

The Sacramental Basis of the Church's Life

LORD SANDS has recorded for us that Dr. Wallace Williamson "contrasted, with a judgment unfavourable to both, the evangelical who presses the claims of Christ and ignores His ordinances, and the 'precisian'—that was his word—who attaches supreme importance to the objective celebration of the ordinances, apart altogether from ministration to the needs of souls".⁽¹⁾ This viewpoint expresses correctly the attitude of the Church of Scotland to the Sacraments. We do not believe that, merely by their celebration with due form and order, God is glorified and the Church's life enriched in any manner independent of the faith and needs of the worshipping community. We do not believe that the form or occasions of their celebration are so rigidly fixed that the omission of some minor detail invalidates the rite. But neither do we believe in an evangelism which calls men to Christ without calling them to His Church. We deprecate the preaching of a "gospel" which invites men to a particular religious experience, with consequent loyalty to a particular religious vocabulary, but does not proclaim that the Ministry, the Word, and the Sacraments are part of the one true Gospel itself, all given by Christ to His Church, and that salvation is normally through faith in Jesus Christ and a diligent use of His ordinances within the life of His Church. We do not believe that the Sacraments are only symbols, pledging to faith spiritual realities which the soul has already received by faith and can as well receive without recourse to the Sacraments at all.

The Sacraments are means of grace. They "exhibit", i.e. in the sense in which this term is used in our Standards, they apply, or convey to believers the grace which they signify. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are Christ's own ordinances, which He Himself ministers to believers through the agency of His Ministers. "The sacraments thus deserve to be ranked along with the Word as true means of grace, and along with the Word of the Gospel can be called the power of God unto salvation".⁽²⁾ "Baptism and the

⁽¹⁾ Lord Sands, *Andrew Wallace Williamson*, p. 154.

⁽²⁾ R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, p. 160.

Lord's Supper are the two Sacraments "generally necessary to salvation".⁽¹⁾

Dr. John Macleod of Govan frequently attributed the decline in Church life to our neglect of the Sacraments. Dr. James Cooper once said that at the end of last century it was considered superstitious to attach much importance to Baptism.⁽²⁾ Yet one of the chief glories of our Standards is their full teaching on the Sacraments. To-day, we seem to attach more importance to Baptism, but are we clear what the importance is? After seventy years' endeavour to restore the Lord's Supper to the place it occupied in the worship of the Apostolic Church, frequent Holy Communion does not yet seem to be much desired by the majority of our people, and certain aspects of the Eucharist are still largely unknown or misunderstood.

There is urgent need for the Church to recognize afresh that her whole life is sacramental. Salvation is through the Incarnate Christ. The Grace of God is mediated to the Church by the Holy Spirit, and the Ascended Saviour faithfully administers His ordinances in the Church. The relation of believers to Christ embraces their whole nature, bodily and spiritual. In Baptism they are incorporated in His Body. In the Lord's Supper they are nourished with the Communion of His Body and Blood. Sacramentally they are united to Christ, but also to all believers. They are baptized into one Body. They partake of one Living Bread. The Church is Christ's Community on earth, the pattern of all true community among men, and is itself that Community wherein sinners find grace to live in community with their fellowmen.

In the light of the "All Scotland Crusade" and the "Tell Scotland Movement" we see the urgent need of giving the Sacraments their true place. Those who have made a decision for Christ must be spiritually nourished. No substitutes can take the place of the apparatus of grace provided by Christ in the Ministry, the Word, and the Sacraments. Those who have lapsed from Church membership and have been won back dare not be put off with some form of "getting together", instead of the fellowship which centres in Christ and His Flock gathered round the Holy Table. The experience of others is relevant. Olive Wyon tells that, "A young pastor of the French Reformed Church, speaking of the movements of renewal in his own land, said

⁽¹⁾ H. J. Wotherspoon, *Kyrie Eleison*, p. 169.

⁽²⁾ *Scottish Church Society Report*, 1917-18, p. 23.

to the writer : ' Wherever there is new life in our church, there is always renewed emphasis on three things : Prayer, the Bible, and the Eucharist . . . and these three go together ' ".⁽¹⁾ Renewal in our religious life in Scotland to-day cannot afford to neglect the sacramental basis of the Church's life.

