

PREFACE

There are several convictions which have contributed to the shape, the approach, and the content of this essay in sacramental theology. First of all, this essay is the expression of a high valuation of the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace, representing spiritual realities by whose observance the Church and its members celebrate the life they are given in Christ which is life indeed. The dominical sacraments are symbolic actions representing God's renewing action in its universal, global, and even cosmic scope, and therefore confront us men with issues of life or death, with ultimate meanings, and with the choice of our destinies. They are actions in which the Church as the community of faith and people of God becomes concrete in historical actuality and bears witness to the redemptive power of God before the world. They are gifts to confirm faith, which is to say, to nurture spiritual life.

Such an appreciation of the sacraments of the gospel is not an advocacy of "sacramental religion" in distinction from "evangelical religion" or a depreciation of the preaching of the Word. Rather, such an appreciation is grounded in the understanding of the Church's rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper as dramatic enactments, employing visible elements and actions and interpretative words, spoken and heard, representing the essential Christian message—the same message which is the content of preaching. We are not confronted with a necessity to grade baptism as more or less important than the Lord's Supper; nor are we obliged to grade the importance of preaching in relation to eucharistic worship or vice versa. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and preaching are distinct actions of the Church, but their distinction is not one of levels of significance. Each of these actions is to be highly valued because each is done in obedience to the Lord of the Church and with His promise. Nor is any to be too highly valued as a rite, for each of these actions is done in the knowledge that it is not the rite itself but the Holy Spirit who makes the Church's action effective.

The current practice and understanding of baptism and the Lord's

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Supper in many local Churches and among many Christians hardly reflects a great appreciation of them and often such appreciation as there is is not a means of grace. It could be questioned whether the depreciation of sacramental observance is itself the disease rather than one symptom of a deeper malady; for more than one observer has noted the association of moralistic “preaching” with depreciated sacramental practice and teaching. The fundamental issue—fundamental also for sacramental observance—is right apprehension of the gospel.

The second conviction is that sacramental practice and teaching must be orientated in our fullest and deepest understanding of the gospel of God. This certainly is no new insight. But it is the ever-old and ever-new responsibility of the Church of Jesus Christ to submit its sacramental teaching and practice to the test of the gospel. The fulfilment of the responsibility in our time requires an appreciation of the past; but a mere repetition of formulations embodied in the confessional statements of the sixteenth century, for example, does not fulfil the responsibility of the contemporary Church. The heritage of the Fathers, whether of the fourth or of the sixteenth century, is honoured by appropriation guided by the norm of the gospel, not by mere re-iteration of their formulations. The first obligation of a truly responsible sacramental theology is a critique of the questions to be dealt with and of the perspective and orientation in which sacramental practice and teaching are approached. The mere elaboration of the teaching of some selected era in the past leaves us unsatisfied, not because we are avid for novelty but rather because we sense that no degree of theological virtuosity can be a substitute for appraisal of practice and teaching in the light of the gospel and because the formulations conditioned by one milieu do not communicate the great motifs automatically to people in a different cultural environment.

The third conviction is that the effort at synthesis must be continued in sacramental theology as in Christian theology as a whole. Historical study and its findings are very important; but our effort—the corporate effort of the Church—cannot stop with historical studies of the Scriptures, of the Fathers, of the Churches through the centuries. Historical study and the appropriation of its results are themselves a formidable task. When to that dimension are added the other dimensions which have been made inescapable by the ecumenical movement and contemporary knowledge of man and the universe, the requirements of a constructive sacramental theology seem beyond the capacity of even gifted theologians who are men of profound faith. One is encouraged

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by the reflection that a constructive sacramental theology is a corporate undertaking to which many may have a small contribution to make. At any rate, the effort must be made.

This essay is primarily concerned with the perspective and orientation of sacramental practice and teaching rather than an exhaustive discussion of one or more particular questions. Some of the questions which have received detailed consideration in past and present discussions have not been explicitly treated here. Some questions have been omitted because they have been so well explored by others. A complete sacramental theology would require extensive discussion of the relation of the creative to the recreative or redemptive and sanctifying work of God; of the relation of Christ to His Church and of the Church to Christ. Such allusions to the work of the Trinity in the sacraments and to Christology and ecclesiology as are made will, it is hoped, indicate their importance for our subject. Some other questions have not been explicitly discussed because the concern was to suggest that what is necessary is a re-statement of the question rather than a discussion of traditional answers. For example, the mode of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not discussed. There is no intention to suggest that Christ is not truly present in the Supper; it does, however, seem that discussions of the presence of Christ in the elements have a presupposition which itself should be called into question.

The present essay is not a contribution to historical scholarship. It does attempt to recognize frankly the results of historical study not only in general but on specific questions as well. The hope is that this sketch may assist in a reconstruction of sacramental teaching, a more responsible ordering of practice, and a more understanding participation in the sacraments of the gospel.

It is hardly necessary to state explicitly my great indebtedness to writers, past and present; but I do wish to acknowledge the stimulus and help which I have received from my colleagues in the Consultation on Church Union and in the Theological Commission and other committees of the United Church of Christ.

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