

The Place and Purpose of the Sacraments¹

BY THE EDITOR

A SACRAMENT is defined in the Catechism of the Church of England 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". In brief, it is a sign, a means, and a pledge.

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A sacrament is a *sign* : that is, it is not intended as a mere empty ceremony or frivolous spectacle, for a sign is necessarily *significant*. Thus the outward symbols of the Christian sacraments point meaningfully beyond themselves to a deep spiritual reality. This in turn requires that there should be a certain similitude, a symbolical appropriateness, of the sign to the reality which it signifies—but not an identity, else it would not be a sign, but the reality itself. Accordingly Augustine declares that "if sacraments had not some point of real resemblance to the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all";² Archbishop Whitgift speaks of "the similitude which sacraments have with the things whereof they be sacraments";³ and Richard Hooker observes that "the inward grace of sacraments may teach what serveth best for their outward form".⁴ "When in baptism our bodies are washed with water, we are taught that our souls are washed in the blood of Christ," explains Bishop Jewel. "The outward washing or sprinkling represents the sprinkling and washing which is wrought within us : the water signifies the blood of Christ."⁵

The significance of the sign resides, however, not only in its symbolical appropriateness, but even more so in the words or doctrine with which its institution is associated. Thus Augustine (so frequently quoted by our Reformers) writes : "The word is added to the element and there results the sacrament, as if itself also a kind of *visible* word";⁶ and, on another occasion : "Material symbols are nothing else than visible speech."⁷ As William Tyndale remarks, "the sacrament doth much more vehemently print lively the faith, and make it sink down in the heart, than do bare words only : as a man is more sure of that he heareth, seeth, feeleth, smelleth, and tasteth, than that he heareth only".⁸

This word which, audible in preaching, becomes visible in the sacrament, is essentially the word of the Gospel. It is the word of Christ, or about Christ, who Himself is the Incarnate Word of God. The authority of a Christian sacrament is the authority of Christ Himself, who by adding His word to the element, transformed it into a sacrament. "It was of necessity," says Hooker, "that the words of express declaration taken from the very mouth of our Lord Himself should be added unto visible elements, that the one might infallibly teach what the other do most assuredly bring to pass."⁹ Therefore

those only are properly Christian sacraments which are sacraments of the Gospel, instituted by Christ Himself, or, as Article XXV puts it, "ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel".¹⁰

The number of the sacraments is by this definition limited to two, namely, Baptism and the Holy Communion, and this delimitation is in harmony with the mind of the Church since the earliest centuries. Of course, by broadening the definition it is possible to increase the number of the sacraments, even to the extent of viewing the entire universe as full of sacramental significance. The number of seven sacraments on which the Roman Church now insists can claim no greater antiquity than the twelfth century and, notwithstanding the fulminations of the Council of Trent,¹¹ has rightly been rejected by the Protestant Churches. The comment of Bishop Andrewes is to the point: "For more than a thousand years the number of seven sacraments was never heard of. How, then, can the belief in seven sacraments be catholic, which means, always believed?"¹² "We acknowledge there be two sacraments," writes Bishop Jewel, "which, we judge, properly ought to be called by this name; that is to say, baptism and the sacrament of thanksgiving. For thus many we see were delivered and sanctified by Christ, and well allowed of the old fathers."¹³ And in his *Treatise of the Sacraments*, after quoting from Ambrose and Augustine, he says: "Thus Augustine and Ambrose, unto whom I might also join other ancient fathers, reckon but two sacraments. Let no man then be offended with us for so doing: we do no new thing, but restore the ordinance of Christ, and keep the example of the holy fathers." Baptism and the Lord's Supper are "properly and truly called the sacraments of the church, because in them the element is joined to the word, and they take their ordinance of Christ, and be visible signs of invisible grace".¹⁴

