

DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

THE SACRAMENTS.

IT was a great theologian who defined a Sacrament to be the visible form of an invisible grace, and this definition is the more felicitous because it not only describes with accuracy certain ordinances of Christ, but also allies them to what may be called the sacramental law of nature. It has been an unfortunate disability of human thought to distinguish so sharply between what is seen and what is unseen, as to place the supernatural in contrast to the natural and to deny the unity of the universe. It was part of the Divine wisdom of our Lord to ignore this distinction in His teaching, and ever to treat nature as the body in which the spiritual was incarnate, and as the parable which was its revelation. What we saw and handled corresponded with what we thought and felt, so that the spiritual, which had appealed to our mind, became real to our senses; and as one commits to printed words upon a page what he has imagined, so we are to recognise in the phenomena of nature the shapes of the mysteries of grace. Christ did not compare the spiritual to the natural, but He was accustomed to identify them so that the sign became the thing signified. He was the true vine, whose sap was to be the principle of fertility in human souls; He was the light which would illuminate every human mind; He was the bread which would support the life of the soul; He was the water which would satisfy its thirst; He was the seed of indestructible vigour which might be cast into the ground but would spring up to future harvest. As He moved through nature it became the transparent veil through which the spiritual will ever shine—a vast and Divine Sacrament.

Although we have not the vision of our Master, and impressions from the outside are apt to fall on us like snow upon a blind man's face, yet we are not quite indifferent to the spiritual effects of the world into which we have been born and which laps us round on every side. Our emotions correspond to the fresh beauty of sunrise, the golden glory of sunset, the awful majesty of a thunderstorm, the austere purity of the everlasting snow, the unrelieved loneliness of mid-ocean, and the joyful hope of the spring. The emotion may be too delicate for any but a poet's speech, yet for even commonplace people it is real, and they have the sensation of seeing their subtlest feelings cast into the most magnificent form, and also being moved through their senses to thoughts which never otherwise would have visited their minds. No word of preacher or of book would have so suddenly and thoroughly affected them, and the effect with successive impacts becomes a part of themselves. If it seems strange that the souls should be fed by the Sacrament of the bread and wine, because the soul is spiritual and the elements are physical, it is quite as strange, but it is perfectly true, that the character of a people is largely shaped by the scenes amid which they live, so that an Italian peasant is the most volatile and gayest-hearted of men beside the blue Mediterranean, and the Highland Celt is the most sombre and reverential, living at the base of hills on which the mists are hanging. So the physical is again the instrument of the spiritual, and men's souls are shaped by the Word which dwells within.

We carry about with us in our very constitutions as human beings an evidence for the sacramental principle, for we have not only the eternal particle of the soul, but also the habitation of the body. It is not possible to imagine any human being as a disembodied spirit, and it is not likely there could be such a state of existence. We

cannot be utterly unclothed; if one body be removed, another must take its place; but it were less than the truth to think of the body as a mere vesture which can be put off and on like a cloak, for the body and the soul are so vitally connected that the soul may be said to penetrate and vitalize the body, to be the spring of its life and vigour. Through the body the sensations of the outer world pass into the soul, and through the same body the soul expresses itself and exercises its power. While the humility of the body veils the glory of the soul, as the elements in the Sacrament are a poor dwelling-place for the Lord, yet the soul is able so to transform the body, that by-and-by we catch the light within through the dim windows, and a man's face becomes the revelation of his character. As the Word comes to the elements and behold a Sacrament, so the soul comes to the body and behold a man. The crowning illustration of this truth is found in the Incarnation of our Lord wherein Deity has been united to humanity in a mystery. What an unbelieving Jew beheld was a peasant of Galilee, of lowly appearance and humble dress, who had no home and no honour, who was despised and rejected of men. What St. John and the Apostle saw was the Son of God, almighty, all-wise, all-loving, the very image of the Eternal Father. And the Deity and the Humanity are so united that they cannot be separated, so that whatsoever the Lord doeth as man He doeth also as God. Through His humanity streamed the efficacy of His Deity, and it was enough to touch the hem of His garment to be saved; and His humanity is so entirely part of His personality, that in the midst of the Throne St. John saw the Lamb as He once was slain. The sacramental law, which is the revelation of the unseen by the seen, and of grace by nature, which had been exhibited first in the creation of the world, next in the nature of man, came to its height in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Humanity was

as the bread and wine, and whose Deity is as the indwelling and eternal virtue.

