

Presidential Address 2001

THE END OF SACRAMENTS?

Sacramental Action and Discipleship

As a young graduate student of politics at the University of Chicago, fresh from an arts degree at St Andrews, I was introduced one day to a visiting German theologian. He turned out to be Professor Markus Barth, son of the great Karl, and himself a New Testament scholar of some distinction. His work on baptism in the New Testament had persuaded his father to change his mind, and resolve that baptism was not a sacrament. On hearing that I came from Scotland, and was as they used to say, 'intending the ministry', Markus Barth looked me straight in the eye, and said, 'Beware the Scottish sacramentalists'.

At the time I didn't really know what Markus Barth was talking about, or what a sacramentalist might be. To this day my word processor puts a wiggly red line beneath every time I use the term. Despite the limitations of my computer's dictionary, I think I have in the intervening decades discovered what sacramentalism is, and who the sacramentalists are. I suppose I am now myself one of them, and indeed honoured to be the President of what some believe to be a society of sacramentalists.

But why should I *beware* of the Scottish sacramentalists? I wondered and I still wonder. Under the initial impetus of his son's exegetical writings, Karl Barth progressively distanced himself in his later theological writing from an understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments. But this by no means meant that he favoured abandoning the practice of Baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as do the Quakers, the Salvation Army and some other sects. The truth is rather to the contrary, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are very much the culmination of his theology, and close to the heart of his whole theological project. On the face of it, this may appear strange, but I would argue that Barth's position here is a perfectly coherent and challenging expression of some of his most basic theological insights.

His critique of sacramentality, if properly attended to, could be a considerable help towards a recovery and renewal of the worship of the Church.

The Critique of Sacramentality

Søren Kierkegaard accurately anticipated the gist of Barth's unease with the sacraments when he declared:

Nothing is truer than the statement of Pascal, the most accurate ever uttered on Christendom; that Christendom is a society of people who, with the help of a few sacraments, escape the desire to love God.¹

Baptism, particularly infant baptism, according to Kierkegaard, suggests objective inclusion in the people of God, independently of discipleship: 'So the following of Christ', he writes, 'has been completely abolished'.² The Lord's Supper 'is calculated to set one at rest – objectively and rapidly – in relation to the matter of eternity, and then we live our own lives, enjoying existence, multiplying and filling the earth'.³ For Kierkegaard the sacraments have become disjoined from discipleship and from ethics, and this is a characteristic, almost a prerequisite, for the existence of 'Christendom'.

Barth, writing a century and more later, is convinced that the Christendom that Kierkegaard attacked so vigorously has now disintegrated. That development, he believes, gives urgency to the critique of the sacraments, especially, perhaps to the critique of infant baptism. Sacramental practices that could go unquestioned during the centuries of Christendom must now be radically re-examined, and rejected or reformed if they are found to be wanting. In the new situation, Barth believed that 'the community must accept the fact that it will always be a small minority'.⁴ And the ethics and life style of that minority are of the greatest importance as a practical witness to the broader community.

Barth, in his later works, explicitly rejects the idea of the sacraments:

Baptism and the Lord's supper are not events, institutions, mediations, or extensions, nor indeed guarantees and seals of the work and word of God; nor are they instruments, vehicles, channels, or means of God's reconciling grace. They are not what they have been called since the first century, namely, mysteries or sacraments.⁵

Instead, 'Baptism and the Lord's Supper belong to *ethics*, and especially to ethics as it is to be worked out in the special light of God's reconciling action'.⁶ Just as Barth argues elsewhere that dogmatics is ethics, and any dogmatics which claims to be 'scientific' and purified of ethical content is spurious, so now he sees a major threat to Christian faith in an understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper which is not through and through ethical. Ethics, in a real sense is the culmination of Barth's theology, and a way of talking about discipleship, which is peculiarly apt after the end of Christendom.⁷

Older members of the Society will remember the huge interest in the theology and practice of baptism in the Church of Scotland in the 1950s, culminating in the reports of the Commission on Baptism, and leading to significant changes in the regulations concerning baptism, which deeply affected the practice of baptism in the Church. A great deal of this was sparked off by the disturbing fact that the great guru of Scottish theology in the 1940s and 50s, Karl Barth himself, had increasingly emphatically rejected the practice of infant baptism, and was already questioning whether baptism as such should be considered as a sacrament. That period of turmoil and debate about baptism deserves a study in its own right, but will not concern me here, save for noting a couple of points.