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A Christian sacrament is also a *means*. In other words, the sacraments of the Gospel, in their capacity as signs, are not *bare* signs. They are "effectual signs of grace and God's good will towards us, by the which He doth work invisibly in us".¹⁵ But their efficacy is not automatic (*ex opere operato*); for the external sign by itself is impotent to produce any spiritual effect. Water cannot cleanse, nor bread and wine nourish, the soul. The efficacy of a sacrament is indissolubly linked to the word of promise of which it is the sign—not, however, to the word as a mere pronouncement of a formula of consecration, but to the word as a proclamation of the Gospel to those who receive the sacrament. That is to say, the sacraments, to be effective, must be addressed, word-wise to men and women as to intelligent, responsible, and needy persons of whom it is required that they should inwardly believe the word thus proclaimed to them. "Whence," demands Augustine, "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?*"¹⁶ Again, referring to our Lord's words concerning "the meat which endures unto eternal life", he says: "To what purpose do you make ready teeth and stomach? Believe, and you have eaten already."¹⁷ And, again, he explains that

to eat of the bread that comes down from heaven (John vi. 50) " belongs to the virtue of the sacrament, not to the visible sacrament : he that eats within, not without ; who eats in his heart, not who presses with his teeth ".¹⁸ " We affirm," says Bishop Jewel, " that Christ doth truly and presently give His own self in His sacraments ; in baptism, that we may put Him on ; and in His supper that we may eat Him by faith and spirit, and may have everlasting life by His cross and blood. . . . For, although we do not touch the body of Christ with teeth and mouth, yet we hold Him fast, and eat Him by faith, by understanding, and by the spirit."¹⁹ The sacraments, therefore, " are not bare signs : it were blasphemy so to say. The grace of God doth always work with His sacraments; but we are taught not to seek that grace in the sign, but to assure ourselves, by receiving the sign, that it is given by the thing signified ".²⁰

The effect of the sacraments, therefore, cannot be dissociated from the manner in which they are received. They are means of divine grace only to the heart which gratefully believes the promises of which they are the signs. " In such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation," declares Article XXV ; and the words of invitation in the Communion service of our Book of Common Prayer remind us that it is those who draw near *with faith* who receive the holy symbols to their comfort. Thus Archbishop Cranmer writes that, " although the sacramental tokens be only significations and figures, yet doth Almighty God effectually work, in them that duly receive His sacraments, those divine and celestial operations which He hath promised, and by the sacraments be signified ".²¹ Hooker also is quite emphatic concerning the manner of their efficacy as a means of grace when he says that the benefit received through them is received " from God Himself, the Author of the sacraments, and not from any other natural or supernatural quality in them ", and that " they contain *in themselves* no vital force or efficacy, they are not physical but *moral instruments* of salvation, duties of service and worship, which unless we perform as the Author of grace requireth, they are unprofitable. For," he adds, " all receive not the grace of God which receive the sacraments of His grace."²²

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It is necessary to affirm, moreover, that the Christian sacraments are not without effect even when received unworthily ; but in that case it is the opposite effect which they mediate : they then become, not means of grace, but means of judgment. Hence the assertion of Article XXV that " they that receive them unworthily purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith " (an allusion to I Cor. xi. 29) ; and similarly Article XXIX says of the Holy Communion that " 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 ". Hypocritically to associate oneself with those who partake of these eloquent symbols of the Gospel is to show a contempt for the Gospel and its promises far

worse than that displayed by those who hold themselves aloof from the worship of the Church.

It must not be imagined, however, that the grace of God is in any way created by the faith of man. God's grace is God's initiative on behalf of man who is helpless because of sin. Divine grace precedes all. Faith is man's response of gratitude and appropriation to the grace that is freely offered. It embraces, with humility and wonder, the saving promises of the Gospel. Human unbelief cannot nullify the reality of the work of Christ. The word of God, which is visible in the sacraments, is prior both to those sacraments and to that faith of which their participation is an expression, and, equally, God's word remains true, however much man may spurn it.