Dr. John Macleod held that men can be urged to attend church only when they understand that in her worship " grace is offered which is not normally obtainable elsewhere ".⁽²⁾ Dr. Sprott expressed the conviction that " it is with the lowering of the doctrine of the Sacraments that unbelief has usually begun. The missing link in much that is called evangelical religion is the link of vital union with the Second Adam including that bodily nexus with His glorified Humanity, as signified and sealed in the Sacraments, which Calvin held as dear as life, and which has been so emphatically asserted in every standard of our Church since the Reformation ".⁽³⁾

In the majority of our new churches and hall-churches the Holy Table has central place and the Baptismal Font is given prominence. A worthy setting is being increasingly assured for the celebration of the Sacraments. The Orders of Service for Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the *Book of Common Order* (1940) are among the most widely used portions of that book. The Church has gone a long way to exonerate herself from Dr. Robert Lee's reproach that she, of all the Reformed Churches, stood alone in using no fixed order for the celebration of the Sacraments. Nor can we forget the large part played by the Church Service Society in securing a more fitting setting and a worthier form for the celebration of the Sacraments.

Nevertheless are the Sacraments occupying the place they ought in the Church's life ? Have we really entered into and taken possession of the doctrinal and liturgical positions won for us at no little cost and toil by the pioneers of this Society ? It seems that we have not.

More Baptisms are celebrated in Church than formerly, but stress is laid on the importance of the vows taken by parents or sponsors rather than on the action of God in engrafting the baptized into Christ and incorporating the baptized into the Body of Christ. Our services have become less didactic, more acts of worship, but are four

(1) Quoted in *The Altar Fire*, by Olive Wyon, p. 107.

(2) John Macleod, *The Normal Place of the Holy Communion*, p. 12.

(3) G. W. Sprott, *Scottish Church Society Report*, 1895-6, p. 16.

celebrations of the Lord's Supper instead of two, or even more frequent celebrations in which only a tiny fragment of the local church participates, a true fulfilment of our Lord's ordinance—as understood by Apostolic and Catholic tradition? God has doubtless blessed the Church of Scotland with many new agents and instruments for witnessing to the Gospel in the modern world,—the reconstituted Order of Deaconesses; trained youth workers; the “apostolate of the laity”; industrial and school chaplains; films, T. V., etc.; but that which is built up must be something less than the Church of God unless a more objective view is taken of sacramental grace and its fundamental place in the Christ-given Church order. We must teach and believe what our Standards teach—that in the Sacraments God is acting in such a way that we neglect His proffered grace to our spiritual peril. We need to take to heart the lesson Edward Irving tells us the sacramental teaching of the Scots Confession taught him: “It was this Article which delivered me from the infidelity of Evangelicalism, which denies any gift of God either in the work of Christ, or in the Sacraments, or anywhere, until we experience it to be within ourselves; making His bounty and beneficence naught but words, till we make it reality by accepting thereof; in one word making religion only subjective in the believer, and not elective in God,—objective in Christ, in order that it may be subjective in the believer; a religion of moods and not of purposes and facts; having its reality in the creature, its proposal of reality only in God. The true doctrine of the Sacraments will always strike this infidelity upon the head”.⁽¹⁾

Much misunderstanding has been created by confusing the significance of Baptism with conversion, as if Baptism were merely an outward ceremony confirming God's grace to the penitent, believing sinner, who has already declared his acceptance of Christ as His Saviour, as if faith must always precede Baptism as an indispensable condition. Such a view of Baptism rules out Infant Baptism. But the Church has from the beginning baptized the children of believers, because Baptism is primarily an act of God in which the candidate is passive. Conversion is an act of the human will, in which the convert accepts God's grace, surrenders his life to Christ, and pledges himself to confess Christ before men. “In Baptism the baptized person

⁽¹⁾ Edward Irving, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, p. 606.

does nothing, but only surrenders himself to Divine operation. True, he comes with confession of faith, renunciation of hindrance, and promise of fidelity. But these are not parts of Baptism; they are conditions of Baptism,—steps in the way to it. In Baptism itself the baptized is passive; so much so that the Scripture compares it to the act of dying, as the extreme instance of passive yielding into God's hands; or even compares it to the burial of the dead The contents attributed to Baptism are all of them acts of God; He engrafts; He regenerates; He remits sin; He calls and 'engages' us to be the Lord's. God does it, and it is done. But nothing is asserted as to our acceptance or use of this grace, nor our answer to this calling".⁽¹⁾

Baptism is no mere attestation of faith; it is a *means* of grace. Our Standards, which state so plainly that personal faith is necessary for the right use of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, significantly omit this qualification in speaking of Baptism as a seal of engrafting into Christ. "The over-emphasis on faith, making it a condition of Baptism, springs from a Pelagian view of human nature, which imagines that unregenerate man can choose whether to sin or not. The truth is that the unbeliever cannot but serve sin, and that it is only in Christ that it is made possible for men to disown sin and to choose Him. The optimistic doctrine of man that underlies theological liberalism denies this truth and so obscures the significance of Baptism wherein we are grafted into the Body of Christ and given power to choose whom we will serve".⁽²⁾

The Church must see that the true basis of her training and pastoral care of the young is Baptism. St. Paul based many of his ethical counsels on the fact that he was addressing "baptized believers". The grace of Baptism extends over the whole of life.⁽³⁾ The baptized must go on either to the confirmation or the rejection of his Baptism. Conversions should be looked for, especially at the time of the Confirmation of Baptism; indeed the fact of Baptism should act as an incentive towards it. Preparation of catechumens should be at least as much a matter of the heart as of the mind. But conversion is to be encouraged on sacramental and Churchly lines. "The doctrine of

⁽¹⁾ H. J. Witherspoon and J. M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, pp. 40-41.