In the first place, Barth believed, and his experience from the 1930s onwards confirmed, that Christendom was dead. In Scotland, on the other hand, in the 1950s Christendom at least appeared to be flourishing. Others here may remember, as I do, the heady sense in the 1950s that,

with the diverse leadership of George MacLeod, Tom Allan, and Billy Graham we were engaged in mopping up the not yet Christian fringes of a Christian Scotland. Christendom was alive and well; in a sense the Second World War had been a vindication of Christendom. In that context the baptism of infants made some kind of sociological sense, which needed to be reinforced by a theology which rejected at this point the teaching of the master. The situation today in Scotland is radically different, and no responsible person could say that Christendom now survives intact in our land.

In the second place, there was at that time, and even today in Scotland, very little controversy about the Lord's Supper. We were pretty confident that we were maintaining a classical tradition going back through Robert Bruce, John Knox, and Calvin's Geneva to the early Church. The remnants of the old communion season still flourished, even in the cities. And Barth's critique of the Lord's Supper had not yet clearly emerged. It was only in the last huge 'fragments' of the *Church Dogmatics*, IV/4, that Barth made clear both that he did not regard the Lord's Supper any more than Baptism as a sacrament, and that the Lord's Supper would be the 'conclusion and crown' of his whole treatment of the Christian life, itself the culmination of his whole theological project.⁸ That treatment of the Lord's Supper never appeared and was not in fact written.

What I want to do in this lecture is, not to presume to complete Barth's project for him, but to explore some ethical aspects of the Lord's Supper, and see if this deepens and enlarges our understanding of the Supper and its place in Christian life and faith in today's post-Christendom Church.

The Action of Actions

As we have seen, Barth progressively distanced himself from a sacramental understanding, first of Baptism and then of the Lord's Supper. Essentially this was a critique of ritualism, of sacraments separated from discipleship and from ethics. For Barth the Lord's Supper

is not a sacrament, but it is the ‘action of actions’, and the crown of his ethics.⁹ He constantly insists that it should be celebrated every Sunday in every congregation. The only true sacrament is Jesus Christ,¹⁰ but as ‘the action of actions’ the Lord’s Supper celebrates the community’s union with Christ, it presents a model of the life-style of disciples, so that holy living should flow from the grace, forgiveness and fellowship encountered and received in the Supper.

In the Supper, divine and human action come together. **The** Action (note the definite article in the use of a term for the Lord’s Supper which is deeply entrenched in our Scottish Presbyterian tradition) is the model of all true and faithful action, the type or template or foundation of the life of discipleship. The rite is exemplary as well as challenging. ‘It is’ according to Cochrane, ‘an ethical response to God’s one justifying and saving work in the death of Christ and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit’.¹¹ And in the Supper we find resources for the life of discipleship.

But the affirmation that the Lord’s Supper is in some sense the crown of ethics, or the action of actions, is worlds apart from the moralism and the sharp distinction of the sacred and the profane which have so deeply and so calamitously deformed the practice and understanding of the Lord’s Supper in Scotland, with these awful fencings of the Table, and the suggestion that one has to be good or holy before one takes part in the Supper. ‘Rabbi Duncan’ had the right response when, from the pulpit of St Giles’, seeing an old woman in a shawl obviously unwilling to approach the Table, he shouted to her – and to all the congregation, ‘Tak it, woman, it’s for sinners’. Holy, ethical living is not a qualification for admission to the Supper; it flows out of sharing in the breaking of bread as forgiveness, fellowship and grace.