Hence it has become customary to speak of a sacrament not only as a sign and a means of grace, but also as a *pledge* of God's faithfulness, or as a *seal* which is as it were affixed to His word. A seal attached to a document adds nothing to the text of the document. It is simply a visible assurance of the authenticity of that document which apart from the seal is none the less authentic. Sacraments are seals added to the word of the Gospel which visibly confirm the authenticity of that word, without, however, adding anything to the word itself. And as a seal by itself, or affixed to a wordless sheet of paper, is void of all value and significance, so too the sacraments, if divorced from the word of God, degenerate into empty superstitions. "Christ hath ordained them," writes Jewel, "that by them He might set before our eyes the mysteries of our salvation, and might more strongly confirm the faith which we have in His blood, and might seal His grace in our hearts. As princes' seals confirm and warrant their deeds and charters, so do the sacraments witness unto our conscience that God's promises are true, and shall continue for ever. Thus doth God make known His secret purpose to His Church: first He declareth His mercy by His word; then He sealet it and assureth it by His sacraments. In the word we have His promises: in the sacraments we see them."²³

Thomas Becon propounds seven reasons for the institution of the sacraments:

"First, that they should be unto us testimonies, pledges, signs, or seals of God's grace, favour, and mercy, to teach us that God is merciful unto us, and will forgive us our sins, justify and save us for Christ's sake, and that all the benefits of Christ both belong and are freely given unto us of God the Father, if with faith we come and receive those holy mysteries. . . .

"Secondly, that they should be certain tokens and marks, whereby the Church of Christ may be discerned from the synagogue of anti-christ. . . .

"Thirdly, that they should be signs, tokens, and marks of our confession, in the which we outwardly profess what we inwardly think and believe. . . .

"Fourthly, that they should be as sinews and bonds to link and knit together the congregation of God publicly and openly, whereby they may be known to be of one company, and of one spirit, of one faith, and of one doctrine and profession. . . .

"Fifthly, that they should be unto us memorials, to put us in remembrance what mutual benevolence, what love, and hearty friendship one to another ought to reign among us. For seeing we all are partakers of the same mysteries, baptized with one baptism, and eat together of one bread, and drink together of one cup, by this means protesting openly that we are members one of another's body, whereof Christ Jesus is the Head; who seeth not how far all enmity, debate, strife, malice, envy, and all displeasure ought to be from us? . . ."

"Sixthly, that they should be testimonials unto us, to testify and witness how nigh Christ joins Himself unto us, that He giveth Himself whole unto us, and that He will dwell in us, and endow us with all His benefits and riches, so that whatsoever is Christ's, the same is ours. . . ."

"Seventhly, that they should be unto us a singular consolation and an exceeding great comfort in all our troubles, perils, dangers, and adversities, while in receiving them we behold and consider the merciful good will of God toward us, with this persuasion, that that God, who hath instituted these sacraments, delivered them unto us as pledges of His most hearty good will toward us, and hath also commanded us to use them for our comfort, will not leave us succourless, but in His time will deliver us from all those miseries, and bring us into the haven of quietness. . . ."*

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Baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments of the New Testament answer to circumcision and the passover as sacraments of the Old Testament. "God," says Hooker of the former, "hath annexed them for ever unto the New Testament, as other rites were before with the Old."³⁵ The passover is explained by Tyndale as "a very prophecy of the passion of Christ, describing the very manner and passion of His death, and the effect and virtue thereof also; in whose stead is the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ come, as baptism in the room or stead of circumcision."³⁶ But although with the coming of Christ the outward and visible signs were changed, yet there is no essential discontinuity; for the grace of God is the same in both Testaments and Christ is the one Mediator and Redeemer throughout the entire duration of human history.³⁷ The sacraments of the Old Testament, affirms Augustine, "were types of Christ who was to come, and when Christ fulfilled them by His advent they were done away, and were done away because they were fulfilled."³⁸

Roger Hutchinson speaks of the abiding relevance of both old and new covenants (or testaments) in the following manner: "In the time of the old testament, before Christ's incarnation, such as in all their ceremonies had an eye to the Seed promised, and believed in Christ to come, were of the new testament, under grace, and Christians. . . . And such, again as at these days do not believe, but live after the flesh, are yet under the old testament, under the law, under the stroke of the axe, which is put to the root of all evil trees. For both testaments were effectual from the beginning of the world; the one in virtuous and godly men, the other upon the unvirtuous and ungodly."³⁹ And, referring more specifically to the sacraments, Cranmer asserts that the Old Testament "fathers and prophets did eat Christ's body and drink

