

The Christian Sacraments

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The Christian sacraments, specifically baptism and the Lord's Supper, are essential means of grace that represent a person's decision to follow Christ and their entrance into the kingdom of God.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Mark 14:22, John 6:53, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 10:16, 1 Corinthians 11:23, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Titus 3:4

Topics: "Christian Sacraments", "Means Of Grace"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the significance of Christian sacraments, emphasizing their personal intention, symbol of grace, and means of grace. Each sacrament serves as a token of personal Christian intention, symbolizing events in grace such as regeneration and redemptional union with Christ, and acting as a means to open up one's inner life to the Spirit of God for Christian growth. The discussion also touches on the number of sacraments, the formula of Christian baptism, the mode of baptism, and the mystical experience of communion in the Lord's Supper.

Transcript

Coming now closer to the Christian sacraments, we find that they have, without losing at all their societal significance in the organism of the church, very important functions in relation to the Christian person himself.

1. Each sacrament is a token of personal Christian intention. In baptism the candidate expresses his personal intention of entering the church of Christ. Here his self-decision is something more than to submit to Jesus Christ as his Redeemer, it is to acknowledge Christ's command, and "to be a Christian man before the world." Thus baptism becomes a public profession of the faith. In the Lord's Supper there is no less an expression of personal intention, for the communicant, by his answer to the invitation, declares that he intends "to lead a new life." Thus the member of the church is made often to recommit himself to the Christian purpose, and so there is repeatedly a renewal of that intense personal bearing in self-decision which he had as a candidate in baptism.

2. Each sacrament is a symbol of an event in grace. Baptism is to us the symbol of regeneration. To be comprehensively true to all the different ways in which the writers of the New Testament associate baptism with salvation, we should, I think, use a larger fact than regeneration, and say that Christian baptism is the symbol of redemptional union with Christ. Allowing such usage, baptism would be, first, a token of personal intention to enter the church of Christ; and, second, a symbol of actual entrance into the

kingdom of Christ. But, as a matter of history, the Christian consciousness has never treated all passages of Scripture as of equal importance; and, in this instance, the Christian tendency has been to make baptism precisely a symbol of regeneration. The Lord's Supper is the symbol of the death of Christ, or, more exactly, a sign of the personal appropriation of the person of Christ in his death. By grace the person takes the crucified Saviour as a spiritual nourishment of soul; and the use of the bread and wine symbolize that deep event of grace. The phrase "by grace" means that the communicant receives the extraordinary aid of the Holy Ghost.

3. Each sacrament is a means of grace. We are to understand this point, first of all, in the sense that the full use of either of the sacraments enables a person to open up his inner life more largely to the personal operation of the Spirit of God, and this more searching work of the Holy Spirit always results in Christian growth. But, in this connection, there also comes to mind the old question of "baptismal regeneration," a question concerning which a sane word is now very much needed. Several Protestant New Testament scholars, in their exposition of "the washing of regeneration" (see Titus 3.4-7), hold that Christian baptism is, in this phrase, most closely connected with regeneration, not merely because it symbolizes it, "but also, and chiefly, because it effects it." At once we want to know what exactly is meant by the expression "effects it." If the intention is to teach that baptism is automatically effective of regeneration, or even that baptism is a fixed and only condition of regeneration, the view should be rejected; for it is contrary to the trend of teaching in the New Testament, and also is not the best interpretation of the Pauline passage involved. If, however, it be held that baptism may be such an energizing personal expression of the faith of a repentant man as naturally to prepare the way, or to render feasible actual regeneration by the Holy Ghost, I can see no forcible objection to the view. In other words, Christian baptism not only is a symbol of regeneration, but also may be a means of grace unto the event of regeneration. It does not practically follow, however, that a pastor should always be willing to baptize any repentant person. Indeed, as a rule, it is wiser, I think, to baptize men only after complete conversion.

The Number of the Sacraments. The discussion of the term *sacramentum*, as to its history and meaning, is of some interest, but of no great worth in reaching a decision concerning the number of the Christian sacraments. The question is, mainly, one of pure obedience in carrying out our Lord's intention as to what features are essential in the structure of his own church. He really organized his society about the preaching of the gospel and exactly two sacraments; and therefore exactly these two sacraments the church should have. It matters not how sacred and useful other rites may be, the Saviour himself did not place them in the organism of his church, and we have no right to enlarge upon his will. The name sacrament is not worth long contention, but baptism and the Lord's Supper should together have a name which is not given to any other feature of the church service, or to any other rite in sacred ceremony.

