

# PROTESTANT SACRAMENTALISM

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## I

Since we are incarnate, not disembodied, spirits, it is inevitable that inward spiritual experience should manifest itself in outward form, and in so far as our inward experience is dynamic and not static, then this outward expression will partake of the nature of a sacrament, ie it will be an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," not only expressing but also nourishing the inner state of mind.

A kiss between true lovers is not simply a physical event. It is a symbol and a sacrament, and their love is both signified and fortified by this outward expression. It is true, of course, that a kiss may have no sacramental significance whatever. It may be purely formal or erotic; its sacramental efficacy depends entirely on the extent to which it is an outward sign of an inward spiritual grace, but it is surely obvious that without such outward expression the inward experience will be cramped. Love may and can exist without such outward manifestation, but only with considerable difficulty. There may be circumstances in which it is impossible to kiss our wives, but in normal circumstances such sacramental expression is a necessary outward counterpart of our inward affection. It was surely for this reason that Jesus justified the extravagant act of the woman who anointed his head with precious spikenard in order to express fitly her love and devotion.

If we accept the foregoing theory of the nature of a sacrament then it will be seen at once that the whole of life may be charged with sacramental significance. A keepsake, a photograph of an absent friend, a smile, a handshake and a thousand other events in the physical world may have spiritual potency.

"And so each tiniest act and meanest ploy  
May grow instinct with sacramental joy."

We must never forget that such outward events have no inherent sacramental validity; it is only in so far as they faithfully reflect inward spiritual experience that they become sacramentally efficacious. (There is no virtue in matter per se: a sacrament is "a marriage of matter and spirit.") Nor must we forget that although these outward signs possess great value in expressing and nourishing spiritual experience they are not essential to it. But at the same time we are surely right in concluding that generally speaking sacraments are of inestimable value in expressing and nurturing spiritual experience, and life would be poorer without them.

## II

It is therefore natural to expect that sacraments will play a large part in religion, which exists to purify and exalt the life of the soul, and particularly in Christianity on account of its incarnational philosophy. The Incarnation is itself, in a sense, a sacrament, whereby the love of God is manifested in the flesh and made effectual in the lives of men; and the whole physical universe is a sacramental revelation of the unseen world. "The invisible things of God are made known by the things that are made." God knows the spiritual potentialities of the physical and clothes the world with beauty as a token of his love.

From man's side, also, religion has a sacramental character. The experience of seeking, worshipping and adoring God inevitably expresses itself in outward prayer and praise which is sacramentally efficacious in so far as it nourishes the life of the soul. Further, the actual form in which prayer and praise are expressed may have important sacramental significance. True worship is essentially objective, ie the mind is focussed not on itself and its own needs and desires but on God; it is accompanied by the peculiarly religious feeling of awe, wonder, reverence, adoration and creaturely feeling which Otto calls "the numinous," and it creates a state of humility, receptivity and obedience in the mind of the worshipper. The outward form of worship should therefore reflect these three mental states.

In Babylon Daniel prayed with his window open toward Jerusalem. It would obviously have been possible for him to pray with his window shut, but the open window fittingly expressed the attitude of mind he wished to preserve. But it was not only a symbol, it was a sacrament, for it helped him to focus his heart and mind on all that Jerusalem meant to him, and to exclude the heathen influences around him. Everything in the outward form which fitly

expresses an attitude of objectivity is therefore of sacramental value. It is better that worship should be conducted *with* the congregation rather than *at* the congregation (the minister occupying the traditional position, or better still standing in the midst of the people), and it is helpful if in the church building the eye naturally focuses on some sacred symbol, rather than on a row of organ pipes, a phalanx of choristers, or a central pulpit, if we are to help the worshippers to keep their minds fixed upon God.