During the dispensation of the Old Testament the Church was constantly educated and supported by Sacraments, which at first were numerous and general, and then became limited and definite. The rainbow upon the cloud assured the ancient world that God would not again cover it with a deluge; the gift of Isaac to Abraham in his old age was the pledge of God's faithfulness; the burning bush in the wilderness declared the presence of God to Moses, a common bush yet "afire with God"; a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, leading the children of Israel, were the signs of the Divine guidance. Aaron's rod which blossomed, and the dew on Gideon's fleece, and the light which shone from the breastplate of the high priest, and the Ark of the Covenant, were all Sacraments assuring God's people of His presence and unfailing grace. There were, however, two rites of the ancient Church which chiefly deserve to be called Sacraments, and which were, indeed, a forerunner of the two Sacraments of the New Dispensation. One was Circumcision, wherein by a sign in his very flesh a child was admitted into the Church of God and pledged to holiness, and the other was the sacrifice and feast of the Passover wherein the Hebrew people were not only reminded of the mighty deliverances of God when He brought their fathers out of Egypt, but also were fed and strengthened for the battle of life. The one was the Sacrament of union, whereby the soul was brought into covenant with God and made a member of the nation which may be said to have been in type and prophecy the body of the Lord; the other was the Sacrament whereby the fellowship between God and the nation was maintained.

While the Lord by His teaching and Spirit did not confirm, but abolished, the sacrificial system of the ancient

Church, and while He insisted that the kingdom of God was within a man, and that what the Father desired was worshippers in spirit and in truth, yet He in whom two natures met, and who is Himself the point of unity in the universe of God, was not indifferent to the necessity and service of Sacraments. It was a great demand which He made on faith, and it was needful to sustain it by outward signs, so that the senses should become the reinforcement of the soul; and a man be better able to believe in the grace of God when He saw it presented without Him in a symbol. For this end He commanded two rites, which are altogether perfect in the selection of the visible means and in the suggestion of the invisible grace. If any one should hear Christ's words, and believe in the Lord so that he was willing to be His disciple and to carry His cross, then let him be baptized in water to signify that his sin had been cleansed away and that he had become a new creature, that his old man had disappeared as if he had died, and that he had been buried in baptism with Christ. Let him come up from this baptism with a new name, and enter on a new life, and by his baptismal vows let him be consecrated for ever to the Lord. Without doubt the perfect idea of baptism is realized when one who has come to the years of discretion makes himself his own profession of faith in the Lord, knowing what he has done and having counted the cost, and then is immersed in the waters of baptism. But the same picture of spiritual things is still retained, although the water be only sprinkled on the face, and although the recipient of the rite be an infant, whose parents place it with prayer and vows within the Church of God as mothers placed their children in the arms of the Lord Jesus. The purest thing in nature, clean fresh water, is used to represent and to convey the cleansing grace of Christ's blood and Spirit. And by a speaking

symbol the soul is made a member of the holy body of Christ.

As the disciple of the Lord will be dependent upon Divine grace from day to day, requiring forgiveness as often as he sin, and strength as often as he is weak, he must live in constant fellowship with the Lord, receiving grace for grace till he come to perfection in Christ Jesus. As he accomplishes his great pilgrimage, he requires to be inwardly refreshed and comforted; and, therefore, Christ not only makes him to pass through the waters of the Red Sea, wherein he is separated from Egypt for ever and becomes God's free man, but He also spreads for him a table in the wilderness, so that he may eat and drink and go on his way rejoicing till he come to the land of promise. And to symbolize this constant communion with Himself, Christ instituted the Sacrament of the bread and wine. By bread, which is the richness of the harvest and the staff of life, is signified that body of the Lord—His Divine and human fulness—which is the food of the soul; and by wine, which is the very essence of the vine and the gathered vigour of creation, is represented that blood of the Lord which was His life, and which is poured out to be the salvation of the world. As one eats this bread and drinks this wine so can he, and so ought he, to receive the fulness of the Lord and the cleansing of His blood. The power of God, which permeates all creation, cometh as it were to a height in these elements of water and bread and wine, and through them sanctifies and satisfies and glorifies the soul.

