

The Place of the Sacraments in the Life of the Church

The Presidential Address to the Church Service Society at its Annual Meeting, at New College, Edinburgh, 26th May, 1950.

THIS Address will naturally not attempt to deal with the theology of the Sacraments, but simply with their place and use in the life of the Christian community.

Last summer, while visiting the far north of Scotland, I came across more than one parish church where not only was no baptismal font or bowl to be seen, but the Holy Table itself had been set in a remote corner of the chancel—bare, uncovered and neglected, as though it was a piece of furniture seldom used. In one or two churches in recent years I have noticed that there was no permanent Holy Table at all. Presumably it was only carried in when required. So far as outward appearances were concerned, a stranger might well conclude that the Sacraments occupied, in such parishes at least, a quite subsidiary and comparatively unimportant place in the life of the Church. This is a charge which is in fact sometimes levelled against us in Scotland, especially by Roman Catholics.

Now much can, of course, be said in reply. The furnishings of most parish churches are more adequate and seemly. The Holy Table occupies usually a central place. We have our own sacramental customs and traditions which are very different from those of Rome. Roman teaching about the Sacraments seems to us to savour often of magic or superstition; whereas alike in mode of administration and in doctrine we claim to keep closer to the New Testament and to primitive practice. Yet I think, even after all explanations have been made, it must be admitted that the Sacraments are not valued among us as they should and might be.

There can be no doubt as to the part which the two great Gospel Sacraments played in the Christian Church of the earliest days. The Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles make this abundantly clear. Baptism was the

rite of initiation into the Christian life and the Christian community ; its outward form, immersion in water, being eloquently symbolic of the dying to sin and rising to newness of life by the power of Christ's death and resurrection. So with the Lord's Supper, instituted in the Upper Room on the night before the Crucifixion and observed with gladness and loyal devotion among our Lord's followers from the very beginning. From the earliest days there would appear to have been two types of Christian worship. There was the service of prayer, preaching and the reading of Holy Scripture, modelled on the worship of the Jewish synagogue. On the other hand there was " the breaking of bread," modelled on the Last Supper. In this service, Christian believers commemorated the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross, His body broken and His blood poured out, and gave thanks for His living Presence and risen power. This breaking of bread (as we are told in the Acts of the Apostles) was observed on the morning of the first day of the week, in celebration of the Resurrection, and constituted the distinctive form of worship of the early Church.

During the medieval period the simplicity of early sacramental practice was almost completely left behind. The Eucharist, as the chief act of worship, was surrounded with ritual and ceremonial calculated to proclaim its splendour and supernatural character. Gradually its meaning became stifled under ceremonial. Under an arrogant and often illiterate priesthood, both Baptism and the Eucharist became semi-magical rites, administered often without any attempt at instructing the people in their evangelical meaning and spiritual value.

Both Luther and Calvin, seeing the serious defects, alike doctrinal and practical, of medieval developments, were determined to return as far as possible to Biblical and primitive practice.

The Sacraments are historically prior to the Canon of Scripture in the life of the Church. But by a sure instinct the Reformers saw and emphasized the essential connection between them. Both Bible and Sacraments are means of grace ; both proclaim in different fashion the central truth of the Gospel : both witness to the great redemptive acts of God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In our Scottish tradition the Sacraments are never celebrated without the reading and usually the preaching of the Word. This close connection between Gospel and Sacrament is of vital importance.

One of the great achievements of the Reformers was to bring back to the Sacraments their true character and religious value, and restore them to their proper place in the life of the Church. The Mass, said by the priest alone and in Latin, became once again the Lord's Supper, a service which all could easily understand and in which the people could share. Instead of being a magical rite, it was invariably accompanied by the preaching of the Word. The Holy Communion at its best was in medieval times a mystical experience expressing the relationship between God and the individual soul. With the Reformation its corporate meaning was re-discovered, and it became an experience of spiritual fellowship not only with the risen and ever-living Christ but also with fellow-members of the whole Christian community—the Church.

In spite of the fact, however, that the Reformers succeeded in restoring to the people the Lord's Supper in something of its early simplicity, and in a ritual which all could readily understand, yet the value of the Sacraments has in the Scottish Church (partly because of the scarcity of ordained ministers for some time after the Reformation) been on the whole somewhat over-shadowed by emphasis on the preaching of the Word. This accounts for the predominantly intellectual character of traditional Scottish worship, and also for its comparative poverty on the devotional side. While in almost every generation during the last three hundred years Church of Scotland scholars and writers have made a contribution to theological thought, the contribution in devotional literature has been strangely meagre. A similar lack of the devotional spirit in the life and work of the Church and of individual Christians in Scotland to-day is, I believe, closely connected with inadequate teaching and administration of the Sacraments. The time is therefore ripe for a careful reconsideration of the place which the Sacraments ought to hold in the whole life and worship of the Christian community.