How far the new discussion of the significance of our Lord's last supper with his disciples and the origin of the eucharist (by Harnack, JÄ¼licher, and others) may influence Christian scholarship, it is now impossible to surmise; but I do not expect to see any essential modification of the consensus of evangelical opinion by this extremely erratic discussion. For Christian men, it certainly would seem that Saint Paul's statement to the Corinthians should settle the entire matter forever. In an article on the Lord's Supper in the Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Alfred Plummer wisely writes as follows: "In what sense is the tradition represented by Mark and Matthew 'the earliest'? That given by Saint Paul was written earlier, and is the earliest written record of any words of Christ. It had been previously communicated to the Corinthians. And Saint Paul had derived it direct from the Lord himself (1 Cor. 11.23). His words can mean no less. Had he merely been told by apostles he would have had no stronger claim to be heard than

hundreds of other Christians. The silence of Matthew and Mark does not warrant us in contradicting such explicit testimony, which would be sufficient, even if it were unsupported, for the unvarying belief of the church from the earliest ages, that it was on the night in which he was betrayed that Christ instituted the eucharist, and gave the command, 'Continue to do this [pres. imp.] in remembrance of me.' The proposal to place the institution of the eucharist as a permanent rite later than the last Supper is as unnecessary as the proposal to place it earlier."

The Formula of Christian Baptism. In 1 Cor. 6.11 we read: "And such were some of you: but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the spirit of our God." Such references to Christ in connection with baptism, together with the fact that in the New Testament there is no mention of any person as being baptized in the name of the Trinity, has led many to believe that at first the trinitarian formula was not used in the Christian sacrament of baptism. This belief I cannot regard as well founded. These references to Christ are to be taken, I am inclined to think, as mere statements of the fact of Christian baptism, with the emphasis, in rhetorical manner, upon Jesus Christ -- an emphasis which under the militant circumstances of the early church is just -- what one would naturally expect -- and not as exact indications of the formula used in the administration of the sacrament. There stand our Lord's words, "baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost"; and unless there is thoroughly convincing evidence to the contrary, we surely must suppose the apostolic church, so eager to do the will of their crucified and risen Lord, would carry out his last command.

Nor is the recognition of the Trinity in baptism an unimportant matter; for it is of the greatest concern that the Christian church fundamentally and perpetually recognize the fact that, while Jesus Christ is our Redeemer, redemption is the plan and work of the entire Godhead. The baptismal command of our Lord, in taking leave of his disciples, is as if he had said to them, "I have now finished my work on earth, and provided for every man the possibility of salvation, but you are ever to remember that this free salvation is not a gift from me alone; but is from the whole of God, even the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

The Mode of Baptism. Exhaustively to consider the question of mode in Christian baptism is a physical impossibility under the limited plan of this book. But, fortunately, the old-style discussion, which spent pages upon *baptizo* and the classical history of the Greek pronouns, is no longer necessary. Christian archaeology has changed all that. We now know what the early church actually did. All reliable scholarship is, I think, in agreement that the typical baptism in the apostolic church was in the mode of trine immersion. But from the very beginning, with the type ever at the front, there was in use a principle of liberty, a deep distinction being made between the essential act of baptism and the mere mode. The whole spirit of the situation is expressed in this passage from The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles: "Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water [that is, fresh-running water]. But if thou have not living water, baptize in other water; and if thou canst not in cold, in warm. But if thou have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit." This principle of liberty has been used by different branches of the holy catholic church until the typical mode of baptism has been thrust into a practical banishment, and the exceptional mode (and the most exceptional mode, too) has become the type. As Dean Stanley said, "It is a striking example of the triumph of common sense and convenience over the bondage of form and custom."

From the standpoint of the Baptists, Dr. George Dana Boardman says, "The church has no more right to change a divine symbol than to change a divine command." To this I would answer: If the church decides

that she can better carry out a divine command by changing the form of a symbol which she believes is not a divine command, then she has not merely the right, but even the obligation, to make such a change. Indeed, this same principle of liberty has been used by our Baptist friends themselves, for they do not practice trine immersion.