His blood in promise of redemption to be wrought, and we eat and drink the same flesh and blood in confirmation of our faith in the redemption already wrought";¹⁰ and, again: "It was all but one Christ to them and us. . . . He was in their sacraments spiritually and effectually present."¹¹

The continuity of the New Testament with the Old in this respect is brought out over and over again in the teaching of Christ and His apostles. Christ is "our passover" Who has been sacrificed for us (I Cor. v. 7); He is "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world" (John i. 29); it is "precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ", with which we have been redeemed (1 Peter i. 19). Accordingly, the proper preface for Easter Day in the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer speaks of our Lord as "the very Paschal Lamb which was offered for us, and hath taken away the sin of the world". Baptism, indeed, is expounded by St. Paul as a spiritual circumcision: in Christ, he tells the Colossian Christians, "ye were also circumcized with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead"—and this has taken place despite "the uncircumcision of their flesh", for he is speaking in particular to Gentile converts (Col. ii. 11-13). So, too, with the Jew under the Old Testament the outward and visible sign was of no profit to him apart from a heart of faith and obedience: "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 man, but of God" (Rom. ii. 28f.; cf. Acts vii. 51; Lev. xxvi. 41; Jer. vi. 10; ix. 26; Ezek. xliv. 7, 9). The true children of Abraham, with whom God established His covenant of grace together with its sacrament of circumcision, are not those that can boast a fleshly descent, but "they which be of faith": all who are Christ's are "Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. iii. 7, 29; cf. John viii. 39ff., 56ff.).

The advent of Christ is the clinching and consummating proof that God has remembered "His holy covenant, the oath which He sware unto Abraham our father" (Luke i. 72f.). St. Paul even speaks of Christ as having been "made a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, that He might confirm the promises given unto the fathers"—promises which extend God's redeeming grace to all the nations of the earth (Rom. xv. 8ff.; cf. Gal. iii. 8f.), and which are sealed no longer with circumcision, but with baptism. The significance of baptism, therefore, is not different from that of circumcision. Both are affixed to God's eternal covenant. Both symbolize obedience to God's will, death to sin, the putting off of the body of the flesh (cf. Rom. vi. 3f; Col. ii. 11). Baptism, no less than circumcision, is a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. iv. 11), the righteousness, that is, which is reckoned to all who obediently believe and appropriate to themselves the promised grace of God (Rom. iv. 16-25). In all this there is an entire consistency between Old and New Testa-

ments, which is only to be expected, since there is but one covenant, established by God in the former, whose promises are fulfilled and eternally confirmed in the latter. The new covenant is distinct from the old, not in its content, but in the fact that the law of God, formerly engraved externally on tables of stone, is now inwardly inscribed by the finger of God in the willing hearts of His people (Jer. xxxi. 31ff. ; Ezek. xi. 19ff. ; II Cor. iii. 3ff.).

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If it should be asked why, seeing there has been only one covenant of grace, circumcision was discarded, it must be answered that the appropriateness of this sacramental symbol ceased with the coming of Christ and the completion of His redeeming work. Baptism is the symbol of the new age which Christ's coming has inaugurated, and was for this reason administered by His forerunner, John the Baptist, as an anticipatory rite of repentance in preparation for the approaching kingdom. Since God's covenant promise was that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. xxii. 18), and since a male deliverer was looked for according to God's word (Deut. xviii. 18 ; Ps. cx. 4 ; Is. vii. 14 ; ix. 6), the sign of circumcision was appropriate in that it was administered to all males within the covenant and involved the male generative organ. But when the promised seed, even Christ, in whom all God's purposes of grace are concentrated, had come, this particular symbolism ceased to have a place. In Him there is now neither male nor female, and accordingly a sacrament which may be administered to both is now instituted through His command (Gal. iii. 16, 26-29).

Again, circumcision was a rite which involved the shedding of blood and which in this respect pointed forward to that perfect and final blood-shedding whereby "the putting off of the body of the flesh" would be achieved for all God's people. But now that Christ's blood, which cleanses from *all* sin (I John i. 7), has been shed, there can be no more shedding of blood : His is "the blood of an eternal covenant" (Heb. xiii. 20 ; x. 10ff.). And so in this respect also circumcision has ceased to be appropriate as a sacrament of the Gospel. It was superseded, and rightly so, when those realities which, in sign, it anticipated were fulfilled in Christ.