Baptism

Infant baptism presents certain serious theological difficulties, but from very early days it has been administered to the children of Christian parents. Baptism as a Sacrament is primarily the bestowal of God's grace. While we cannot understand how that grace is given to a very young child incapable of response either in understanding or faith, yet as Calvin says, we must not limit the gift that God

can bestow even upon an unconscious infant. In Baptism something happens, something is done by God, given by God, which is of inestimable importance. To receive or administer it casually or carelessly is a sin against the Holy Ghost. Baptism is also the receiving of a believer, or the child of believers, into the great visible family of the Church on earth.

There is a rightly growing feeling that more stress must be laid upon the responsibility of parents and guardians, both in the taking of the promises and the training of their children subsequently in the home through the most impressionable and formative years. Without such training, by personal example and verbal teaching, in the Christian faith and life, the grace bestowed in Baptism may come to nothing, like precious seed sown but left thereafter unwatered and uncared for. It is this neglect which explains why the number of children confirmed is much smaller than the number baptized. In the recent past there has, perhaps, especially in large city parishes, been a certain laxity in the administration of Baptism. Parents are permitted to make professions of belief which they scarcely understand and take promises which they have no real intention of keeping.

Under such conditions the spiritual efficacy of the Sacrament is obviously largely frustrated. There needs to be a new emphasis on the importance and privilege of Baptism, and much more careful instruction as to its significance, privately and from the pulpit. It should, except in cases of illness, always be administered in church, and wherever possible during public worship. In large congregations, where in the course of the year there may be too many children for all to be baptized at a Sunday diet of public worship, from time to time baptisms should take place "in face of the congregation," as the *Directory* commands. At least once a year there should be a service in which Baptism forms the central act, and at which the sermon is used to explain its meaning and its responsibilities. Parents who have seen their child sprinkled with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and thus received and welcomed into the gathered Family of the Church, are not so likely to view the Sacrament lightly or to take their vows carelessly.

The Church has also a responsibility in securing that children should as soon as possible after Baptism receive instruction both in Christian doctrine and worship. Hence

the Sunday School is not an extra activity of the Church but a central and essential part of its pastoral ministry. Even this, however, is not enough, unless it have the proper sequel. The *Westminster Confession* says :—

“ 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.”

Surely this means that, with the developing mind and conscience and personality of the child, the Divine grace is able to act more fully and freely. It can be frustrated or assisted by the conditions and atmosphere in which the child grows up ; hence the quite incalculable importance, morally and spiritually, of the influence, during the most impressionable years, exerted by both home and Church.

Baptism, however, especially in the case of infants, is not in itself complete. It points forward to its completion in the rite commonly known as Confirmation. However sincere and wholehearted may be the faith and intention of parents in bringing their child to the font for Baptism, he himself understands as yet nothing of what is being done for him and in him ; and there must come a day when he is able to take consciously for himself the baptismal promise, and receive with personal faith the gift of Divine grace.

Confirmation

This opportunity is provided by Confirmation, or what is rather loosely called often “ admission to full membership of the Church.” No subject calls more urgently for scholarly research and theological thought at the present time. Recently a special Commission was appointed by the two Archbishops to undertake this study in the Anglican Communion.

Both the origin and the administration of Confirmation are in the *New Testament* somewhat veiled in obscurity. So far as the evidence of the *Acts of the Apostles* goes, the “ laying-on of hands ” normally, though not invariably, followed profession of faith and Baptism. It seems to have been regarded as a final equipment for membership of Christ’s Church and service in His cause and kingdom. The rite of initiation as administered in the early Church (and still to-day usually on Mission fields) would consist

therefore of (a) Profession of Faith ; (b) Baptism ; (c) Laying-on of hands ; and (d) Admission to the Lord's Table.

Confirmation or the Laying-on of Hands has two aspects or elements. On the one hand it is an act of personal profession of faith and dedication to the Christian way of life by the catechumen. On the other hand it is a bestowal of Divine grace to enable the recipient to live a life of Christian witness in the world.

Both of these things are of fundamental importance. As Dr H. J. Wotherspoon says, " One religious value of a Confirmation explicit and fully administered is that it affords opportunity for that open confession of Christ, before God and man, to which the Christian instinct impels, and which our Lord requires. If instruction and the preparation of the neophyte have obtained their due result in decision and in embracing of salvation, this instinct becomes a demand which it is perilous to ignore. If the Church does not within its own Order satisfy the demand, the opportunity may be sought and afforded elsewhere in another form. Where the Church meets the impulse with opportunity, the decision of an hour may the more probably become the decision of a life." Or, as a report by a joint-committee of the Anglican Church well puts it, " The Christian needs to make a personal dedication of himself to his vocation as a soldier and servant of Christ. Confirmation is an important occasion for personal avowal and commitment in a public act of witness. It can be emphasized in terms which appeal to the adventurous nature of younger people. St. Bonaventura, for example, spoke of Confirmation as the Sacrament of Warriors. We are enlisted in Christ's Army at our Baptism, and we are sent on Active Service at our Confirmation."

