

## I

### THE MEANING OF THE TERM

THE ecclesiastical significance of the term "sacrament" has been very variable during the course of the Church's history and has been influenced by a diversity of circumstances.

Etymologically and in its proper sense this word has reference to something sacred or consecrated, and in consequence to that which possesses a significance which is sacred, secret, or related to a "mystery." It was used in this sense to designate religious rites and ceremonies. In its religious sense the word "sacrament" is allied to the Greek word *mysterion*, which signifies a secret, a mystery, into the knowledge of which a man has to be initiated. It is for this reason that in the Vulgate *sacramentum* is used to translate the word *mysterion*, in particular in Eph. i. 9, iii. 2 f., 9, 32; Col. i. 26 f.; 1 Tim. iii. 16; Rev. i. 20, xvii. 7. In a wide sense, then, the word was used to designate any sign which possessed a hidden meaning. Religious rites and ceremonies, the sign of the cross, anointing with oil, preaching, confirmation, prayer, aid to the sick, the mystical or allegorical explanation of Scripture, etc., were equally called sacraments.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the word was, up to the Middle Ages, so vague that Abelard counted but five sacraments, while Hugo of St. Victor enumerated thirty of them!

It is self-evident that the primary religious significance of the word is too comprehensive and its use too free for it to be

<sup>1</sup> "But it would take too long to discuss suitably the variety of signs which are called sacraments because they have to do with divine things."—Augustine, Letter 138, Benedictine edit., Paris, 1836 ff., Vol. vii, p. 615. "Things are called sacraments, brethren, because in them one thing is seen and another is understood. What is seen has a corporeal appearance, but what is understood has a spiritual fruit."—Augustine, Sermon 252, *ibid.*, Vol. v., p. 1614. "Preaching, blessing and confirming, giving communion, visiting the sick, and praying, are sacraments of God."—Jerome, *Loc. Theol.*, XLIX. i. 6, 9.

possible for theologians to employ it without risk of confusion. For this reason theologians early relinquished the field of etymology and philology and endeavoured to assign to the word definitions which were more or less exact according to the teaching of the New Testament on the subject. Two definitions in particular held the attention before the Reformation: that of Augustine—*accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit sacramentum*, “The Word is added to the element and it becomes a sacrament”<sup>1</sup>; and that of Peter Lombard (*d.* 1164) given in his book of *Sentences*<sup>2</sup>—*sacramentum est sacrae rei signum*, “a sacrament is the sign of a sacred thing,” which is specified in the formula which has become famous—*sacramentum est invisibilis gratiae visibilis forma*, “a sacrament is the visible form or expression of an invisible grace.”

These definitions, however, have seemed and still seem too unprecise and vague to Reformed theologians. They are inadequate for expressing the meaning and the scope of the sacraments which are common to *all* believers, namely, baptism and the Lord’s supper, nor are they adequate for defining the sacraments which were in common usage in the Old Testament. It was necessary to choose between two alternatives: either to change the word or to delimit the matter by giving the same word a more adequate meaning.

During and immediately after the period of the Reformation there were some who tried to exchange for the word that of *signs* or *seals* or *mysterics*. Today, again, there are some who would not hesitate to alter the term for another which would be really better. But the force of usage is such that it would be difficult to find a word which offers, without any other inconveniences, the same advantages as that which has been hallowed by custom. While they drew the attention of believers to the fact that the word *sacrament* was not employed in its original sense, Luther and Calvin considered, and together with them the Churches of the Reformation, that it is usage which ultimately determines the significance of a word much more than its etymology. Words are of little consequence, provided the thing itself is preserved.

<sup>1</sup> *Tract.* lxxx. 3 on John xv. 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Lib.* iv, dist. 1, B.

The only sure and satisfactory method of arriving at the most precise idea possible of the meaning of the word is to refer to the ceremonies which, by general consent, are recognized as being sacraments, and, by analyzing them, to define their essential and characteristic elements.<sup>1</sup>

There is unanimity in acknowledging that in the New Testament economy baptism and the Lord's supper are sacraments.<sup>2</sup> An exegetical study leads to the following essential conclusions :

1. Baptism in its Christian form and the Lord's supper are ceremonies instituted by Christ (cf. Mt. xxviii. 19 ; Mk. xvi. 16 ; Mt. xxvi. 26-29 ; Mk. xiv. 22-25 ; Lk. xxii. 14-20 ; 1 Cor. xi. 23-29).