Similarly, the sacrament of the passover, which was in symbol both a commemoration of the deliverance by God's hand from the bondage of Egypt and also an anticipation of the coming of that Lamb of God, without blemish and without spot, who would finally deliver mankind from bondage to sin, was discontinued because the appropriateness of its symbolism was concluded with the fulfilment of what it portended. After Christ had made, "by His one oblation of Himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world,"²² there was no further place for a sacrament involving sacrifice, blood-shedding, and death. There is place, however, for a sacrament whose elements are fitting symbols of Christ's finished work. Hence the institution by our Lord of the Holy Communion, in which the bread broken bespeaks His body crucified and the wine outpoured His blood shed for us at Calvary.

The symbolism of baptism is set forth in Rom. vi. 3ff. and Col. ii. 12. It is that of death, burial, and resurrection, by identification of ourselves with Christ in His death and burial, implying the crucifixion with Him of the old nature and the doing away of the body of sin, and identification with Christ in His resurrection from the dead, implying the newness of life in which the Christian is to walk. Our baptism witnesses to us that we should reckon ourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus (Rom. vi. 11)—or, as the Baptismal Service of the Book of Common Prayer puts it, "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."

But the symbolism of baptism is further, and even more obviously, that of cleansing or washing; for water, which is the element used for this purpose in daily life, is in baptism the outward and visible sign of the inward "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. iii. 5). Christ cleanses His Church "by the washing of water with the word" (Eph. v. 26—*ἐν ῥήματι*, in the sphere of the word", that is, not by bare outward ceremonial, but by the grace spoken to believing hearts, of which the sacrament is significant). Thus in the English Baptismal Service prayer is offered that the one to be baptized may be washed and sanctified with the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism, then, is a visible word which speaks of cleansing from defilement, death to sin, and resurrection to new life in Christ. It is, in short, the sacrament of regeneration. Jewel draws attention to its inner reality when he describes it as "our regeneration or new birth, whereby we are born anew in Christ, and are made the sons of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven", and as "the sacrament of the remission of sins and of that washing which we have in the blood of Christ".³³ But he is careful to give this warning: "Not the water, but the blood of Christ, reconcileth us unto God, strengtheneth our conscience, and worketh our redemption. We must seek salvation in Christ alone, and not in any outward thing."³⁴ And Becon stresses that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is so necessary "that without it the baptism of water profiteth nothing".³⁵ To the same purpose is the assertion of the Catechism of the Church of England that "repentance, whereby they forsake sin, and faith, whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that sacrament", are required of those that receive baptism. "Our baptism," says Bishop Latimer, "is not only ordained for that cause, to know a Christian from a Turk or heathen, but it hath a further signification: it signifieth that we must wash away the old Adam, forsake and set aside all carnal lusts and desires, and put on Christ; receive Him with a pure heart, and study to live and go forward in all goodness, according unto His will and commandment."³⁶

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In view of these considerations, the question arises as to the permissibility of the practice of infant baptism. On what scriptural

grounds, if any, may this sacrament be administered to little children who as yet are incapable of the response of repentance, faith, and obedience? The answer to this query must be sought in the attitude of God to children as revealed in the Scriptures; and this is not difficult to discover. While it is true that God's covenant was established, in the first place, with a responsible adult, Abraham, consequent upon his faith, and that circumcision, which was the "seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision" (Rom. iv. 11), was instituted as the sacrament, or visible word, of this covenant; yet it is an indisputable fact that from the very beginning infant children had a secure place within the covenant, and that, for this reason, the sacrament of circumcision was administered to them, even though at the time of receiving this "seal of the righteousness of faith" they were incapable of the response of faith to the promises of the covenant. Indeed, the circumcision of infant boys who were born within the covenant was by no means merely optional or permissible; it was strictly *commanded* by God, with the warning that to disobey this command was at the same time to break His covenant (Gen. xvii. 10-14).