Dr. Boardman also suggests, as his *irenicon*, that the Baptists shall give up their insistence on immersion as a qualification for communion, and that the non-Baptists shall return to the primitive mode of immersion. This suggestion is made in such a large Christian spirit that one can only wish it could be accepted and acted upon; but it is out of range with the urgency of the situation which the Christian church is now facing. We are now fighting for nothing less than the whole supernatural peculiarity of Christianity, and such a question as the mode of baptism is, for the time, of no great Christian concern. The denominations would much better stay just as they are until this serious battle is won -- then there will be a new Christian perspective, and we all shall be able to look at our polemics in a new way, I believe.

"A Communion of the Body of Christ." For the sake of emphasis, I have kept for this place the deeper consideration of the Lord's Supper. This sacrament is, as was indicated, a general means of grace; but it is also a most peculiar means of grace, for it furnishes to the communicant the possibility of an experience which is properly called mystical. The modern Christian man seems to be afraid of this term mystical, but it is the only term which can indicate some of the highest Christian experiences, those experiences which are so transcendent that, like the peace of God itself, they pass all understanding. Allow me, in this connection, to say that the teaching of Zwingli concerning the Lord's Supper has been very strangely misunderstood. He taught something much more profound than "the memorial view," for he taught that the body of Christ was mystically present. And, in the Methodist church, the mystical presence has also been taught. Dr. Latimer's "dynamical presence," by which the communicants are "penetrated" so that Christ "assimilates them to himself," was Zwingli's view stated in a most inspiring manner. I say it was Zwingli's view; but I am not sure but Dr. Latimer intended to go further and to be almost as mystical as was John Calvin, who had an exceedingly profound and spiritual conception of the Lord's Supper. Had Calvin's influence only prevailed, the superficial Socinian conception of our Saviour's table would never have made such headway as it has made, although it fits into the rationalistic tendency to cheapen into clarity every feature of Christian experience.

In 1 Corinthians, the tenth chapter, Saint Paul says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread." In all of Saint Paul's epistles there is nothing more mystical than is this passage, and it is extremely difficult to get at his exact meaning. But let us earnestly try. The key to the passage is, I am sure, the one word *koinonia*, translated "communion" in the English text quoted above. What does this word mean? That it does not mean a mere "partaking of" is at once indicated by the fact that Saint Paul, in the last clause of the passage, expresses that meaning by another word ("for we all partake of -- *metechomen*"). Then, again, when we study *koinonia*, in its derivation, and as it is used in various connections, we discover that the pith of its meaning is in the idea of active fellowship. That is, a fellowship where both parties give as well as take. Now, is it possible to interpret the Lord's Supper in terms of an active transcendent fellowship? I think it can be done in the following way:

1. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, when used in a thoroughly Christian manner, become, under the operation of the Holy Spirit, the means of a transcendent realization of the death of Christ. That death not only occupies the communicant's thought, it also dominates his feeling. It becomes absolutely real to

him. It is reproduced in his consciousness. Spiritually, mystically, in overwhelming effect, it is to him as if the crucified Saviour, broken and bleeding, were actually there, in complete grasp by the senses. This is the mystical presence of our Lord's body and blood. And it has been the actual experience of thousands of Christians who have fully prepared themselves for this sacrament. This mystical presence is the first stage of Saint Paul's *koinonia*.

2. This realization of the death of our Lord is a means (again under the operation of the Holy Spirit) of an active fellowship with Christ. The believer absolutely yields his person to that transcendent vision of his crucified Redeemer, and thus enters into communion with Christ himself. Christ takes him, penetrates him, and "assimilates him to himself." Even the mystic's phrase, "He becomes a part of the body of Christ," I do not deem beyond the fullness of the experience. This is the second stage of Saint Paul's *koinonia*; and it is really only an intense emphasis in personal consciousness of that actual union with Christ which every truly Christian man obtains in his conversion.

3. This active fellowship with Christ is the means (still under the operation of the Holy Spirit) of a further fellowship -- a transcendent fellowship by the communicant with the Christian people who are about him at the Lord's table; and to just the extent that they are in active fellowship with Christ. Thus, one man can gather up into his consciousness all sorts and conditions of men, and enter into their sorrows and their joys, and live large moments of supreme unselfishness. And thus it is possible for a Christian society, all partaking "of the one bread," to become "one body." This is the completion of Saint Paul's *koinonia*, the communion of the body of Christ. And with a thought of the matter you will see that this communion is for the church but a predictive foretaste of the completed new race in Christ, as the members of that race will live in glory. Forever will the death of Christ be absolutely real to them; forever will they have active fellowship with Christ; and forever will they have active fellowship with each other.

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