2. Their usage is perpetual, that is to say, it ought to be maintained until the return of Christ. Then they will be of no further use because the promises, being fulfilled, will no longer require to be preached, represented, or sealed (1 Cor. xi. 26).

3. Both of them are *signs*. Baptism represents, figures, and signifies purification ; the Lord's supper represents, figures, and signifies spiritual nourishment. The sacraments are extraordinary external signs which, commencing from sensible things, according to a predertermined analogy, are designed by God to display and explain to us, by making them more clear, those benefits which are invisible and eternal.

4. Sacraments are not only signs, but also *seals* which serve to confirm and strengthen faith. It is the recognition of the worth of this biblical affirmation which gives the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments both its original character and, at the same time, its grand precision.

<sup>1</sup> By this method we believe we shall avoid the reproach voiced by Th. Preiss against the classical notion of a sacrament when he says " that a general concept of a sacrament will always have a strong likelihood of being any kind of article introduced from philosophy."—*Le Baptême des enfants*, Verbum Caro, Aug. 1947, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Thus all other ceremonies of divine or human institution in which these characteristics are not found will be excluded from the category of sacraments.

Seals are distinct from signs in that they not only remind us of invisible things, but also authenticate these things to our religious consciousness by making them more certain and sure to us. During our daily practical life we constantly make use of seals, tokens for combating fraud, falsehood, and counterfeits. It is, in fact, necessary to distinguish the true from the false, what is authentic from what is not, the original from the counterfeit. A trade mark serves to authenticate and guarantee the source and quality of a product. Hall-marks declare the standard of alloy, the exact value, and the nationality of gold or silver articles. On weights and measures they testify to the accuracy of the inscription by reference to the scientifically determined original which they represent. Stamps, seals, and signatures guarantee the perfect authenticity of an important document—and so on. Scripture attests the usage of seals when there is concern to prove that something is really authentic and when it is of importance to guarantee it against all falsification.<sup>1</sup> Men, therefore, take great trouble to guarantee the authenticity of their actions, their thoughts, their products, and to preserve them to the greatest possible degree from all profanation.

It is a fact of capital importance that Scripture teaches us that God does the same thing with regard to His works, His Son, the Church, and those who are dear to Him; He seals them with His seal in order to guarantee the authenticity, whether it be of persons or of things, and also with a view to their being preserved from all profanation.

The living God possesses His seal (Rev. vii. 2). He places a seal upon the Book of Judgment of such a kind that no one except the pure and spotless Lamb is able to open and read it (Rev. vi. 1, etc.). He seals the entrance of the abyss into which Satan is cast, so that he is no longer able to deceive the nations (Rev. xx. 3).

God does the same thing with people who are dear to Him.

<sup>1</sup> Scripture informs us that seals were placed on the letters of princes (1 Ki. xxi. 8; Neh. ix. 38; Esth. iii. 12) or of other persons (Jer. xxxii. 10), on laws which had been promulgated (Isa. viii. 16), or on important books (Dan. xii. 4; Rev. xxii. 10). In order to safeguard them from all interference the den of lions of Daniel (Dan. vi. 18) and Christ's tomb (Mt. xxvii. 66 ff.) were sealed.

By means of numerous signs He marks the Messiah with His seal so that no one may doubt that it is He who gives the food which endures unto everlasting life (Jn. vi. 27). He seals all believers with the Holy Spirit in order that as heirs they may be kept for the coming day of redemption (2 Cor. i. 22; Eph. i. 13; iv. 30). In blessing the work of the Apostle Paul, God gives him a seal which confirms his apostleship: "You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord," says Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. ix. 2). God places His seal on the building of the Church for the purpose of assuring and guaranteeing that it is His personal property (2 Tim. ii. 19).