In the New Testament, as we have seen, the covenant is the same, though the sacramental sign is changed. But there is no indication whatever that God's attitude to children has changed. On the contrary, His perfect consistency in this as in all other matters is fully displayed. Our Divine Redeemer Himself took little children (παῖδες) up in His arms and gave them His blessing, admonishing His disciples, who wished to keep them from Him, that these little ones should be permitted to come to Him, "for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mark x. 13-16). Who will be so rash as to suppose that Christ's blessing of these babes was a meaningless act and that His words associating them with the kingdom of God were empty of truth? And yet there are many professing Christians to-day who, by withholding the sacrament of baptism from their infant children, behave as though the children of believers no longer have any legitimate position within God's covenant of grace. By acting in this way they "leave the seed of believers, whilst in their infant state, in the same condition with those of pagans and infidels, expressly contrary to God's covenant".⁷ They are also, it seems, impelled by an unscriptural individualism which fails to take into account the solidarity of the family as a communal entity within the scheme of God's creation. Little children cannot be viewed in isolation from their parents. They are not born in isolation, but within the family group; and not only within the family group, but also, if their parents profess the Christian faith, within the wider community of Christ's Church, that is to say, within the sphere of God's covenant, in which case the sacrament of that covenant should be administered to them.

St. Paul, indeed, affirms that in a home where only one of the parents is a believer the children are none the less holy, notwithstanding the unbelief of the other parent (I Cor. vii. 14). The 'only satisfactory understanding of this verse is that the Christian faith of even one parent is sufficient to ensure that the children of that home are regarded by God as being within the sphere of His holy covenant.

If this is so, then it is proper that they should receive baptism, whereby the seal of that covenant is placed upon them. This accords well with, for instance, the baptism of the whole household of the Philippian gaoler, subsequent to his conversion (Acts xvi. 30-34). The faith of the head of a family brings, together with himself, all those for whom he is parentally responsible into a new relationship, a relationship before God of privilege and answerability. The "household" baptisms of the New Testament correspond too closely to the "household" circumcisions of the Old Testament for the contention to carry conviction that little children could not have been included among the members of households who were baptized.

Had it been intended that little children should not receive baptism, as being no longer within the scope of God's covenant, a precise command to this effect would have been necessary, for it would have involved a startlingly revolutionary concept of the place of children within the purposes of God. But the very fact that there is no such command in the New Testament presupposes that they continued to be fit recipients of the covenantal sign, and did in fact receive it. And this conclusion harmonizes with the significant fact that no instance is to be found in the New Testament of the baptism of adults or adolescents who had grown up in Christian homes. Scriptural reality demands that the children of believers should not be treated as though they were outside the scope of the purposes and promises of God, and the radical inadequacy of the position taken up by the opponents of infant baptism is betrayed by the fact that, unable genuinely to regard their babes as existing in a spiritual vacuum, they feel it necessary to resort to a practice of infant "dedication", even though it is nowhere enjoined in the New Testament. Is not this an acknowledgment that the grace of God is sovereign over their children and, in fact, that their little ones belong within His covenant? Would it not, then, be more consistent to grant them the sacrament of that covenant?

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Those who maintain that only believers should be baptized, or, in other words, that faith must always precede baptism, are taking their stand on perilous ground, not only because they must then be asked to account for the clear scriptural instances of babes who from birth were recipients of God's special grace, such as Jeremiah, whom God sanctified from the womb (Jer. i. 5), and John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke i. 15); but even more so because the logic of their position demands that faith must always precede salvation, or, in other words, that only believers can be saved. Faith, they argue, must precede baptism: infants are incapable of faith: therefore infants cannot be baptized. But, this being so, they should be prepared to affirm, with equal rigour, the parallel syllogism: faith must precede salvation: infants are incapable of faith: therefore infants cannot be saved. This, in turn, can only mean that those dying before they reach years of responsibility are eternally lost. But who would dare to insist on this logic when he has the scriptural teaching concerning God's attitude to little children before his eyes and our Lord's words, "of such is the

kingdom of heaven," sounding in his ears? The preaching of the Gospel is, of course, addressed to those who are of such an age as to be capable of grasping and responding to its demands. But the very concept of faith as response necessarily implies the priority and supremacy of the grace to which it responds. Grace is sovereign action; it is neither posterior nor subordinate to faith; and the baptism of the new-born children of believing parents emphasizes the priority and supremacy of grace.