Last Supper, Cross and Resurrection

The Last Supper, the Cross and the Resurrection belong together at the heart of our redemption. The meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in the upper room and the action of God in the cross and resurrection

interpret one another. Whether or not that meal was a Passover meal is not important for present purposes; certainly it was a *meal*, and a real meal, around Passover time and thus suffused with the imagery of the Passover. This made it inevitable that the cross and resurrection should be interpreted as ‘the exodus which he [Jesus] accomplished in Jerusalem’, that Christ should be seen as the true paschal lamb, that the theme of deliverance from bondage and from slavery should be at the forefront of any interpretation of the events of Good Friday and Easter day. When Jesus took the bread and broke it and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in anamnesis of me’, and when he took the cup and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in anamnesis of me’, he was tying together for ever the action of the Supper and the action of Cross and Resurrection, radically reinterpreting the Passover and radically reinterpreting the conviction and execution of an innocent man and the mysterious events of Easter day.

The action of the meal that is to be repeated by disciples is pregnant with imperatives. Disciples are to break the bread and take the cup, and eat and drink, and so proclaim, or placard, the Lord’s death until his coming. And this meal of thanksgiving for God’s actions in the past, the present and the future is in anamnesis of Jesus. That is, of course, far more than simply the remembrance of a dead Lord; it is the assurance, in the words of Knox’s Genevan Service Book, that ‘by him alone we are raised into your spiritual kingdom, there to eat and drink with you and the Son at that most joyful table of eternal life’. But this raising up into the spiritual kingdom does not separate us from responsibilities in the world. Indeed, it gives us an experiential measure of what we mean when we pray that ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, and sharpens the imperatives that are involved in participation in the Supper.

And there is more that we could and should recover from the Passover for the renewal of our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, and the strengthening of our faith and our discipleship. Passover was and is, as we all know, a family feast at the common table. But it was also an occasion for hospitality towards the stranger, and a welcome to the

messiah whenever he may come. Children are present by right, and indeed have a central role in asking the key question, 'What does all this mean?', to which the response is the renewed telling of the story, which comes alive ever anew to a fresh generation, and is normative as well as descriptive. I envy the celebratory informality of the Passover. Participants are not constantly on edge, determined that every detail should be correct. But they are aware that the meal confirms their identity and strengthens their vocation and their hope: 'Next year, in Jerusalem!'. The celebration is relaxed and friendly, and moves quite naturally from the majesty of the story of salvation symbolically re-enacted to lively and entirely secular folksongs. People enjoy the Passover; it is a celebration, even in face of suffering, uncertainty and danger. It does not have the accoutrements of a wake for a dead God – black ties and dark suits, as for a funeral, solemn silence, children and the young excluded.

It was not ever thus in Scotland. Think of the great 'Holy Fairs' that marked the old communion seasons, note the huge quantity of wine that is on record as having sometimes been consumed.¹² Surely we should be thinking very seriously today of ways of making the Lord's Supper again a real festive meal, giving thanks for the deliverance wrought for us in Christ, and celebrating his abiding presence with us.

Passover and Last Supper were clearly real meals, even if eaten in haste with sandals on the feet and the loins girt, nourishing people for a journey and for the challenges of discipleship. The link between these meals and the common daily table, even the 'fast food' of modern times, was obvious and unavoidable. For disciples the Lord's Table made the table of everyday holy; thanksgiving flowed from the eucharist to encompass our daily eating and drinking, to enable a lifestyle that was indeed eucharistic and lived in the presence of the Lord. But the church down the ages has renewed the barrier between the sacred and profane and separated the holy table from the table of everyday in such a way as to convince the people of today, even many churchgoers, that the Lord's Supper is irrelevant to ordinary life. It is not good to have tasteless wafers or cubes of tired bread and little phials of sickly juice – things

that no one would choose to eat and drink at a celebration, or for nourishment. There should be real eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper, an eating and drinking which is exemplary for all our eating and all our drinking. It should be a real feast, not a symbolic fast, a meal at which people can say, as did a woman with Downs Syndrome on drinking from the cup: 'That tastes good. I like it.' Thus Cochrane is right when he suggests that 'The Lord's Supper is the model and criterion of all meals...all eating and drinking is to be eucharistic'.¹³