This ideal of enlistment in a spiritual army is of special value at a period in history when the forces of evil in the world ranged against the Church are so strong, so strident, and so highly organized. We have perhaps been apt to lay too much emphasis upon self-dedication to Christ as of importance to the *individual* Christian. But it is of no less importance to the Church Militant. Loyal, convinced, and resolute recruits were never more urgently needed in the Christian ranks than to-day.

In the Church of Scotland, however, we have perhaps sufficiently stressed this aspect of Confirmation ; almost to the exclusion of what is the really more fundamental aspect. For Confirmation is much more than merely an act of self-

dedication or a ratification of baptismal vows. It is the bestowal of a Divine gift, the strengthening and illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. We in the Scottish Church have, I think, largely forgotten this sacramental character of the Laying-on of Hands. Yet to forget it is to miss the central meaning of the rite. One of the gravest of the sins of modern man is the sense of arrogant self-sufficiency. The Christian has, or should have confidence, but it is not confidence in himself, but confidence in the strength which God supplies through His Eternal Son. "The Christian life," says William Temple, "is a supernatural life. We neither make it nor discover it. God gives it, we receive it. And this is the truth of chief importance to the whole life and purpose of the Church. The most seductive and the deadliest of all temptations that come to man is the temptation to suppose that by himself he can achieve his destiny. It is false. Man can only be all that he is destined to be when God in-dwells him."⁽¹⁾ It is this vital truth which lies behind Confirmation. In receiving the Laying-on of Hands, we acknowledge our own human weakness and insufficiency, and come very humbly seeking the help of Divine grace to equip us for the battle of life against the world, the flesh, and the devil. In response to our asking, the answer comes. In response to our knocking, the door is opened. And as we listen to the moving words of the Confirmation Prayer, "Defend, O Lord, this Thy child with Thy heavenly grace, that he may continue Thine forever ; and daily increase in Thy Holy Spirit, more and more, until he come unto Thy everlasting Kingdom"—we know ourselves to be strengthened in the inner man, with resources of spiritual power far beyond any natural moral equipment of our own. There has been bestowed upon us the gift of God's grace, as we set out upon the Christian life with its high demands for purity, truthfulness, courage, unselfishness, love.

If all this is true, then Confirmation ought obviously to be a notable landmark in the life of the young Christian. The preparation for it ought to be as careful and thorough as circumstances allow, and the service at which it is administered as moving and impressive as possible. It marks a red-letter day in the life of a young man or girl, a day which ought to be forever memorable to them.

In many parishes throughout the country there is in this matter a deplorable inadequacy. Candidates for

⁽¹⁾ *Christus Veritas*.

admission to this fuller membership of the Church are often hastily prepared and casually accepted, and the service for their admission is invested with no special solemnity or appeal.

The minimum preparation should be five or six meetings of a special class, either preceded or followed by a personal interview between the minister and each catechumen. The Special Committee which reported to the General Assembly recommends that wherever possible Confirmation should take place at the principal diet of public worship on a Sunday. The hymns, the prayers, and the sermon should all be chosen and prepared so as to explain and express the two chief aspects of the rite : on the one hand the self-dedication of the young man or woman to the following of Christ, and on the other hand prayer for the grace of God through the Holy Spirit to strengthen and equip them for their calling. Catechumens should kneel, the attitude expressive of humble prayer and self-dedication. The minister should either lay his hands upon the head, or hold them above the head, of each individual separately. When thus administered Confirmation will mark a moment in the life of the young man or girl which they will never forget, and which again and again in face of later temptations and trials will strengthen and steady them.

The Lord's Supper

From the beginning, as already said, the Lord's Supper had a central place in the worship of the Christian Church. It was both a commemoration and a eucharist ; an act of remembrance of our Lord's passion and sacrifice upon the Cross, an act of thanksgiving and rejoicing in His victory over death, and His ever-living presence with His disciples.