Christian parents, therefore, do not despair of the salvation of children who die either before they have been baptized or before they have attained to years of responsibility. With Bishop Jewel we should confidently assert: "Our children are the children of God. He is our God, and the God of our seed. They be under the covenant with us."³⁸ Like faith, baptism, whether of infants or adults, is preceded by grace, of which it is the sign and pointer. Grace alone is sovereign, and is dependent neither on an external ceremony nor on a human response. "If our election, vocation, creation, reparation, justification, glorification, and whatsoever maketh unto the salvation either of body or soul, come of the free grace and mere mercy of God, is it not injurious to the grace and kindness of the Lord our God so to embrace it, that without the help of an external sign and outward ceremony it cannot save us?" asks Thomas Becon. "Hath God so bound and made Himself thrall to a sacrament, that without it His power of saving is lame and of no force to defend from damnation?"³⁹ The matter is well summed up by Hooker when he writes: "The fruit of baptism dependeth only upon the covenant which God hath made. . . . God by covenant requireth in the elder sort faith and baptism, in children the sacrament of baptism alone, whereunto He hath also given them right by special privilege of birth within the bosom of the holy Church."⁴⁰

A child, when he has grown to years of responsibility, may indeed repudiate the grace of which the sacrament administered to him in infancy is a symbol and pledge. Neither in Scripture nor in experience is there such a thing as automatic (*ex opere operato*) sacramental regeneration. In the pre-Christian age great numbers of Jews who, in accordance with God's command, had received the outward seal of circumcision, showed themselves, by the rebellion of unbelief, to be altogether uncircumcized in heart. In a word, they possessed the sign, but not the reality to which it pointed. "Circumcision without faith was as a seal cut off from a deed of gift," says Nathaniel Dimock. "But it was unbelief which cut it off. The privilege and responsibility of circumcision was this, that it was a call to, and required, faith in the promises it sealed. When those promises were believed, circumcision became circumcision of the heart."⁴¹ And this is equally true of baptism. That the want of the sacrament does not exclude from salvation is shown by our Lord's promise to the penitent thief, who died without being baptized. On the other hand, that participation in the sacrament does not guarantee salvation is shown by the example of Simon Magus, who received it unworthily and to his condemnation. In the rite of Confirmation an opportunity is afforded to those who have been baptized in childhood and who have come to years of dis-

cretion, so that (in the words of the English Prayer Book) "they may themselves, with their own mouth and consent, openly before the Church, ratify and confirm" the promises of their baptism. That very many of those who are baptized neglect to come to confirmation, and go on to lead ungodly lives and wilfully keep themselves separate from the fellowship of Christ's Church is a patent fact which the theology of sacramentalism cannot ignore."¹

But this by no means implies that baptism is a vain formality, even in the case of those who choose to repudiate the reality to which it points. As I have said earlier, the sacraments are always effective as means, either of grace to those who receive them rightly, which is the main purpose of their institution, or of condemnation to those who abuse them. For every believer, his baptism, though an event of the past, should constantly be before him as an ever-present witness to the grace and truth of which it is eloquent. Circumcision, says Latimer, "was a certain, sure, infallible, and effectual token of God's good-will towards them to whom it was given: for as many as did believe the covenant of God, it did ascertain them of the good-will of God towards them, that they should be delivered out of all their troubles and adversities, and that they should be sure of the help of God. . . . So let us ever consider, in what trouble and calamity soever we be, let us remember that we be baptized; that God hath promised to help us, to deliver us from all our sins and wickedness, to be our God."²

As for those who treat their baptism in an irresponsible or superstitious manner, we can hardly do better than hear the voice of Bishop Latimer once again: "I heard of late," he says, "that there be some wicked persons, despisers of God and His benefits, who say, 'It is no matter whatsoever we do; we be baptized: we cannot be damned; for all those that be baptized and be called Christians shall be saved.' This is a false and wicked opinion; and I assure you that such which bear the name of Christians and be baptized, but follow not God's commandments, that such fellows, I say, be worse than the Turks and heathen: for the Turks and heathen have made no promise unto Christ to serve Him. These fellows have made promise in baptism to keep Christ's rule, which thing they do not; and therefore they be worse than the Turks: for they break their promise made before God and the whole congregation."³

(To be continued)

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¹ In this article I have given particular, though not exclusive, attention to the writings of the English divines of the sixteenth century.