Art can become the handmaid of worship to the degree that sacred music, poetry, architecture, painting, sculpture and dramatic ceremonial express an attitude of wonder and awe, though, alas, in actual practice, particularly in the case of music, church art is often largely devoid of "numinous" quality. Vestments subtly assist in creating such an atmosphere, and the traditional cassock and surplice are more satisfying in this respect than the somewhat drab and dull imitations which have found favour in many Free Churches. A central altar is a fitting symbol of the supreme mystery of our faith - the love of God towards the children of God, culminating in the sacrifice of Christ - and a continual reminder to the preacher that his task is not to air his own opinions, or deliver brilliant philosophical lectures or biting moral diatribes, but to set forth Christ and him crucified. The important part played by ceremonial lights from an early date (eg in the ritual of Candlemass) can no doubt be explained on the grounds that light is a significant symbol of God, and the beauty and simplicity of the flame of a candle may therefore assist in creating the atmosphere of worship. In every way worship should be as rich as possible in colour, symbol and artistic beauty, in order to express adequately our love and adoration of Christ, and to keep our minds stayed on the thought of him.

The condition of mental receptivity which true worship engenders is fittingly expressed by the traditional Jewish and Christian attitude of kneeling for prayer (*see Psalm 95:6; Daniel 6:10, Luke 22:41 and Acts 9:40*), although other postures may be equally effective and in some circumstances preferable (eg with uplifted hands, *Timothy 2:8*). There is sufficient truth in the James-Lange law that emotions are evoked by appropriate gestures to make us realize that appropriate bodily postures do help create or maintain and intensify mental states. A relaxed condition of the body fosters a relaxed condition of the mind; an attitude of physical depression intensifies mental depression; and the act of kneeling, being an effective symbol of a receptive attitude of mind, helps to strengthen that attitude. It is possible to pray without kneeling and to kneel without praying, but if we are not too proud to recognize that body can help soul we will readily admit that kneeling for prayer is preferable to the "Nonconformist crouch."



The extent to which bodily attitudes may reinforce the mental attitude of prayer and adoration will naturally vary with different types of people. Kneeling, bowing, or even genuflecting may come naturally to some, whilst in others of a more reserved character such practices would be exhibitionist or hypocritical. The criticism may justly be made that sacramental forms of worship are liable to degenerate into barren formalisms, but all outward expression runs the same danger, yet no one suggests that because in some cases a kiss may be meaningless and perfunctory we should give up kissing our wives. It is sheer cowardice to decline to use the means of grace for fear of misusing them.

### III

There is nothing in the foregoing irreconcilable with the doctrines of our evangelical faith (except, possibly, the plea for an altar in our churches, of which more will be said later). Yet in actual practice the Protestant churches, and particularly the Free churches of this country, are suspicious of sacramental forms of worship and tend to reduce them to a bare minimum. There is, of course, a growing recognition that for the expression of our deepest experiences ordinary language is an imperfect medium and only succeeds in discharging its high task in so far as it has recourse to verbal imagery and symbol, as is demonstrated so eloquently in the teaching of Jesus. The value of external symbolism and dramatic ceremonialism has therefore become more apparent. There has also been a tendency in recent years to make our church buildings conform, to some extent, to the traditional pattern, due to a vague awareness of the value of sacramental objectivity. It is also being increasingly recognized that we have concentrated almost entirely on the audible and forgotten the value of the visible. As Dr Sidney Berry has said, *"Protestantism let one of the Christian witnesses fall from its hands when it disdained to use the appeal through the eye."* But it is still true that we are shy and suspicious of any conspicuous degree of sacramental worship in our churches, and this is not entirely due to the slavery to custom. It is due also to an uneasy feeling that the introduction of a thorough-going sacramentalism would imperil our evangelistic faith, and that feeling has arisen because the only complete form of sacramental worship with which we are familiar is that of the Roman Catholic Church, and it is not realized that our objections are not really to sacramentalism at all, but to Roman Catholic sacramentalism.

The Roman Catholic insists that certain places, certain words, certain persons

and certain fixed forms are essential to the validity of worship, whereas the Protestant declares that the "where, when and how" are of secondary importance, and that to insist that certain outward forms are necessary to worship is to deny the free operation of the spirit and to run the risk of reducing worship to a dead formalism. Unfortunately in our protest against the Roman Catholic standpoint we have not been content to deny that sacraments are essential to worship; we have to some extent implied that they are of no use whatsoever. It is true that what matters most is that worship should be "in spirit and in truth," but that does not mean that the outward form is of no importance at all. Outward expression is not inimical to spiritual experience (God does not compromise his spiritual nature by creating flowers), and it may actually foster it. Just as God can stimulate our wonder and our love by the creation of flowers, so a fitting sacramental form of worship may stimulate our love and adoration. It is possible to worship God without specific sacramental forms; it is possible to worship God in a barn, but that is no valid reason for so doing if better accommodation is available. It is absurd to depreciate the value of sacramental worship simply because the Roman Catholic insists that worship is impossible without it.