If one takes a generous reading of our definition of a Sacrament, then, no doubt, there are not two but many Sacraments, for all the sacred acts of life, and especially such as are symbols, may be called Sacraments, from the meal in which we establish the covenant of hospitality to the kiss with which we seal the covenant of love. Cer-

tainly it is not without reason that the act of ordination by which the minister of Jesus Christ is set apart for his sacred duties, or the intimate union between a man and woman in marriage, are called Sacraments, for, indeed, both are deep and holy mysteries and the outward shapes of spiritual realities. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are set in a place by themselves, because they were instituted by the Lord, and because they are an obligation upon all His disciples; so that if one desires to enter into the Church visible, it must be through the laver of baptism; and if any one would give his soul the full benefits of the Divine covenant, he will obtain the same most surely and readily through the communion of the body and blood of the Lord.

While the Sacramental principle, that the physical is the body of the spiritual, is accepted on all hands, the efficacy of the Sacraments—what is conveyed by them—is a matter of keen controversy. It is, indeed, one of the misfortunes of faith that the two Sacraments, which were intended by the Lord to unite Christian people together by uniting them to their Head, have become a cause of separation, and the font of Baptism and the Holy Table of Communion are changed into battlefields where blood has been shed and hearts have been broken. Could there be a more bitter satire upon our religion than one Christian persecuting another because he differed from him over the mystery of Holy Communion, and two disciples quarrelling unto death who owned the same Lord and were trying to keep His last commandment, because the one took the words of our Lord's ordinance in the letter and the other in the spirit? One may, however, remember for his consolation that honest folk do not carry their arguments to such lengths, and will not make their doctrines matters of life and death, unless they regard the matter in dispute to be of the last importance. Christians have

surely counted the grace of God very precious when they were willing to die for the method of its communication, and they must have loved their Lord with all their heart when they counted their life to be less than the form of His ordinances. If Christians sinned against charity, it was not because they loved men less, but because they loved the Lord more; and, if they seemed to ignore reason, it was not because they had not used every power of thought, but because they desired that every thought should be brought into obedience to the mind of Christ. It has been a long and fierce debate, which is not yet settled, and which carries great issues with it; but one may be allowed to hope not that the fire should die out, and believers come to regard the Sacraments as a thing of no importance, about which it were not worth while to differ, but rather that it should cease to smoke and turn into a pure, clear flame of faith and love. And if the Sacrament of the body and blood has been the *disputa* of the past, around it may yet gather, as in the Vatican fresco, the saints of all ages and all schools, and the sign of the Lord's dying love unite men together on earth as it unites the redeemed in heaven.

It is pleasant also to remember how far the whole Church travels together in unity, and holds the same doctrine regarding the Sacraments. Every Christian believes that the grace of which the Sacraments are in some sense the channel comes alone from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and that the grace dwells in Him as the Head of the Church and the Saviour of the race; that the Sacraments are intended to minister that grace to His people as they have need of it, afflicted by the corruption of human nature, contending daily with temptations, requiring strength for ordinary duty, and desiring to be changed into the likeness of the Lord; that the Sacraments can only convey this grace in full

measure, and without injury, when the recipient is in spiritual fellowship with his Lord; that the Sacraments are an obligation laid upon the heart and conscience of Christian people, so that every branch of the Church (with the exception of a few mystics, such as the Society of Friends, who faithfully keep in the spirit what they do not observe in the letter) is careful to observe baptism and the Lord's Supper. Is it too much, therefore, to say that in the essence of sacramental truth the Church of Christ, through all her provinces, has one mind, and that, if we are agreed that in the Sacraments we are cleansed by the blood and reinforced by the body of Jesus Christ, it is of secondary importance what is the exact method of the conveyance or the limits of the grace conveyed?

