

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE SCOTTISH DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

I

IN the Larger Catechism of 1648 (Q. 164) a Sacrament is described as “an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in His Church to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the Covenant of grace the benefits of His mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith and all other graces”. That is to say, a Sacrament has three different aspects or functions.

(a) *A Sign*. It is a “Sign”, symbol, or pictorial representation of the grace that is offered us in Christ. Thus the sprinkling with or immersion in water of Baptism is an outward representation of cleansing and remission of sin. And thus in the Lord’s Supper, by the broken bread and poured-out wine, the Lord Jesus “calleth us to remembrance of His Death and Passion” (*Knox’s Works*, 3, 73).

(b) *A Seal*. A Sacrament is a “seal”, assurance or guarantee of the gifts promised us in Christ. The Sacraments are “ministered as seals and visible confirmations of the promises contained in the Word” (John Knox, *First Book of Discipline*, chapter 2). So Calvin maintains “. . . there never is a sacrament without an antecedent promise, the Sacrament being added as a kind of appendix, with a view of confirming and sealing the promise” (*Institutes* 4, 14. 3). To weak faith or dim imagination the Sacraments come as sure outward visible pledges of the inner invisible reality.

(c) *An Instrument*. A Sacrament is an “exhibition”, means, or instrument of the grace conferred by Christ. The grace promised and represented is actually given. The Scottish Church has always deliberately, definitely, and strongly contended that the merely representational view is inadequate. Thus the Scots Confession of 1560 asserts: “We utterlie dampne the vanitie of those that affirme Sacramentis to be nothing else but naket and bair signes. No, we assuredlie believe, that by Baptisme we are ingrafted in Christ Jesus to be maid partakares of His

justice, by the which our synes are covered and remitted, and also that in the Supper, rychtlie used, Christ Jesus is so joynd with us, that He becumis the verray nourishment and foode of our saullis." Under and in the visible elements we find and receive the unseen spiritual realities and gifts.

The efficacy of the Sacraments, in all these three ways, is conditional on worthy reception, on faith or a right spirit in the attitude of the recipient. "All this, we say, cummis by trew fayth, which apprehendeth Christ Jesus, Who only makes His Sacrament effectual unto us" (*Scots Confession*, art. 21). "They confer nothing and avail nothing," says Calvin, "if not received in faith, just as wine and oil, or any other liquor, however large the quantity which you pour out, will run away and perish unless there be an open vessel to receive it." In fact, part of the divine purpose in the Sacraments is "to exercise the faith of His children" (*Scots Confession*, chap. 21). The proportionate degree in which they are efficacious in each of the various ways distinguished (as signs, seals and instruments), may differ with the individual and with the occasion. Thus, as a sign, the efficacy of the Sacrament will be directly proportionate to the conscious explicit intelligent faith of the recipient. Its efficacy or value as a "seal" or assurance will depend partly also on the intellect and understanding, *but hardly less* on the emotions and imaginative powers of the recipient. While, as an instrument, the grace conveyed through the sacrament will depend less on the individual's own conscious power of apprehension, and more entirely on the immediate or direct operation of the Holy Spirit. This last aspect is specially important, as it avoids any tendency to too "subjective" an interpretation, and demands the recognition that the grace bestowed is not in proportion only to either intellectual capacity (which varies with individuals), or emotional height (which varies with the occasion), but is the expression of the unfailing liberality of God the Giver, Who, as He has provided grace in His Sacraments, wherever they are humbly and worthily received, can be counted upon to reward faith, however weak or dim.

Two general features in this doctrine of the Sacraments held by the Scottish Church are worth particular notice. In the first place, the emphasis is always upon the divine rather than the human part in the rite, upon what God does rather

than upon what man does. Faith in the recipient is made an *essential* condition, but no more than a condition. Man must be prepared to receive, and desirous of receiving, but the gift is of God. The Sacraments, in their very essence, are divine, supernatural actions. For their content is nothing less than the free spontaneous unmerited grace of God in Christ; and how that grace is conferred and made man's, remains to the last a secret hid from human comprehension. Sufficient is it that they are given by Him to be the channels of grace, and that that grace has its source only and always in Him. This emphasis gives to the whole (Scots) view of the Sacraments a clearly "objective" interpretation or colour.