Holy Scripture teaches that in a similar manner the sacraments are seals. It was thus that Abraham received a seal in the sign of circumcision (Rom. iv. 11), that is to say, a confirmation, a ratification, a guarantee of the righteousness which he had obtained through faith. Eph. i. 13 and iv. 30, which in the opinion of the exegetes have reference to baptism, show that baptism is also described as a seal.<sup>1</sup>

Sacraments therefore are not only signs, *but also seals* which are affixed to the Word, in order that this Word may be apparent to us in all its veracity, in all its trustworthiness, and in all its certainty—apparent to *us*: for it goes without saying that, taken in itself, *the Word* of God, inasmuch as it is the *Word of God*, is sufficiently sure, true, and veracious for it not to require any confirmation. It is to our conscience, our heart, our spirit, that God confirms His Word by the *seal* which the sacrament impresses on it for authenticating it and preserving it from all doubt and profanation. The sacraments do not help God; they help us.

Karl Barth<sup>2</sup> is in full agreement on this point. F.-J. Leenhardt is not. For the latter, the sacraments are not seals. This proceeds quite plainly from the fact that (*a*) if we have read him accurately, the word "seal" is used only once in the development of his thought,<sup>3</sup> and, as though by

<sup>1</sup> O. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 45 f., 57. It seems that it is impossible for F.-J. Leenhardt to deny this fact after having given his exposition of the relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit, although he refuses here, as far as the terms are concerned, to see anything other than a play on words.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

accident, in the last line of his exposition ; (b) this notion is explicitly remote from the definition of a sacrament adopted by Leenhardt<sup>1</sup>—" It is sufficient to say that the sacrament is the visible sign of an invisible grace, as the Reformed tradition repeatedly says " ; (c) he directly denies it : " No one will find the least demonstrative value in the fact invoked by O. Cullmann that Paul calls circumcision a seal and that he employs the verb ' to seal ' in alluding to baptism " (Rom. iv. 11 ; Eph. i. 13, iv. 30). But the fact invoked by Cullmann has long since been regarded and still is today regarded by the whole Reformed school as classical. To our mind such an exegesis is perfectly regular and is invested with an evident demonstrative value. The Apostle's language is of sufficient precision for the same root, employed in the form either of a verb or of a substantive, to be able to have the same meaning in two distinct passages. Leenhardt seems to us to be unwilling for his thought to be confined within the limits of precise language. We must confess that, in this matter, we have had some difficulty in apprehending Leenhardt's thought exactly. For this we may be partly to blame, but it should be stated that the task is not made easier by the frequently unprecise vocabulary of the author.

As for the definition of a sacrament adopted by Leenhardt—" the visible sign of an invisible grace " <sup>2</sup>—we are obliged to contest the assertion that it is the " traditional formula " of the " Reformed tradition." <sup>3</sup> Giving the words their meaning, this is exactly Peter Lombard's definition of a sacrament, and if it has found a place in Protestantism it is not, however, in *Reformed* but in *modernist* tradition, whether it be the modernism of the sixteenth century or that of today. Leenhardt's definition is not that of any of our confessions of faith, nor of any *Reformed* dogmatics or exegesis. It is no use insisting on the importance of the consequences which result from the laying down of such a definition at the commencement of his treatise. The author himself indicates its gravity : " The interpretation of all the New Testament teaching on baptism is responsible for a certain notion of a sacrament. Besides, and by way of

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14, 64, 65, 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

consequence, the ecclesiastical doctrine of baptism will similarly depend on the positions taken up from the beginning on this question.”<sup>1</sup> That is obvious, and it provides the reason why we cannot agree with Leenhardt on several of his subsequent conclusions. Here the point of departure is *decisive*. Is the method in which the significance of a sacrament has been sought,<sup>2</sup> without any comparison with the sacraments, legitimate? Leenhardt puts the question<sup>3</sup>: “What position conformable to the Reformed tradition itself could have been adopted apart from that which we, Karl Barth and I, have adopted?” To this we can only reply: *the position of the Reformed tradition itself*, which you are trying to depict. Apart from this, we are far from concluding that, on this point, the positions of Leenhardt and Karl Barth are identical.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 11-1.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14.    <sup>3</sup> *Foi et Vie, op. cit.*, p. 78.