to God and find his constant delight in doing God's will.

These truths about man's nature and destiny inevitably give outstanding importance to words. For words, as our own experience of life continually evidences, are essential to communication and co-operation between persons. The words of first importance are the words of God to men which tell man what he ought to do, and how rightly to use his freedom to act. It is very significant therefore that when our Lord was tempted as Man to act wrongly He quoted, as His reason for not so acting, words which express the governing principle of right human living; namely, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."¹ Only if he can be sure of God's words, that they are true and trustworthy in the guidance they give, and only if he devotes himself to act accordingly, can man live rightly.

Further, God's words are not all precepts telling man what he must do. Many of them are promises or warnings telling man what God will do. Such words cease to be of full value and true worth unless man can be sure that God is faithful, and will always keep His word and do what He says.

Again, in making response to the offers and demands of others,

¹ Matt. iv. 4: from Deut. viii. 3.

and most of all of God Himself, man is so made that, being spoken to in intelligible words, he answers first by giving his own words of assent and promise, and then by acting to fulfil all that such words imply. It is important therefore that in his use of words man also should be faithful, and should not say what he does not intend to do.

It is in this fundamental relation to God's words that man has failed and become a sinner. The record of Genesis, chapter three, makes it abundantly plain that things first went wrong in human life when man disobeyed God's word. Such action, to say no more, immediately cast man's faithfulness into complete uncertainty. He could no longer be counted on to keep God's word. Also, as one who had broken faith, he could no longer be counted on to keep his own word. He became a liar and a deceiver, a person who often said things that he did not do.

I.

This fallen state of man as a sinner who has disobeyed God's words has thrown man's whole use of words into uncertainty. Since man is a person who does not keep his own word he finds it hard, if not impossible, to believe that other people will keep theirs. Likewise he looks at history and sees that it is strewn with broken promises. So man, the sinner, is with good reason a natural doubter and unbeliever. Yet men still go on making pacts and agreements because they are equally conscious that there can be no hope of peace and freedom from conflict in international affairs, nor can there be the necessary co-operation between individuals in social life and in all the wide variety of human affairs, unless men will pledge their word and then stand by it, so that others can trust both them and it, and not be taken unawares by underhand and deceitful dealing, or by failure to fulfil promises given.

For their reassurance, therefore, men have from the earliest times sought to have added to the bare words of another man some solemn sign or confirmatory pledge, which might be a special and more trustworthy witness of good faith; and so that they might be the more sure that in this particular case the words thus pledged could be trusted and their fulfilment confidently expected. So there grew up the practices of oath-taking and of covenant-making, many references to which can be found, for instance, in the Bible in the book of Genesis.

When men thus took an oath or sealed a covenant they commonly did one or both of two things. Either they swore by God, as by One greater, Who could deal with them in judgment if they failed to keep their word; or they swore by their own lives (possibly saying "upon my life," or dramatically drawing a knife across their throats, and such like), thereby indicating that they were prepared for their own lives to be taken if they failed to fulfil the undertaking thus solemnly pledged. These two methods of solemn pledging were combined in the ancient ritual of slaying animals, and passing, as one gave one's promise, between the divided pieces.¹ For violent death was thus visibly represented, and the person making the covenant probably

¹ See Jeremiah xxxiv. 18-20.

called upon God to treat him similarly, if he failed to keep his word. This possibly explains the underlying significance of the words, "The Lord do so to me and more also"—that is, if I fail to perform the intention or undertaking thus solemnly declared.¹

Such visible confirmations of verbal undertakings and such additional pledges of personal good faith are still required in acts of social contract. Men commonly require important statements to be made not only in words but upon oath, or in writing and duly signed and sealed. For instance, in the making of a marriage covenant the words of promise made by the two parties are visibly confirmed by the giving and receiving of a ring. This particular article—the ring—and what is done with it—the giving and receiving—are regarded as a token and pledge of the vow and covenant betwixt them made. Or, when property changes hands, the parties concerned get a lawyer to prepare a proper deed of conveyance. Only when this has been properly stamped, sealed and signed, is the transaction regarded as formally effected and legally confirmed. The deed then becomes tenable, and, if need arise, presentable to others, by the new landlord as formal proof of ownership.

Thus confirming signs and evidences of this kind obviously have an important social significance. They afford easily recognisable visible witness. They are valuable not just for their own sake but for what they indicate or imply. It is, for instance, by the ring on her finger that one knows that a woman is married. It is by drinking the loyal toast or by saluting the national flag that men openly profess their devotion to king and country.

Further, in their highest connection signs of this kind involve reference not only to one's fellow men but also to God; they have, that is, a religious significance. For instance, when men take an oath they commonly swear by Almighty God. This means that they appeal to the Supreme Being as One greater, calling upon Him to be the witness and the judge of their good faith.² It is now for God to see that they keep their word, and to deal with them if they fail. Their obligation is to Him; and so the assurance and the sanction that they give to others is in God's Name. Similarly in ancient times, when Jacob and Laban made a covenant together they set up a heap of stones in witness, they ate together a meal of fellowship, and they swore by the God of their fathers, saying, "The Lord watch between me and thee"; and "judge betwixt us."³

II.