In early times the breaking of bread, as we have seen, was observed every Lord's Day. Calvin and the other Reformers, in their determination to return as far as possible to primitive practice, desired to make the Lord's Supper the main service every Sunday. " Once a week at the very least," he declared, " the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in the Christian congregation." In this desire he was unsuccessful. He then suggested a monthly celebration in every parish, a practice also recommended in the first Scottish *Book of Common Order*, 1560, (*Knox's Liturgy*). In the end, however, Calvin had to agree to a quarterly celebration. Even this practice was found too difficult in many of the Reformed churches, and throughout Scotland

in the later sixteenth century the Lord's Supper was only administered once a year in most parishes, sometimes, owing to the grievous shortage of clergy, with even less frequency.

This practice of infrequent communion was confirmed by Puritan influences in the following century, and has curiously survived even up to our own time in most parts of the country. So that to-day in the majority of parishes Holy Communion is only administered twice, or at most four times in the course of the year. Obviously such a practice has had the result of laying a disproportionate stress upon preaching. This intellectualising of worship has coloured the whole life of the Church since the Reformation. Its value has been a recognition of the importance of the Word, and the resulting tradition of a very high standard of preaching. Its weakness has been a displacement of the Sacrament from its proper place in the life of the individual Christian and of the Church.

Until comparatively recently, however, the sense of the importance of the Lord's Supper was at least partially safeguarded by the customs and traditions with which it was surrounded. "Sacrament Sunday" was one of the great days of the year. It was carefully prepared for by services on Thursday and Saturday previously. The people were called to solemn self-examination and humble repentance. The tables were "fenced" by serious warnings and exhortations. Only after such a time of preparation might the communicant come forward in awe and expectancy to receive God's gift and sacramental grace. "Tokens" were distributed to those who wished to come to the Lord's Table, so that none might come unworthily, carelessly or frivolously, and thus do hurt both to their own souls and to the fair name of the Church.

What of to-day? In most Churches the Sacrament is still celebrated only twice a year. In many parishes there is no service of preparation at all. There is no encouragement of self-examination, no fencing of the Table. Cards have taken the place of tokens. These are distributed beforehand automatically to all those on the communicants' roll, and, often impersonally by post. They are handed in thereafter to an elder at the church door in order that a record of attendance may be kept. The congregation on so-called "Communion Sundays" is considerably larger than usual. Undoubtedly, in the case of a great many people, attendance at the Sacrament has become largely a

matter of custom, one of the chief motives of attendance being to secure that the name of the member should be kept on the communicants' roll.

The Sacrament has therefore almost become an extra—an occasional—service. Certainly little encouragement is given to think of it as a vital necessity of the Christian life and the central act of the Church's worship.

This displacement of the Sacrament from its proper place in the life of the Scottish Church is one of the greatest sources of its weakness. God has given us this great means of grace, that, along with the Word, it might constantly keep us in mind and heart close to Christ our Saviour, nourish our souls, and strengthen us to live the Christian life ; but we have lost our sense of its inestimable value. As a result the whole devotional life of our Church has suffered, and suffers to-day.

What can we do to remedy this situation ? I venture to make two practical suggestions.

(1) Let us restore the Sacrament to its proper place alongside the Word, as one of the chief divinely appointed means of grace. Our great traditional parish Communion services have a moving appeal and are of immense value. They symbolize with unique power the fellowship of the great family of Christ gathered about His Table. But it is surely our duty to provide in addition the opportunity of frequent access, instead of rare access, to that Table. There should be in every parish at least a monthly celebration of Holy Communion, whether it be the main Sunday service or a separate service before or after the ordinary act of worship. The Sacrament should be celebrated at all the great festivals of the Christian Year. It should be surrounded not with an atmosphere of solemnity and gloom, but with an atmosphere of thanksgiving and gladness, as a gathering of people rejoicing in the ever-living presence of their Lord and Master.

Those of us who have attempted to make the Sacrament more frequently available know how highly it is appreciated ; but it must be accompanied by frequent instruction as to its purpose, in the course of preaching and visitation.

Nor must the old, the sick or the dying be excluded by infirmity. The Sacrament should be taken to them in their own home or in hospital, as often as they desire it. This practice is still far too rare, but it can give immense comfort to those unable to come to Church, and provides for them a link with the gathered congregation.

(2) Let us separate attendance at the Sacrament from regulations about inclusion in the Communicants' Roll. A roll would be of far more value if it contained the names, not of members who come once in three years to Holy Communion, but who come with reasonable regularity to ordinary Sunday worship. The law of the Church on this matter has done, and is doing, untold harm to the sacramental life of the Church in Scotland. Until it is altered it will continue to encourage a low view of the value of the Holy Communion, and unworthy motives for attending it.

If we can recover a sense of the inestimable value and comfort of the Sacraments, as ways by which God directly communicates to us His strength and peace, equipping us for the battle of life and arming us against its temptations, its sufferings and its testings, I believe the whole life of the Church of Scotland would be lifted to a new level of spiritual power and confidence.

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