When we approach the actual efficacy of the Sacraments, and enquire what practical value they have for the person who receives them, for the Church, and also for the world, there is even here entire agreement up to a certain point; and more stress might be laid upon the truth wherein we agree, even though we must acknowledge the truth wherein we differ. The Sacraments we all hold are a picture of the Divine Grace, wherein we are taught by a sensible parable the love of God and the reality of Christ's sacrifice. They are, according to the express wish of Christ, a memorial of Himself, wherein we are reminded of His faithfulness unto death and His devotion to the flock committed to His charge. They are a prophecy that He who came once to die for our sins will come again for our perfect salvation, when "the day shall break and the shadows flee away." They are an open confession of faith in Christ, who has died and risen again, and who is now Lord at the right hand of God the Father. They are a bond of union between Christian disciples, who, coming from many homes and being of many kinds, are welded into one at the Holy Table, and, in eating the Lord's Body, become them-

selves one Bread. And they are a declaration of the Gospel, preaching as they do unto all men the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, before whom Christ is set forth crucified. As Christians behold the Sacraments, and especially as they receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, they are reminded, after a very lively fashion, of the whole truth of the Gospel and the love of their Lord, as well as of their own sin and shortcomings; and thereby they are moved to new faith and devotion; they are filled with new strength and hope. For this end it matters nothing, whether they receive the Sacrament as the Mass at a Roman altar or take it as the Communion from the table of a Scotch kirk; both Roman and Scot are quickened into holiness by the remembrance of "Him who loved us and gave Himself for us."

Christians who hold that doctrine of the Sacrament which incorrectly but conveniently goes by the name of Zwingli, for indeed this Swiss reformer held a higher view, will not grant that the Sacraments are any more than a beautiful and moving symbol; but those who belong to the school of Calvin are apt to consider this an inadequate and poverty-stricken statement of the truth. With the words before them wherein the Lord declares the bread and wine to be in some sense His Body and Blood, and the discourse at Capernaum, wherein He insisted that His disciples must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, Calvin and his followers have concluded that the Sacraments, besides being most excellent and convincing signs of the grace of Christ, are also a means whereby that Grace is conveyed directly and truly to the believer's soul. Any doctrine less than this would not be worthy of the sacramental mysteries, and would not properly express the experience of the Church, for Christ surely went beyond a symbol in the words and

acts of the Upper Room; and a mere symbol can never be to the soul what the Sacrament has been to believing communicants since the day Christ rose from the dead and went to the right hand of the Father. While Calvin and all with him deny the real presence in the Roman sense, they hold firmly a presence of the body and blood of Christ in their spiritual substance and experimental power; and to vindicate this position, both against those who deny that the Sacrament is anything more than a sign and those who insist upon the presence of the actual presence of the body and blood of Christ, I quote the statement of Calvin in his *Institutes*: "We conclude that our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ, just as our corporal life is preserved by bread and wine. For the analogy of the signs would not hold if our souls did not find their aliment in Christ, which, however, cannot be the case unless Christ truly coalesce into one with us and support us through the use of His flesh and blood. It may seem incredible indeed that the flesh of Christ should reach us from such an immense local distance so as to become our food. But we must remember how far the power of His Holy Spirit transcends all our senses, and what folly it must be even to think of reducing His immensity to our measure. Let faith, then, embrace what the understanding cannot grasp, namely, that the spirit truly unites things which are totally separated. Now this sacred communication of His flesh and blood by which Christ transfuses His life into us just as if He penetrated our bones and marrow, He testifies and seals in the Holy Supper: not by the exhibition of a vain and empty sign, but by putting forth such an energy of His Spirit as fulfils what He promises." And the same doctrine has been stated in the Scots confession of 1560, which runs: "We confess that believers in the right use of the Lord's Supper thus eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus Christ; and we