The other point worth underlining is that the divine agent in the Sacraments, He Whose operation alone makes them real and efficacious, is the Holy Spirit. Thus the Scots Confession of 1560 asserts: "This union and communion which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus in the ryght use of the Sacraments is wrocht by operation of the Holy Ghost." So also Calvin: "The Sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, Whose energy alone penetrates the heart, stirs up the affections, and procures access for the Sacrament into our souls. If He is wanting, the Sacrament can avail us no more than the sun shining on the eyeballs of the blind or sounds uttered in the ears of the deaf" (*Institutes*, Book 4, 14. 9). So also in the Prayer before Baptizing and in the Prayer of Consecration at the Eucharist, it is the Scottish practice always to invoke the presence and operation of the Spirit. This emphasis on the place and work of the Holy Spirit determines and gives its distinctive colour to the sense in which the "Real Presence" is understood in Scottish Presbyterian doctrine. Though the primary and essential content of the Sacraments is Christ and His grace, yet the Spirit is thought of as the minister who both leads the soul to Christ and brings Christ's grace to the soul.

II

BAPTISM

To turn now to the particular Sacraments: Baptism is the divinely-appointed rite of initiation into the Christian Church. "It is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible

Church . . . till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to Him" (*Westminster Confession*). In its visible symbolism it is both a picture and a pledge to believers of the cleansing and regenerating Spirit of Christ, Who is willing and able to free them from the stain and the power of sin, and so to make them truly the children of God. On this symbolic aspect of the Sacrament general agreement is found throughout Christendom.

But that in the doctrine of the Scottish Church it is more than a mere symbol or picture of the operation of divine grace, is made clear. ". . . By the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost" (*Westminster Confession*). That is to say, Baptism is, in the full sense of the word, a real means of grace: what is represented in the sprinkling of water is, if there be faith, actually effected by the Holy Spirit; that operation of the Spirit being not independent of, but in definite relation to, the Sacrament. This is not to say that Baptism is, in every case without exception, absolutely necessary to regeneration and salvation; that would be presumptuously to limit both God's power and His love. Nor is it true that in every case, without exception, Baptism effects salvation; for it is tragically possible to quench or refuse access to the Spirit. Yet, with these qualifications, it remains true that this Sacrament is normally an instrument and vehicle of God's cleansing and saving grace. He who comes to the Font in penitence and faith, finds there a fountain to wash him clean from his sins, and is made sacramentally "a new man in Christ Jesus".

The Scots Church has always claimed that the proper subjects of Baptism are not only those who have professed their faith in Christ, but also the children of such believers of whatever age. To refuse Baptism to such infants would imply the view that children cannot be regenerated and belong to the household of faith, a view contrary to the age-long faith of the Church, to the teaching of Scripture, and to the words of our Lord Himself: "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

The efficacy of Baptism in the case of adults, as the appointed rite by or through which the Holy Spirit operates in the remission of sin and regeneration of the nature of the individual, is readily comprehensible, and in harmony with the view of the Sacraments as conditioned by faith. Since,

in the case of adult Baptism, the grace bestowed follows upon penitence and faith, and is the response of God to the conscious desire of the recipient. The case of infant Baptism is apparently on a rather different footing, and presents the difficulty that the child can have, at the time, no conscious desire for, faith in, or understanding of, the sacrament; and therefore cannot receive the full gift offered by it. The Scottish Church deals with this point by teaching that "the efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered, yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own Will, in His appointed time".

The efficacy of the sacrament, that is to say, in the sense of grace conveyed as well as represented, is as certain and real in the case of children as of adults. But the grace need not be an instantaneous and complete gift, but may extend over years and may come into full operation only in later personal experience—this later experience of its effects, however, being qualified by and connected with the Baptism of the individual. Through the Sacrament, the divine gift promised is actually given; though not necessarily at the moment of its administration nor then in full. The last word must, in any case, be with God; and who shall limit the ways in which He can work, or set arbitrary bounds to the gifts which He can bestow even upon a little child?

III

THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper, Eucharist, or Holy Communion, has two distinct though closely-allied aspects. On the one hand, the broken bread and poured out wine are visible symbols and reminders of the Sacrifice of Calvary, in which Christ our Saviour gave His Body to be broken, and poured out His Blood, in His redemption of us men from the bondage and penalty of sin. The communicants are "to take and eat the bread and to drink the wine in thankful remembrance that the Body of Christ was broken and given, and His Blood shed, for them". So is this Sacrament, wherever and whenever celebrated, a perpetual sign of the passion and death of the

Lord Jesus: and a pledge of the benefits therein offered of pardon and peace and reconciliation with God.