This method of solemn confirmation used by men to assure their fellows of the trustworthiness of their word God Himself also has condescended to use. Not that in His case such assurances were necessary. For His word is always to be trusted. But, because men are slow to believe, and in order to help their faith, God has confirmed His word by an oath, thus giving us for our confidence a double ground of assurance,—two immutable things; first, His word, and

¹ See Ruth i. 17 : 1 Kings xix. 2 ; xx. 10 : 2 Kings vi. 31.

² See Heb. vi. 16.

³ See Gen. xxxi. 44-55.

second, His oath or covenant with its solemn pledges and visible seals.¹ So, after the flood, when God promised to Noah that there should not again be a similar flood to destroy the earth, God established a covenant, and appointed the bow in the cloud as a visible token of the covenant between Him and mankind.²

Such establishment of a covenant and the appointment of confirming seals was particularly used by God in connection with His special choice of Abram, and His promise of blessings to him and his descendants. For instance, when Abram wanted assurance, and asked concerning the land which God said was to be his, "Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" God gave Abram a visible and acted covenant pledge. He told Abram to slay animals and to divide the pieces as in covenant-making. Then, after dark, "Behold a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces." And we read that, "In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land."³

Later God went further and made a covenant with Abram to give him a child, to multiply his seed, and Himself to be their God, thus making them in a special way His people. As pledges of what God would do Abram's name was changed to Abraham, and Sarai's to Sarah, as a witness that they were together to be the father and mother of a multitude of nations.⁴ As a further continuing pledge, in which all male children were to share, God appointed circumcision as a token of the covenant between Himself and Abraham's seed. So every male child born into Abraham's family was at eight days old to have his body solemnly marked with a sign of covenant relation to God. Only those thus marked were to count as belonging to God's people.⁵

Some hundreds of years after in Egypt the promised descendants of Abraham, the Israelites, were solemnly constituted for the first time as the assembly of God's congregation, when they met in their houses under the shelter of the blood sprinkled on the doorposts, and feasted upon the flesh of the passover lamb. By participation in these acts they appropriated the promised redemption, and were visibly marked off as God's people. Moreover, this passover feast was to be solemnly observed year by year as a perpetual ordinance,—a thankful remembrance of the one great act of divine redemption by which they were saved from judgment in Egypt, and brought out to be separated unto God as His people.⁶ This relationship to Him as His peculiar people was further sealed at Sinai when Moses read the terms of the covenant, when the people assented to them, and when Moses sprinkled blood on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words."⁷

These things resulted in the practice of circumcision and the celebration of the passover becoming among the Israelites the recognised witnesses of their individual and corporate covenant relation to the God of Israel. One was the mark of membership in the people

¹ Heb. vi. 17, 18.

² See Gen. ix. 8-17.

³ See Gen. xv. 7-21.

⁴ Gen. xvii. 5, 15, 16.

⁵ See Gen. xvii. 1-14.

⁶ Exod. xii.

⁷ Exod. xxiv. 6-8.

of God, the other the evidence of continuing participation in the God-given privileges and blessings of being God's people. Also, as Paul makes plain in his exposition in the epistle to the Romans about Abraham,¹ it was not the act of circumcision which made Abraham the actual possessor of the God-given blessing. In his case, for instance, he was justified by simple faith in God and His word before he was circumcised. He was given circumcision afterwards as a visible seal of the fulfilment to him of God's word, a fulfilment which he had already appropriated by faith alone.

Similarly when Abraham's descendants were circumcised in infancy, the circumcision was simply a divinely-appointed seal guaranteeing God's promises as applying to them and available to be appropriated. But they could and did only enjoy the actual blessings, thus certified as theirs to possess, if they followed in the steps of Abraham's faith, and (when they became old enough so to act) themselves believed in God.

The possibility of radical difference between individuals alike circumcised in infancy in their subsequent personal response to the pledges of covenant grace is illustrated in the cases of Esau and Jacob. They were both circumcised in infancy. But Esau despised his birthright; and as a result he lost the corresponding blessing. Jacob regarded it as a prize to be coveted; and at Peniel he laid hold of the angel of the Lord to be blessed. "And he blessed him there."² So we see that while covenant signs and actions do pledge and seal the corresponding blessings as genuinely "given", these blessings can only be actually "received" and enjoyed by those who make the response of faith. "For," as Paul says, "circumcision indeed profiteth if thou be a doer of the law; but if thou be a transgressor of the law, thy circumcision is become uncircumcision. . . . For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men but of God."³

III.

Some such understanding as this of the seals and pledges of God's covenant with the Israelites seems essential to a proper appreciation of the corresponding seals and pledges of God's new covenant with men in Christ. For the two Sacraments of the Gospel, Baptism and Holy Communion, are seals of the new covenant; and in the life of God's new Israel they do directly supersede and take the place of Circumcision and the Passover feast under the old covenant.

