

The Place of the Humanity of Christ in the Sacramental Life of the Church

It belongs to the very essence of the New Testament Gospel that it is not concerned only with two dimensions of thought, with God and man, but with a third dimension in Jesus Christ in whom God and man are one and in whom there is a new creation. That is all-important, for example, in our understanding of eschatology. People like Bultmann and Dodd, Niebuhr and Tillich, think mainly in two dimensions,—of the act of God and the act of man, of eternity and time, and of the tension between the two. But when we think of eschatology in terms of the tension between eternity and time, time is always the loser, and in the last resort temporal relations become irrelevant or merely symbolic. That is true in varying degrees of all the four thinkers I have mentioned : in the last resort they all have a docetic attitude toward history. The witness of the New Testament, however, teaches us to think of the Incarnation not only as the assumption of our humanity in union with God but as the assumption of our frail temporal life in union with the eternal life of God. In Jesus Christ crucified and risen our time is redeemed and joined together in an abiding union with eternity : that is *the time of the new creation* which is the very substance of Christian eschatology ; it is the time of the new man which has its abiding reality in the time of the risen Jesus.

We have to think of the doctrine of the Sacraments in the same way. We are not concerned in the Sacraments only with two dimensions, with the act of God and the act of human response ; we are concerned above all with the third dimension in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and therefore with the new humanity in Christ Who is God and man, in which we are by grace given to share. It is His new humanity risen from the dead and eternally in union with God which is the *substance* or the *matter* of the Sacraments (as Calvin used to put it), and indeed of the whole Christian life in time and eternity. Jesus Christ is the *New Adam* and it is in Him, in our sharing of the humanity of the New Adam, that our salvation and our new life consist.

This is the teaching which we in the Reformed Churches owe to John Calvin who recovered it for us out of the New Testament. In this, Calvin owed a great deal to the Greek Fathers, notably to Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Cyril of Jerusalem. There was a tendency among the theologians of the Early Church to divide into two camps,—those of the Antiochian school who stressed the historical humanity of Jesus, and those of the Alexandrian school who stressed the eternal nature of Christ as divine Logos; but there was a third “school”, running from Irenaeus to Athanasius, which stressed the vicarious humanity of Jesus along with its stress upon the Deity and Lordship of Christ. That is where Calvin derived his theological ancestry when he thought of the Incarnation and Reconciliation in Christ not only as the mighty act of God on our behalf, but of the atoning obedience of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord and our High Priest. Calvin was, in fact, the first theologian to work out fully the place of the human obedience of Christ in a doctrine of atonement. He did not, of course, neglect the fact that it was *God* in Christ who reconciled the world unto Himself: but in unity with that he was the first great theologian since the Early Church to give a full and satisfactory account of the saving significance of the humanity of Jesus, and of the life of the Church as union with Christ through the power of the Spirit sharing in His New Humanity. The fruits of the atoning work of Christ, Calvin could sum up in the words of John 5.26: “As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in Himself”. This life which the Son has residing in His humanity He communicates to us through Word and Sacrament, so that we are given to share in the durable and incorruptible life of the Son of God, who has taken our humanity upon Himself for ever.

We may note, for our purpose here, three main respects in which the doctrine of the vicarious and saving humanity of Christ was so important for Calvin.

(a) *In regard to the Priesthood of Christ.* Only with a proper stress upon the humanity of Jesus can an adequate conception of the Mediatorship of Christ be attained and false notions of human mediation and priesthood be abolished. If what Christ did for us He did as pure act of God, then there must of necessity be a human priesthood to respond to it and convey it to man. But if Christ acted not only as God but as Man, and has once and for all offered man's sacrifice, man's response to God, then our sacrifice is

already made and our response is already offered, and there is no need for human mediation or a human priesthood. This does not mean that we do not have to worship God in sacrifice and oblation, but it does mean that our sacrifice is one of praise and thanksgiving for what is offered on our behalf, and that whatever we offer, even by way of thanksgiving, praise, and prayer or that when we offer ourselves in living sacrifice, we offer only "by the hand of Christ", as John Knox put it. Thus the stress upon the saving, vicarious humanity of Jesus determines the whole nature of the Church's life of prayer and worship.

(b) *In regard to Baptism.* If the whole course of Christ's obedience on earth was part of His atoning work, then the whole course of His life lived out for us from infancy to maturity, from the Cradle to the Cross, was sanctifying and redeeming in its effect. And so Calvin, following Irenaeus and others, held that our birth is sanctified by the birth of Jesus, our infancy by His infancy, our youth by His youth, and our manhood by His manhood. He took upon Himself the whole course of our human life to redeem and sanctify it. It becomes immediately clear that the Sacrament of Baptism has very definite relation to the birth of Jesus Christ from above by the Holy Spirit, and is concerned with His growth in wisdom and grace into the full stature of manhood before God and men. The Baptism of infants is thus grounded upon their sharing in the birth of the human Jesus who was born an infant for them, and who already gave new birth to their humanity in Himself, as well as upon His death and resurrection for them. At the same time Baptism is grounded upon the whole life of Jesus, and is our sacramental initiation into the life of the New Adam who was born at Bethlehem that we might be born again in Him, and who was raised from the dead for our justification.