The other central aspect of this sacrament is that of a Feast, in which the believing communicant not only holds spiritual communion with Christ himself, but becomes an actual partaker in His life; being thereby purified, strengthened, and refreshed in the inner man. This aspect of the rite is very clearly brought out and emphasized in the standards of the Scottish Church, e.g., *Shorter Catechism*, Ques. 96: "Worthy receivers are not after a corporal and carnal manner but by faith made partakers of His Body and Blood, with all His benefits to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace." The essence then of the Sacrament is a "union and communion" with Christ himself so close and intimate that we thereby share in His very life and become heirs of the immortality which is His by divine right. This implies, on the Divine side, to express it in the most general terms possible, nothing less than "the self-communication of Christ Who gives Himself in the Supper to be the meat and drink of our soul". How this self-communication of Christ is effected cannot ultimately be explained. It is a fact which finds its credentials not in dogmatic description, but in personal experience. Nevertheless it is this experience of an intimate mystic communion with God in Christ which is the very heart of the Sacraments.

The question inevitably arises here: "What is the part played by the material elements in this mystical experience?" The Scots Church has always definitely repudiated the theory that the bread and wine are actually changed by consecration into the physical Body and Blood of Christ. The doctrine of Trans-substantiation seems to them neither sufficiently intelligible nor sufficiently spiritual, nor to be borne out by Scripture. They recognize in the consecrated elements, not the source of the grace offered, nor the grace itself, but channels through which the grace is truly conveyed. In the Sacrament, the material is not changed; but the material becomes the instrument or vehicle of the spiritual. As once a woman, touching the hem of the garment of Jesus, felt virtue flow from Him into her whole being, so . . . taking in faith these simple things of bread and wine, through them we receive the life and strength of Christ our Lord.

Nevertheless, a point to be emphasized is that the Scottish

Church conceives of the grace of this Sacrament as being communicated not by the elements in themselves but by the sacramental action as a whole. Through the bread and wine, that grace is made ours; but only as the bread and wine are rightly used and in their proper setting; namely, prayer, the words of Holy Scripture, and the fellowship of the Church Catholic. These things also, though in a subsidiary sense, are vital parts of the Sacrament. Thus it is that in the doctrine of the Scottish Church, the "Real Presence" of Christ is thought of in a wider and less localized manner: not in the consecrated elements, but in the whole sacramental action; not so much merely upon the Holy Table as presiding over the Feast and Himself distributing among the worshippers His sacramental Gifts. The Feast is His: the bread and wine, blessed in His Name, are His. Receiving them as from His Hand, we truly partake of His very life.

IV

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE SCOTTISH CHURCH

One or two important facts of a general character emerge from the briefest statement and consideration of this subject.

(1) The Scottish Church has never at any stage of her history, either minimized the value of the Sacraments, or countenanced any laxity in their administration, or permitted the neglect of them. The very practice which may have seemed to strangers to be the result of indifference, namely, the infrequency of celebrating the Lord's Supper, is, in reality, due to an almost awesome (if wrongly applied) conception, of the sacredness of the rite.

(2) The doctrine of the Sacraments held in Scotland is much "higher" and more objective than is usually realized. They are not merely symbolic ordinances, but actual means of grace; communicating to men that which they signify; of divine appointment and of divine content and significance; efficacious and generally necessary for the purification, strengthening, and sustaining of the spiritual life.

(3) Nevertheless the Scottish Church alike in her official standards and in her popular teaching, does not attempt to describe standards and in her popular teaching, does not attempt to describe in clear logical terms the method of the operation

by which grace is conferred upon the recipient. She is willing to accept, both as a warrant for their use and as a description of their gifts, the simple and familiar, but infinitely profound, language of Holy Scripture. She is willing to admit that as Luther says, "all doctrines regarding Sacraments are like the stammerings of an infant". Because at the heart of these supernatural acts the reverent, humble, and grateful heart will always find, and will even welcome, mystery. "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?"

(4) It seems that along such lines the Scottish Church is peculiarly fitted to point the way to a possible "rapprochement" among the various branches of the Church Universal on this crucial and difficult matter of the Sacraments. She would suggest the definite acceptance of a "via media", to be discovered, however, not so much by compromise of principles on either side, as by the recognition rather that complete clearness and consistency of dogma on this subject is, by its very nature, not only undesirable but impossible. Such a "via media", as offered for example in the Scots Confession of 1560, would keep a "high" view of the Sacraments, as being essentially supernatural acts: would recognize their necessity, under normal conditions, for the growth in grace of all Christians: would insist on their valid administration according to proper form and matter, and by properly ordained ministers of the Church. But, on the other hand, such a "via media" would neither seek nor desire a clearcut logical theory as to the precise effects and methods of operation of the Sacraments: agreeing, simply, that they are divinely-instituted and divinely-regulated acts by which God, through His Holy Spirit, confers upon men in their frailty the forgiveness, strength, and life that are in Christ Jesus our Lord. Upon the conviction that the Sacraments offer such gifts, all Christians could surely agree. More than the knowledge that such gifts are thus conferred, no man or church need surely require.

A. NEVILLE DAVIDSON.

Glasgow Cathedral, Glasgow.