⁽²⁾ J. Heron, *The Theology of Baptism; Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 8, No. 1.

⁽³⁾ cf. *Westminster Directory* "Of Baptism".

conversion is not preached either on a right basis or in a right aspect, except in relation to the responsibilities which devolve on us through our Baptismal ingrafting into Christ ; and, in like manner, the doctrine of the availing efficacy of the Sacrament of Adoption, whereby we were even in our infancy, made the sons of God through Christ, can never be rightly preached without involving, at the same time, the most fervent and ceaseless testimony to the need of personal conversion ".⁽¹⁾

Merely to stress the responsibilities of parents and sponsors is not enough, although even this could be more successfully done than at present. The fact of engrafting into Christ must be constantly explained and applied to the young. They are called to grow up in obedience to Christ and in devotion to His Church, to Whom and to which they have been united in Baptism. From Primary Sunday School to Bible Class they are not to be continually pressed to make Christ " the Hero of their souls " or to " fall in love with Christ ". They are to grow up in Him to Whom they already belong, and in Whose Divine life they already have part. The actual day of Baptism is more important than the day of birth, and could profitably be observed as of spiritual significance in home and Sunday School.

We are not to look for sudden " decisions for Christ " in adolescence, real as these can be. For Baptism is the initiation of a process, the beginning of a life in which the soul should be ever more closely united with Christ and with His Church, dying repeatedly to sin, and ever rising to higher levels of righteousness, by the Death and Resurrection of Christ Himself.

During the last hundred years many things have been restored to our worship which had been lost through Brownist influence or Episcopalian oppression. Frequent Communion, the Reformers' ideal, the subject of many injunctions of the General Assembly, is not a mark of Church life to-day. Yet Presbyterianism has rarely lacked advocates of weekly Communion. At the time of the Westminster Assembly Baxter was saying that the Lord's Supper " is part of the settled order for the Lord's Day worship, and omitting it maimeth and altereth the worship of the day ".⁽²⁾ In 1832, Dr. Brown, of Broughton Place

⁽¹⁾ John Macleod, " The Holy Sacrament of Baptism ", *Scottish Church Society Conferences*, second series, vol. 1, p. 179.

⁽²⁾ Quoted by Dr John Macleod, *Holy Communion and Frequency of Celebration*, pp. 7-8.

Church, published his pamphlet urging weekly Communion as a duty. Dr. John Macleod, an untiring advocate in the cause, said in 1887: "In these days of changes and improvements in worship, it is well to remember that all improvements are more or less spurious and defective unless the service of the Holy Table is set in order and receives its proper place".⁽¹⁾ Then in 1923, Dr. Cromarty Smith confessed that, "it is to be feared that there is yet in many quarters a disposition to regard Holy Communion as an opportunity for an introspective calling to mind of the actual dying of Christ, a kind of Good Friday meditation. It is needless to inquire how it is that such ideas have come to be entertained, and it is surely as needless to say that they are not in accord either with the teaching of Holy Scripture or with the Standards of the Church of Scotland. Doubtless at the Lord's Table we call to mind the Cross and what the Lord suffered there, but we do very much more than this. Our action at the Lord's Table is not primarily a calling to mind at all. It is commemoration, an anamnesis, an offering to God. As the Confession puts it, it is our 'spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God'. What must be taught is the joyfulness of the act. It is worship, the truest Christian worship; and if this were taught as it ought to be, the difficulty of persuading people that they must 'oft the sacred rite renew' would vanish, and so the day would be hastened when once more as in the Church's best days, the Holy Communion will be regarded as the normal, as it is the divinely appointed, worship of every Lord's Day".⁽²⁾

It is not enough to-day that the Church has moved away from the Calvinist ideal of bare places of worship, devoid of symbolism, and also from the Victorian central organ with bracket pulpit. Our finely restored chancels and finely designed Holy Tables must have more than mere aesthetic or psychological value for the worshipper. Too often they suggest absence of sacramental life, and are oddly out of place in a form of worship which still finds its centre only in the preaching of the Word.

It is time for the Church to talk less about the fellowship of believers one with another. It is time for her to make that fellowship a reality by giving the Lord's Supper that place which God has assigned to it in her worship. For

(1) *op. cit.*, p. 21.