Again, the complaint that sacramentalism distracts from the worship of God is really a criticism of Roman Catholic sacramental practice, which, though it may suit the more expressive Latin temperament, seems to us so fussy, effusive and overdone, that the very vehicle which is intended to help us fix our minds on God prevents us from seeing him at all.

The assertion that sacramentalism leads to sacerdotalism, idolatry and superstition is in reality a criticism of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, which is magical rather than sacramental, since it asserts that the elements are not effectual symbols but the actual body and blood of Christ, and that salvation depends primarily upon the offering to God by specially qualified people of the elements as a sacrifice, and secondarily upon the infusion of the divine substance into the life of the worshipper by the act of communion. Such a doctrine logically results in the creation of a priesthood without whom worship and salvation are impossible. It easily leads to a magical non-moral conception of salvation, and an attitude to sacred symbols which savours of idolatry, and to a penal doctrine of the Atonement which by implication denies the Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and creates a tendency to limit the presence and power of God to certain times and certain places. When the reserved elements were removed from a certain Anglican church by order of the Bishop a woman sadly exclaimed, "They have taken Jesus away !" Roman Catholic doctrine may not actually countenance such

gross perversions of the Christian faith, but that it is liable to foster them no one can deny. An Anglo-Catholic Manual of Devotion actually states for the illumination of the worshipper, before the prayer of consecration, "Very soon Jesus will be here just as he is in heaven," and at the offertory, "Now the Priest offers Jesus to God as our sacrifice of praise and for the propitiation of our sins."

But there is no reason why true sacramental practice should lead to this sad perversion of the Christian faith. Whereas the doctrine of the Mass tends to confine the experience of God's grace to one particular point in time and space, true sacraments are avenues to an indefinite extension of our experience of God. As Baron Von Hugel declares, "It is not the universal and the abiding, but the specific and the concrete which move the will." We rise from the particular to the universal; if we fail to see God in Jesus it is doubtful whether we shall see him anywhere. Jesus wanted his disciples to realize his universal presence, yet he instituted the rite of Holy Communion, and the fact that they found him at the Holy Table did not prevent them from finding him everywhere, but rather assisted them to realize the truth of his promise, "Lo, I am with you always."

Our suspicions of sacramental worship are therefore due to an unfortunate confusion of sacramental worship itself with its faulty and distorted exposition in Roman Catholicism, and it would be wise to endeavour to discover a form of sacramental worship which is truly expressive of our faith, rather than to allow Roman Catholic practices to slip into our worship to satisfy the craving of people for sacramental forms, or to take the cowardly and sterile path of denuding our services, as far as possible, of all sacramental significance. It is impossible in this brief essay to suggest how "Protestant Sacramentalism" can be worked out in detail, it must suffice to suggest possible ways and means in which the sacrament par excellence of the Church, the rite of Holy Communion, might be made more sacramentally potent without sacrificing the essentials of our faith.

#### IV

"The highest cannot be spoken, it can only be acted," said Goethe. This is doubtless an exaggeration, but it is nevertheless true that without underrating (as the Roman Catholic tends to do) the importance of the Preaching of the Word, which should in itself be a veritable lifting up of



the Host, we must recognize that the Eucharist is of central significance in Christian worship, since it employs the powerful medium of dramatic symbolism to set forth the truths of the Gospel, which are proclaimed by word of mouth in the pulpit. Both preaching and sacrament are essential ministries of the Word. To exalt one at the expense of the other is to destroy the fine balance of Christian worship. The altar was taken out of our churches because it stood, as we have seen, for doctrines which appeared to us to be irreconcilable with the Christian faith, and we have put in its place a more or less insignificant table, thereby asserting that the Eucharist is a Memorial or a Communion Service and not a sacrifice at all.