² Augustine of Hippo, 354-430: Epistle XCVIII, to Boniface.

³ John Whitgift, 1530-1604, Archbishop of Canterbury: Tract. XXI, in *Works* (Parker Society), vol. III, p. 383.

⁴ Richard Hooker, 1554-1600: *Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, lviii, 1.

⁵ John Jewel, 1522-1571, Bishop of Salisbury: *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. II, p. 1101.

⁶ Augustine: Tract. LXXX, 3, on the Gospel of John.

⁷ Augustine: *Con. Faust.*, XIX, 16.

⁸ William Tyndale, 1494-1536, translator of the Bible and Reformation martyr : *A Brief Declaration of the Sacraments*, in *Doctrinal Treatises* (Parker Society), p. 360.

⁹ Hooker : *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Cf. also Article XIX which speaks of the sacraments being "duly administered according to Christ's ordinance" as a mark of the visible Church of Christ.

¹¹ "If anyone shall say that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord, or that they are more or less than seven, . . . let him be anathema" : Session VII, Canon 1.

¹² Lancelot Andrewes, 1555-1626, Bishop of Winchester ; quoted by W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology* (London, 1930), p. 354.

¹³ Jewel : *Apology of the Church of England*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. III, p. 62.

¹⁴ Jewel : *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, p. 1103.

¹⁵ Article XXV.

¹⁶ Augustine : Tract. LXXX, 3, on the Gospel of John.

¹⁷ Augustine : *ibid.*, Tract. XXV, 12.

¹⁸ Augustine : *ibid.*, Tract. XXVI, 12.

¹⁹ Jewel : *Apology*, p. 64.

²⁰ Jewel : *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, p. 1102.

²¹ Thomas Cranmer, 1489-1556, Archbishop of Canterbury and Reformation martyr : *On the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. I, p. 148.

²² Hooker : *Op. cit.*, V, lviii, 4.

²³ Jewel : *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, p. 1099.

²⁴ Thomas Becon, 1513-1567 : *Catechism*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. II, pp. 199ff.

²⁵ Hooker : *Op. cit.*, V, lvii, 2.

²⁶ Tyndale : *Op. cit.*, p. 354.

²⁷ Cf. Article VII : "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man."

²⁸ Augustine : *Con. Faust.*, XIX, 13.

²⁹ Roger Hutchinson, d. 1555 : *Works* (Parker Society), pp. 326 f.

³⁰ Cranmer : *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

³¹ Cranmer : *ibid.*, p. 60.

³² Quoted from the prayer of consecration in the Communion Service.

³³ Jewel : *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, p. 1104.

³⁴ Jewel : *Ibid.*, p. 1106.

³⁵ Becon : *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

³⁶ Hugh Latimer, 1485-1555, Bishop of Worcester and Reformation martyr : *Sermons and Remains*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. II, p. 133.

³⁷ John Owen, 1616-1683, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford : *Works*, Vol. XVI, p. 259 (London, 1853).

³⁸ Jewel : *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, p. 1107.

³⁹ Becon : *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Hooker : *Op. cit.*, V, lxii, 15.

⁴¹ Nathaniel Dimock : *The Doctrine of the Sacraments*, p. 48 (London, 1908).

⁴² Cf., for example, the admission of the Anglo-Catholic author, E. L. Mascell, that "the reception of baptism is in itself no guarantee of final perseverance and ultimate salvation" : *Christ, the Christian, and the Church*, p. 84 (second impression ; London, 1955).

⁴³ Latimer : *Op. cit.*, pp. 133f.

⁴⁴ Latimer : *Sermons*, in *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. I, p. 346.