(2) *Scottish Church Society Report, 1922-23*, p. 24.

only in the celebration of the Eucharist does the Church know herself completely, only there is she most visibly the Church of God. As we see the consecrated Bread and Wine passing from hand to hand, we no longer need to search for words wherewith to define the nature of our fellowship in Christ. We experience the reality. The grace of this fellowship is surely the Divine antidote to all that is petty, disruptive, uncharitable—and there can be much—in the life of the local Church. But much more, there is fellowship with the whole Church on earth and in Heaven. “So long”, said Dr. John Macleod in a sermon in 1892, “as the Church had the Holy Eucharist, she had a fount of joy which the world could not take away”.⁽¹⁾

We must guard against seeing in the Holy Communion only an occasion of experiencing the Risen Christ, one occasion among many occasions presenting themselves to believers daily. In this Sacrament Christ offers us the Communion of His Body and Blood. What do we mean by this? “The Body of Christ is that body which God prepared for Him, the ‘flesh and blood’ of our common humanity, which for our sakes He sanctified through obedience unto death: through the offering of which, once for all we are sanctified; in the resurrection power of which our mortal bodies are quickened for their rising. The Blood of Christ is ‘His life won through death’. His life as Risen and Glorified, the life human, yet Divine, from earth, yet Heavenly, once dead, now alive for evermore”.⁽²⁾

Our Lord has indeed promised always to be in the midst of His Church, but in the Lord's Supper He is present for an act which is unique among all the acts which the Church performs on His behalf and through His grace. “The Celebration of the Eucharist involves Christ as engaged in the very central moments of His mediation. It unveils Him in the essential acts which define the present ends of the Incarnation, His Intercession, His Benediction, His presentation of Himself before the Father ‘in the merit of His obedience and sacrifice’ it is a presence special to that act and moment, definite, official, ascertained, unqualified; for in this at least all is His own—there is no uncertainty of His consent—there is no doubt

(1) Minute of the Scottish Church Society, 25th November, 1892.

(2) A. W. Wotherspoon, “The Cup of Life”, *Transactions of the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society*, 1895, pp. 126-127.

but that as we follow He goes before us into the Holiest ".⁽¹⁾

But already we are being reminded by this last quotation of that important aspect of the Eucharist, first re-taught in the Church of Scotland by Prof. Wm. Milligan of Aberdeen and by Dr. John Macleod of Govan, namely the Anamnesis.⁽²⁾ In these times of crisis when the duty of intercession is so urgently brought home to the Church, we dare not neglect this sacramental act of intercession, in which the Church's intercession is linked by Christ's own ordinance with His supplications before the Throne. "In the heavenly places the Ascended Saviour, living unto God, presents Himself before the Father on our behalf, showing His Death and pleading His accomplished sacrifice'. He is there the 'Lamb as it had been slain', 'a propitiation for us'. In this act we are now one with Him: He is the Head, we are the Body. What He then does personally in the Upper Sanctuary, He in like manner does by our means on earth: uniting us to Himself by His Holy Spirit and ministering also in and through us before God. We co-operate with Him in His heavenly priesthood, sacramentally enacting here in His Name that which in the actuality is proper only to Himself ".⁽³⁾

Too often the prayer of Consecration, the Fraction of the Bread, and the Elevation of the Cup have all been viewed as the mere preparation of spiritual food. The emphasis has been on Communion rather than on Commemoration. We must see in this Sacrament not merely a remembrance of what Christ has done, perfect and all sufficient as is the sacrifice of the Cross; but also a memorial of that part of His Sacrifice which never ceases,—the appearing of Him before the Throne of God for us, who is the Living Sacrifice. We here have a part not only in what Christ did, but also in what He is doing now. As we set forth this Memorial which Christ has commanded us to make, as we plead His Eternal Sacrifice, He honours our action, He unites our action with His own in the heavenly places, where He, Crucified, Risen, and Ascended is "the propitiation for our sins".

Amid a plethora of organization, appeals for money, "special" services, "new angles", and acutely practical

⁽¹⁾ H. J. Wotherspoon, *The Pentecostal Gift*, pp. 142-143.

⁽²⁾ cf. Wm. Milligan, *The Ascension of Our Lord*; John Macleod, *The Gospel of the Holy Communion*.

⁽³⁾ H. J. Wotherspoon and J. M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, pp. 74-75.

insights into the social implications of Church membership, the Church must humbly confess that, having much, she lacks one thing needful for her life and witness,—the restoration of the Eucharist to its central place in her worship. After all the Church is called first to *worship*, and then to *witness*. It matters little what we in our time plan to do for Christ, if we are refusing to allow Him to act through us by a diligent use of His ordinances, by declining to adhere to the mode of worship He has appointed. For the Eucharist, celebrated in faith and obedience, is our great access to the Father, our strongest bond binding us as believers to one another, and the sanctification of all life.

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