But even if we deny the sacrificial character of the Eucharist it cannot be said that our manner of celebrating the rite is always sacramentally effective in expressing the idea of Holy Communion. "It would be altogether unseemly if a fine banquet were not served upon a well appointed table, with fine linen and flowers and other beautiful things; how much more unseemly and profane if the ministration of the Lord's holy banquet were not both reverent and worthy." But in our striving after simplicity we have forgotten that the Holy Communion was intended to be, not a repetition of the Last Supper, but a means of realizing the presence of Christ here and now. "Do this," said Jesus, "with a view to recalling me." The Lord's Supper is intended to enable us to enter into spiritual communion with him, and if so, the more the Holy Table is like an ordinary table the less likelihood is there that the external form of the rite will suggest the supreme mystery of religion - the fact of God's communion with the soul of man. The externals of the service should help to create a "numinous" atmosphere, and we should show reverence for sacred symbols without relapsing into the Roman Catholic habit of treating them, not as symbols deserving of respect, but as objects capable of magic power, to be carefully handled. If we are not prepared to recognize the importance of the sacramental auxiliaries of Holy Communion, then it would be better, as the Quakers have done, to adopt the logical course of omitting Holy Communion from our worship altogether. As it is, it often seems oddly out of place in typical Nonconformist worship.

But are we right in refusing to recognize the sacrificial character of the Eucharist? Obviously we cannot believe it is an actual sacrifice without denying the very substance of our faith, but if it were an actual sacrifice it could properly be called a sacrament at all. It is possible for a Protestant to acknowledge its sacrificial character in so far as he maintains its sacramental significance, ie as an outward and visible sign of an inward

and spiritual grace. The actual sacrifice is made, as all Protestants insist, not by the priest but by God, and there is no reason at all why the altar should not be regarded as the earthly image of the invisible altar in the heart of God, just as the bread and wine are regarded as sacramental tokens of the body and blood of Christ. If we may place a table in church as a symbol of spiritual communion (which already finds complete expression in the act of eating and drinking), is there any reason why we should not place an altar in church to symbolize the sacrificial love of God? The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is surely obvious in the very words of institution, "This is my body, broken for you," and in the commentary of St Paul, "Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us." In fact it can only be a communion service if it is first and foremost a sacrifice. It is God's gift of himself to us which makes communion possible. Further, the offertory is the token of our sacrifice to God, in response to his sacrifice for us, and the pledge of our consecration to his service. We love because he first loved us, and self-offering is therefore the climax of the Eucharist. The actual offering should therefore come after the Communion, as it does in the ancient liturgies, instead of before it, as in the Roman rite, thus denying the real nature of the sacrifice, and it is obviously fitting that the offering should be placed upon the altar.

The altar has therefore a double significance: it is an outward and visible sign both of the altar in the heart of God and of the altar in the heart of every true believer. Whether we have a visible altar or not, we must have the spirit of the altar in our religion. If God does not give himself we cannot receive the divine love; if we do not offer ourselves he cannot use us for the fulfilment of his mighty purpose. But since we are celebrating a sacrament it is surely appropriate that the central sacrificial nature of the rite should be symbolically represented by the presence of the altar, so long as we are careful to make the form, of our service emphasize the fact that it is God, not the priest, who makes the sacrifice and that the elements are sacramental tokens and not actual spiritual potences. If a consecration prayer is used (and there is no reason why the consecration of the elements to their symbolic use should imply any material change) no set formula should be adhered to (to avoid any suggestion of magic), and it should be the act of the whole congregation, the minister leading the prayer from the midst of the people and not mumbling it at the altar. The Host is Christ, and the proper position for the minister is therefore not behind the table, facing the congregation, as in most Nonconformist services, but in the midst of the people, leading their prayers and with them receiving the Host's blessing.

The lay servers should wear vestments to signify the importance of their



function, and they should sit on either side of the altar and dispense the sacrament themselves to the people.

In some such ways the Eucharist, in common with all our worship, may not only be given the full sacramental character its very nature demands, but also become the means of visbly proclaiming, rather than denying, the essential priciples of our faith.

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