(c) *In regard to the Lord's Supper.* As members of the New Adam or the New Man we are nourished by the life residing in Christ. And so one of the aspects of the Lord's Supper which Calvin stressed is that in it we are continually being nourished with "the vivifying flesh" of Jesus Christ who gives us to participate in the eternal life which abides in Him. This teaching is very fully and clearly expounded in several sections of the *Institutes* (4. 17. 7-12) which have had the profoundest influence upon our Scottish tradition.

All these three aspects of Calvin's teaching were taken over by our Reformers in Scotland, and in some respects they enjoyed a fuller and purer exposition in Scotland than anywhere on the Continent. John Knox's emphasis upon the priesthood of the Man Jesus, for example, was of great significance, apparent not only in his debates with the Abbot of Crossraguell but in the *Declaration of the True Nature of Prayer*, one of the richest documents for the understanding of the Scottish Reformation. Here the linking together of prayer and the Lord's Supper, on the ground of "the perpetual prayer" of Christ recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John, is of primary significance for the true understanding of the Sacrament. As Christ is the only High Priest, "He is the right hand by whom we offer anything unto the Father". It is by Christ that our prayer at the Eucharist is offered, or to put it otherwise: Christ's high-priestly prayer (which we are given to overhear in John 17) is behind our prayer at the Eucharist when we spread forth the bread and wine and pray in Christ's name. It is in prayer and intercession at the Lord's Supper that John Knox saw the true "priestly character" of our ministry, involving not only the prayer of thanksgiving but also of intercession in Christ.

Along with this, particularly in relation to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, belongs what the *Scots Confession* called "that most blessed conjunction, union and society which the elect have with their Head Jesus Christ". All our standards and catechisms contain this doctrine of union with Christ, but it is principally in the earlier ones that it is expressed most fully, and nowhere better or more beautifully than in the Catechisms of John Craig. It was this, too, that formed such a powerful ingredient in the celebrated *Sermons on the Sacrament* of Robert Bruce. It was in fact this doctrine that contributed so much to the depth and to the wealth of our Scottish conception of the Church and of the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and it is still at this point that the Church of Scotland stands decidedly nearer to the teaching of John Calvin than any of our sister Reformed Churches on the Continent.

But, strange to say, it is precisely at this point that so many ministers to-day are baffled in their understanding of the New Testament doctrine of the Sacraments. Why should that be the case? In the last edition of Robert Bruce's sermons issued in 1900 Professor Laidlaw wrote of Bruce as follows: "The author's formal standard was the *Scots*

Confession of 1560. But the possible exaggerations in Calvin's sacramental ideas, just hinted at in that *Confession*, are avoided by Bruce. He had evidently taken his stand on the more generally accepted Reformed view which had already appeared in the Second Helvetic *Confession* (1566), in the XXXIX Articles (1563), and which was yet to be more clearly stated, immediately after his time, in the Westminster standards". That is a most revealing statement. It is probably true that Bruce's views were influenced by Bullinger's sermons on the Lord's Supper as well as by the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England and to a certain extent also by the growing emphasis upon forensic notions of salvation emanating from the Low Countries; but why should Laidlaw have followed these aberrations against Calvin and the *Scots Confession*?

Professor David Cairns has drawn my attention to another significant passage from the pen of William Cunningham in which he has this to say of John Calvin: "We cannot deny that he made an effort to bring out something like a real influence exerted by Christ's human nature upon the souls of believers, in connexion with the dispensation of the Lord's Supper,—an effort which was, of course, entirely unsuccessful, and resulted only in what was about as unintelligible as Luther's consubstantiation. This is, perhaps, the greatest blot in the history of Calvin's labours as a public instructor". (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 240). That was of course a ghastly failure on the part of the great Cunningham to understand Calvin, but behind it lies a severely forensic interpretation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in terms of the rationalistic Calvinism of the Synod of Dort. That needs a little explanation.