firmly believe that He dwells in them and they in Him—nay, that they thus become flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones. For as the eternal Deity gives life and immortality to the flesh of Christ, so also His flesh and blood, when eaten and drunk by us, confer on us the same prerogatives.” The excellence of this doctrine lies in its profound sense of the power which works through the Sacrament, and in its success in reconciling the experience of the soul with the words of Jesus, while it neither lays an insuperable burden upon reason nor exposes a spiritual ordinance of Christ to the charge of materialism. It is also not the least recommendation of this view that it makes the efficacy of the Sacrament depend upon the operation of the Holy Spirit. As Christ was born by the power of the Holy Ghost, and the union between the Deity and the Humanity is sustained by the same Spirit, so it is by His quickening power that the bread and wine are, if we may so say, charged with the life of Christ’s body and blood; and, without the presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ were not in the Sacrament, as without the same presence He would not be in the Church. As Christ is in the midst of the Church by His Spirit, so is He by the same Spirit in the element of the Sacraments, whether the water of Baptism or the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. And as He cometh into every one’s soul who opens the door in the preaching of the Word or in private meditation, so in the Sacrament He openeth the door Himself and receiveth His disciples into His heart. It is true that we can receive nothing more in the Sacrament than we do in the Word, for what more can be given us and what more can we desire than Christ Himself? But it is also true that Christ cometh in the Sacraments in a more intimate and satisfying fashion, sealing our faith and, with a sensible sign taking possession of our soul. And the power by which He acts is the Holy Ghost. This view is also

commended by the fact that it makes the efficacy of the Sacraments depend, not only on the presence of the Holy Ghost, but also on the faith of the communicant, so that the Spirit in the Sacrament meets the Spirit in the soul. As every blessing of the Gospel is dependent upon faith, and he only can receive anything from the Lord who believes upon Him, so it is incredible, and seems indeed profane, that one who is a stranger to the Lord and a hater of His Law should receive anything except condemnation in the Sacrament. Unto him who believeth, the water of Baptism is both the sign and seal of regeneration; but to him who believeth not, it is only a reproach representing that blood of Christ which is not cleansing him, that union to the Lord whom he is refusing. Unto him who comes to the Lord's Table with a believing heart, the bread and wine in the moments of their reception are the sign and seal of forgiveness and grace; but unto Judas they can only be the revelation of his sin and the means of his judgment. Apart from the Holy Ghost quickening the material of the Sacrament till it be inhabited by the person of the Lord, and quickening the deadness of our souls till they be moved unto faith and love, there is no virtue in any Sacrament; they are vain and empty rites. Wherefore no less in the Lord's Supper than in Baptism should the Christian beseech the power of the Holy Ghost that whatsoever is signified be performed: that the infant presented unto the Lord may receive from Him there and then the blessing of everlasting life, and the communicant who in his infancy was made a member of the Lord's Body be fed amid his labours and his trials with the bread of life.

Amid the pressure and the tyranny of the things which are seen, the Sacraments witness to the power of the spiritual world and its final triumph. They remind us that

whoso will save his life shall lose it, but that he who loseth his life for Christ's sake shall find it again; that Christ did not die in vain upon the Cross, but that by death He vanquished sin and this present world; that He is not dead, but is alive with a power which reaches through heaven and through earth; that those who are united unto Him are lifted above the power of death, and are members of an Eternal Body. And that, while this world, with its pride and its riches and its lust and its glitter, must pass away, he who has set his affection upon the highest things which are at God's right hand where Christ sitteth must remain, "for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are unseen are eternal." And the two Sacraments will continue until the shadows pass into the substance, and this veil of physical things be removed, and the Lord to whose grace and person they bear witness leadeth the Church which He has redeemed into living fountains of water in the heavenly places; and they, who, through the lowly elements of bread and wine, have eaten the very flesh and drunk the very blood of the Lord, shall be called to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

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