Baptism, like Circumcision, is a visible mark of distinction put upon the body of the individual. It is a formal seal solemnly given in God's Name and under the hand of a minister acting in God's Name. It is a pledge or effectual sign both of donation and initiation. It is an adequate assurance to the individual who receives it that in Christ, and through His death and resurrection, forgiveness of sins and quickening into new life by God's Spirit are together given to

¹ See Rom. iv. 9-12.

² Rom. ii. 25, 28, 29.

³ Gen. xxxii. 24-30.

him on the simple conditions of repentance and faith ; and, assuming that these are present, it outwardly incorporates him into Christ as a member of God's people or Church, His true Israel.

Similarly Holy Communion, like the Jewish Passover, is a commemorative feast in which those who partake solemnly call to remembrance the one decisive act of dying for men on the Cross by which Christ secured their redemption. It is, therefore, a continually renewed thanksgiving or "Eucharist." Further, its symbols, and the accompanying words and deeds, challenge all who use them to realise that by His death Christ secured for His people benefits which, like food and drink, they are meant to appropriate for their own continual strengthening and renewal. Also, by His death He ratified the new covenant, which promises to all who share in its benefits the full remission or divine forgetting of sins, and the putting within each heart of God's own transforming Spirit of grace. Such are the benefits which all who eat this bread and drink this cup can rightly rejoice in and appropriate as theirs. These, too, are gifts to be received as from Christ's own hand, according to His own solemn testamentary disposition, and as sealed to His people by His own shed blood.

For it is, finally, Christ Himself who appointed these two covenant seals of Baptism and Holy Communion thus to be used by His believing people. They are, therefore, clearly meant to provide help and to be realised means of grace to every individual Christian, and to companies or congregations of Christians acting together. They are divinely ordained corporate acts by which believers in Christ first seal and then sustain their vital fellowship both with Christ, and in Him with one another.

IV.

Since this article is to introduce others in which attention will be concentrated on the Sacrament of Baptism, it seems appropriate for us in conclusion to consider still further the application to the administration of Baptism of the general principles already recognised, and particularly with reference to the familiar form of service appointed in the Book of Common Prayer. It is of fundamental importance to recognise that Christian Baptism is not something the candidate does to or for himself. Nor is it primarily a method whereby a convert to Christianity confesses his faith in Christ. Baptism is something done to the candidate by another, and something done in the Name of God. It visibly expresses not man's movement Godwards, but God's movement manwards in grace—to cleanse from sin and to quicken by the Spirit. It is a sure witness and an effectual sign of grace and of God's goodwill towards us (Article XXV).

Baptism is the initiatory rite of the new Covenant of the Gospel. Put simply it may be said to do three things : (1) to confirm the promises of God, (2) to confer a status, (3) to convey an inheritance. One may again compare a man's gift to a woman of a wedding ring. By this ring put on the bride's finger the bridegroom does three things : (1) he confirms and pledges his promises ; (2) he confers upon

the woman a status—as married, and married to him, while she consequently becomes known as a member of his family and is called by his name; (3) he conveys an inheritance; he formally makes her the fellow-sharer of his wealth, saying, “With all my worldly goods I thee endow.” With regard to Christian Baptism these same three ideas are all explicitly expressed in the statements of the Articles and the Prayer Book of the Church of England. (1) It confirms God’s promises; by it “the promises of forgiveness of sin and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost are visibly signed and sealed” (Article XXVII). (2) It confers a status. In it “I was made a member of Christ and the child of God” (Catechism). By it I was marked off as different from those not christened (Article XXVII), and given a Christian name (Catechism). By it I was “grafted into the Church” (Article XXVII), and “received into the congregation of Christ’s flock” (Baptism Service). (3) It conveys an inheritance. In it “I was made . . . an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven” (Catechism).

These blessings thus pledged in Baptism are offered to those who make a twofold response. This involves, on the negative side, an act of repentance and renunciation of sin, and on the positive side an act of faith and committal to God in Christ. So in the Catechism there is the question, “What is required of persons to be baptized?” and the answer, “Repentance, whereby they forsake sin; and faith, whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.” Further, in the Baptism service itself, it is only after a candidate has personally (or, in the case of an infant, by proxy) professed repentance, faith and obedience that he is baptized in the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and the minister makes the declaration, “this person is regenerate.” For Baptism witnesses to the Gospel of God-given salvation for sinful men, and to the simple essential conditions of benefit. Provided only that any individual is truly penitent and believing, the minister of the Gospel has authority to declare in the Name of God that such an individual is saved. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And what the Word of grace declares the covenant seal formally conveys to the person to whose body it is applied, thus confirming him, and other Christian believers who pray for him, in the assured possession of the divine gift of grace—that is, salvation. It is, therefore, for those who are baptized thereby to be assured, and on this account to believe and to confess that the full double gift of forgiveness and of the Spirit is theirs on the simple condition of personal repentance and faith. Such awareness, too, should move them to lifelong thanksgiving to God and unceasing devotion to His will.