Following hard upon the Reformation in France and the Netherlands came a formidable counter-attack on the part of the Roman Church; but a Protestant champion arose in Du Moulin, who had achieved fame as an exponent and teacher of Aristotelian logic, and who had published a standard text-book on the subject. He challenged his Roman opponents to debate after debate in public, in which the disputants argued with one another exclusively in series of syllogisms. Du Moulin, who was undoubtedly a master in such logical disputation, overpowered his opponents and became the most formidable Calvinist theologian in what is now known as France, Belgium and Holland, exercising a very wide influence. During the controversies

with the Arminians it was the teaching of Du Moulin which came to be generally adopted by Calvinists, but it was a strange form of Calvinism in which the biblical teaching of the Reformer had been cast back into the rigid mould of Aristotle from which he had, by the mercy of God, been emancipated after his education in the Sorbonne. It was this perverted, rationalistic brand of Calvinism that dominated the Synod of Dort, which sent a gold medal to Du Moulin in recognition of his great services. From the Low Countries the same brand of Calvinism came into Scotland and it was revived by many of the theologians of the Disruption and is still maintained in all its rationalistic and rigid intransigence in the Western Isles ; but the almost exclusively forensic conceptions of justification and salvation through the death of Christ have generally prevailed, or provoked Pelagian reactions which only too readily fell in with the rising subjectivism of the nineteenth century.

In this connexion it is most instructive to look again at the contribution of John MacLeod Campbell, one of the most remarkable and godly theologians in the history of the Kirk in Scotland. As I see it, MacLeod Campbell, reacting against the logical determinism of hyper-Calvinism on the one hand, and against the superficial subjectivism of his day on the other hand, sought to reformulate the doctrine of the atonement along the lines of Calvin's Christology and its emphasis upon the obedience and priesthood of Jesus. His great work, *The Nature of the Atonement*, published first in 1855, is a moving and deeply devotional work, but it fell down rather badly both in its failure to appreciate the element of judgment in atonement and also in a fundamentally Pelagian element in its conception of the vicarious penitence and priesthood of Christ. But MacLeod Campbell did wrestle very seriously, as no one else in his generation, with the saving significance of the human obedience of Jesus as the *Amen* of truth to the Divine Will. Does the fact that we have allowed the centenary of the publication of MacLeod Campbell's great book to pass unmarked indicate that the Church still fails to appreciate the place of the Humanity of Christ expounded in different ways by Athanasius, John Calvin, and MacLeod Campbell ?

After MacLeod Campbell's great attempt and failure to find a way between the extremes of logical determinism and Pelagian subjectivism, Scottish Theology began to

fall more and more apart and was characterized by a radical dichotomy. On the one hand there persisted in even more extreme, though also in modified evangelical forms, the forensic conception of salvation in which the whole focus of attention was directed upon the work of Christ in His actual death, and not upon "the constitution of His Person" as also of the substance of redemption; but on the other hand there arose out of the pietist subjectivism of the nineteenth century and its idealist conception of history, largely under the influence of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, the liberal conception of the Jesus of history, which in accord with the romantic outlook of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries eliminated the elements of judgment and transcendence from the Gospel witness to Jesus Christ. It is now clear that both the forensic conception of Christ and the Liberal reconstruction of Jesus failed signally to give any adequate account of the humanity of Christ in soteriological terms. The forensic theology knocked out the whole conception of union with Christ which had long been such a powerful ingredient in the Scottish Church. That has left our life of prayer and devotion throughout the Church fearfully impoverished. The Liberal theology, for all its fixation upon the historical Jesus, cast everything into an idealist mould which damaged and mutilated the realism of the teaching and message of Jesus, removed Him from the wounded conscience and tears of sinners, and paved the way for the Marxist revolt against all vague idealistic religion in favour of a kingdom of God translated into the flesh and blood of the common life.

What we are concerned with here, however, is the fact that both forensic and liberal theologies, in their different ways, by failing to grasp the place occupied in the New Testament Gospel by the full humanity of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, failed to give to our people an adequate understanding of Word and Sacrament, and of our participation through them in the life of Jesus Christ as the New Adam or the New Man. That is why so many of our people, even of our ministers and theologians, are baffled by the Sacraments, because they do not fit into their meagre conceptions of the person of Christ and of our union with Christ through the power of His Spirit; and that is why the life of prayer both in the home and in the prayer-meeting of the Church is at such a low ebb. Would to God we could recover the teaching of John Knox about the

true nature of prayer and of the ministry as stewardship in the holy mysteries of God !

The theme we have been discussing is of primary relevance to the Liturgical Movement to-day. So much of this has its origins in the desire of the nineteenth century for a romantic repristination of the glories of the past and lacks, just as much as the forensic and liberal theologies, an adequate theology of the saving Humanity of Christ Jesus. So long as that is the case it may have a vogue and a fashion, and may satisfy the superficial and often erotic hunger for symbolism, but it cannot do anything to meet the great pastoral needs of the flock of Christ. They need to be nourished (in Calvin's startling language) with "the vivifying flesh of Christ", and need to be led in worship which not only draws out their soul in ardent prayer and devotion, but builds them up in the new humanity of the risen and triumphant Lord, and then sends them back to live it out in the common life of home and work. If the Liturgical Movement is to have an adequate theological foundation and is to have a continuously invigorating and evangelical impact upon the life of the Church it must find it where, in their different ways, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Calvin, and John Knox found it,—in the Saving Humanity and Royal Priesthood of Jesus.

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