The Lord's Supper clearly draws on the imagery of the Passover, and is intended as a repetition of the last supper of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. That is central. But other associations are also important for the proper understanding of the Supper, in particular the rich and varied material in the New Testament about Jesus' practices of eating and drinking. The first disciples had plenty of experience of eating and drinking with Jesus before they gathered in the upper room for the last supper, which was in fact to be the first of a multitude of celebrations down the ages and in every land. To an amazing extent their experience of the presence of the Lord, before and after the resurrection, involved eating and drinking with him and with others. The Church of South India liturgy, for example, draws upon the story of the Emmaus road where the Stranger unfolds the scriptures so that the disciples' hearts burn within them, and is then 'made known to them in the breaking of the bread'. The liturgy contains a wonderful prayer immediately before the Great Thanksgiving:

Be present, be present, Jesus, good High Priest, as you were with your disciples, and make yourself known to us in the breaking of the bread.

This is a real, if seldom recognised, anamnesis: we experience the presence of the Lord at the table as did the first disciples. The Supper should be a place where we can discern the presence of the Lord with us, calling us to discipleship. But precisely at this point there is a danger, identified by Trevor Huddleston, that we become so concerned with the presence of Christ in the Supper that we neglect his presence in the

needy neighbour, and in the challenges of daily living. The real presence of the Lord in the Supper should enable us to discern the Lord where he is, especially in the needy, the confused, the oppressed and the poor. And that same Lord who is present with us calls us to serve the needy of our day and of our world.

Supper and Unity

There is also much to suggest that other accounts of Jesus' eating and drinking, the narratives of his feeding miracles, and the stories he told about feasts, deeply influenced the understanding of the Supper in various ways. His welcoming to his table all sorts of people, including notorious rogues and women of the streets caused scandal among the religious leaders of the day, who are like those bidden to the great feast in the parable. They invent all sorts of excuses for not attending, so that their places are taken by the people from the highways and the byways, the folk for whom Jesus had a special care. He did not break bread only with the respectable, the successful, or the pious. On the contrary, he was denounced for eating and drinking with sinners. These are the people he still invites and welcomes to his table. At the table Jesus broke through ritual and real barriers of purity, suspicion, fear and hostility. And at the table he still breaks down these barriers to establish fellowship and unity. And I have become more and more convinced as I have meditated on Jesus' hospitality that the churches are not, and never have been, in fact entitled to overrule and limit his generous invitation. Only his open invitation can be a sign and expression of reconciliation and healing in a broken world.

The Lord's Supper as Challenge

The Last Supper was an action of God which evoked, involved and demanded human action. The disciples responded with denial, betrayal or desertion; the authorities, Roman and Jewish, with condemnation and execution; the crowds who had cried 'Hosannah' on the Sunday, cried 'Crucify Him' on Thursday. The Lord's Supper also is an action which evokes, involves and demands a response from disciples, a the

response which taken as a whole can be considered as a eucharistic life-style, or the way of discipleship.

First of all, as Jesus gave himself and gives himself to us, so we are called to share with one another. When we share the bread and the cup with one another we are all as the royal priesthood serving one another, ministering to one another. There is no guzzling while others go hungry and thirsty – St Paul declared that when that happens it is not in fact the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ And the sharing in the Supper is not an isolated, self-contained event; it involves a commitment to sharing with the hungry and the needy neighbours whether they be close at hand or far away. The bread that is given and shared is not simply for disciples, but as Jesus said, 'the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' and 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my own flesh'.¹⁵ Disciples receive the bread in order that they may share it with the hungry, the needy, the lost, the oppressed and the forgotten.

Another way in which the Supper is exemplary is the emphasis on the necessity of service, emphasised particularly in the Johannine account of the foot-washing at the Supper, which we often ritually re-enact on Maundy Thursday. Jesus declares to his disciples: 'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you'.¹⁶ This is not simply a call to serve other disciples; it is an affirmation that our commitment to God demands a commitment to the neighbour and to the needs of the world. It calls disciples to humble service.

Eating and drinking with Jesus was often life-transforming, for instance in the case of Zacchaeus. And it often is still today. But all the evidence also suggests that disciples who failed to obey the commands involved in the meal could still find at Jesus' table forgiveness and the grace of a new beginning.

The Lord's Supper also manifests, or makes, a very special sort of fellowship in which the infinite and equal worth of each is affirmed and celebrated along with an affirmation of the value of difference and

particularity. Where else can the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, the failures and the successful, the young and the old meet together as equals, and attend to one another and serve one another and bring their diverse lifestyles and abilities into God's presence and under God's judgement? The church is most fully manifested when it gathers at the Lord's table. What it receives, and does and says there involves a commitment – a *sacramentum* - that reaches far beyond the particular moment or the specific believing community. It is at one and the same time a prefiguring of the Reign of God and a sign of hope set amidst the injustices and oppressions of the world, the world God loves so much that he sent his Son, the world in which disciples live and serve and hope and pray.

If part of the ethical content of the Supper calls for and expresses the just sharing of bread and wine and all that is necessary for a decent human life, it is also true that the Supper enacts a proper and responsible use and delight in the good gifts of creation. The bread 'which earth has given and human hands have made', and 'the fruit of the vine and work of human hands' are treated with reverence not only because they are for us the bread of life and our spiritual drink, but because they are representative of God's good gifts to us and to everyone in his wonderful creation. Our use and sharing of them involve a commitment to the proper delight and respectful use and sharing of the gifts of creation.

But the Lord's Supper must be, and is, far more than exemplary and challenging to the lovelessness and injustices of the world. It nourishes holiness and right action. In it we find the presence of God and our neighbour, forgiveness, grace, solidarity and peace. The lifestyle of disciples that flows from the Lord's Supper is not a matter of anxious ethical striving, or the earning of merit. It has rather to do with the nourishing of disciples, and setting them free to allow grace to flow through them to the world. The Supper frees us from obsession with ourselves to give our loving, unselfconscious attention to God, our neighbours and the needs of the world. For holiness is a matter of delight rather than of effort.

I doubt if Karl Barth would agree with my ethical interpretation of the Lord's Supper, or consider it an adequate response to the challenge he threw out. But my intention has simply been to restore a balance which has, I feel, sometimes been lost, and reaffirm the importance and centrality of the Lord's Supper in the modern age. But we must always remember that it is food - fast food! - for disciples and pilgrims who are seeking a city whose builder and maker is God. And as such it is always provisional, incomplete, an antepast or appetiser rather than the real banquet. Thus we can still sing, but perhaps with a slightly different emphasis:

O thou who at thy Eucharist didst pray
That all thy Church might be for ever one,
Grant us at every eucharist to say
With longing heart and soul, 'Thy will be done'.
Oh, may we all one Bread, one Body be,
One through this sacrament of unity.

So, Lord, when Sacraments shall cease,
We may be one with all thy Church above,
One with thy saints in one unbroken peace,
One with thy saints in one unbounded love:
More blessed still, in peace and love to be
One with the Trinity in Unity.¹⁷

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¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Last Years: Journals 1853-1855*. London: Collins, 1965, p. 177.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ CD II/4, pp. 484, 504.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (Church Dogmatics, IV/4, Lecture Fragments) Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981, p. 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr's suggestion that prophetic faith is opposed to 'idolatrous sacramentalism'. Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981, p. 44.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. IV/4 (Fragment) Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969, p. ix.

⁹ CD IV/4, p. ix, CD II/2, pp. 640 ff.

- ¹⁰ Karl Barth, CD IV/1, p. 326 and IV/4, p. 112.
- ¹¹ A.C.Cochrane, *Eating and Drinking with Jesus: An Ethical and Biblical Inquiry*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974, p. 128.
- ¹² On this see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- ¹³ Cochrane, *Eating and Drinking*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴ 1 Cor 11.20
- ¹⁵ John 6.33 and 51
- ¹⁶ John 13.15
- ¹⁷ William Henry Turton, in *The Church Hymnary: Third Edition*, number 492.

