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The Sacramental Foundations of Ecclesial Identity: Barrier or Passageway to Ecumenical Unity?

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THE SACRAMENTAL FOUNDATIONS OF ECCLESIAL IDENTITY

BARRIER OR PASSAGEWAY TO ECUMENICAL UNITY?

The question of the sacramental foundations of ecclesial identity really encompasses two related but distinct issues: first, whether the church is itself sacramentally constituted by baptism and second, whether the church itself can be envisioned as a sort of sacrament. I will examine the compatibility between a sacramental ecclesial identity and various ecclesial traditions by examining three ecclesial groupings, each with a distinctive relationship between baptism and Eucharist and ecclesial identity: Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans, for whom baptism and the Eucharist incorporate a person into Christ and the Church and for whom these sacraments are constitutive of the church; the Reformed tradition for whom the church is constituted by the word of God as a *creatura verbi*, a creature of the word; and those traditions practicing believer baptism for whom the church is a committed assembly.

I. SACRAMENTS AS CONSTITUTIVE OF THE CHURCH

For many traditions, including Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist are constitutive of the church. Both incorporate an individual simultaneously into the body of Christ and into the church, the ecclesial body of Christ. One is a member of the church by virtue of being a member of Christ.

The incorporation into the Church by baptism is much more than external church membership or membership in an ecclesial organization, for membership in the church is inseparable from union with Christ. The ecclesial and Christological nature of baptism is evident in such New Testament texts as Gal 3,27-28, which notes that all who are baptized into Christ have become one in Christ Jesus, and 1 Cor 12,13, where Paul reminds the Corinthians that all who were baptized were made one body, in the one Spirit. In Acts 2,41, the baptized are added to the community that day. The baptized experience a communion (*koinonia*) with one another expressed in a common life (Acts 2,42), which is the outgrowth of their participation in the life of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1,9), their

participation in the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 10,16-17), and their share in the one Spirit (Phil 2,1; Acts 2,42.44-45). The oneness of the church of Jesus Christ does not exist because of something we do or achieve as churches, but because of the one Christ into whom we are baptized. The unity of the church is the unity of Christ.

Similarly, in the Eucharist affirmation of the Christological reality leads to the affirmation of the ecclesial reality. The presence of the latter is as real as the presence of the first. When we commune with the sacramental Body of Christ, we commune with the resurrected Christ and the Church which is also the Body of Christ. The Eucharist simultaneously effects communion with Christ and communion in the church. Evidence for this claim can be found in biblical data, the catechesis of Augustine, within the scholastic analysis of sacramental relationships, and in the prayer of the liturgy.

In the face of dissension within the Corinthian community, Paul makes the appeal: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10,16-17). Paul grounds the bond of charity that should exist within the Corinthian community in their participation in the Eucharist. The meaning of the Christian community which the liturgy "mediates, establishes and maintains" is that the Church is in some way the body of Christ. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor notes the close relationship through the epistle between "body of Christ" referring to the Eucharistic body and referring to the ecclesial body. He finds that it is habitual in Paul's vocabulary to attribute the name "Christ" to the community¹. This is not an identification between the community and the historical Christ, but indicates that the community performs the same function as Christ².

In his mystagogical instruction to the neophytes who have just received the sacraments of initiation, Augustine exhorts: "Take then, and eat the body of Christ, for in the body of Christ you are already made the members of Christ". In this same sermon he explains: "Because you have life through Him, you will be one body with Him, for this sacrament extends the body of Christ and by it you are made inseparable from Him". At one level it would seem that Augustine is simply comparing the unity of the bread with the unity of the ecclesial body and what we have is simply

1. J.M. O'CONNOR, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul*, Collegeville, MN, Michael Glazier, 1982, p. 183.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

a literary device, a simile or a metaphor. However, the unity of the body received at the altar is a sign and measure of the unity of the ecclesial body. The Eucharistic sacrament both signifies and effects the unity of the church. The sacramental realism of the historical Christ leads to the sacramental realism of the ecclesial Christ so that Augustine can say to the neophytes he is instructing, "there you are on the altar, there you are in the chalice".

Henri de Lubac's historical study, *Corpus Mysticum*, traces a fascinating change in terminology. Before the Eucharistic controversies with Berengar of Tours in the 11th century, the church was designated as the *corpus verum*, the true body. In contrast, the Eucharist was the *corpus mysticum*, the mystical body, just the reverse of the use of these terms today. In the familiar Eucharistic hymn, *Ave Verum*, composed by Thomas Aquinas after this shift in usage occurred, the "true body" is the Eucharist, not the Church. The Church Fathers, however, "had seen his ecclesial body as the *veritas* of his mystical Eucharistic body. The Eucharist was "mystical" because it was received spiritually. Within this earlier view, there was an inherent unity between the historical body of Christ born of Mary, his Eucharistic body, and his ecclesial body. In response to the threat posted by Berengar, who emphasized a symbolic rather than real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the church emphasized the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, calling it the "*corpus verum*". To prevent any misunderstanding concerning the reality of Christ in the Eucharist, it emphasized the link between Christ's Eucharistic body and the true body born of Mary, dead and risen. As vital as this link is, sadly, the other connection with the ecclesial body was lost in the process. In the emphasis on Eucharistic realism, the ecclesial realism of the Augustinian view of the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and his members complete only in the *eschaton*, was lost.

The scholastic analysis of the sacraments also shows the relationship between the sign of the sacrament, the sacramental presence of Christ, and Christian unity. The scholastics spoke of the *sacramentum tantum*, the sign of the sacrament, the *res et sacramentum*, the reality of the sacrament, and the *res tantum*, the effect of the sacrament. According to this schema, with respect to the Eucharist, the *sacramentum tantum* is the outward sign and appearance of bread and wine. The *res et sacramentum* is the reality of the Eucharist, that is the body and blood of the risen Christ. The *res tantum* is the effect of the sacrament, that is, the unity or bond of love created by the sacrament. Too often in Eucharistic piety people get "stuck" at the level of the *res et sacramentum*, thinking that the purpose of the liturgy of the Eucharist is to make the body and blood

of the Lord present so that they can receive him in communion. That is true enough, but it does not go far enough. The Lord does not give us his body and blood just to be adored and worshipped in the Eucharist or even that the faithful may individually receive him, but so that a greater unity, a greater bond of love may be created in forming the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and his members, what we call the mystical body of Christ. The *res et sacramentum* does not exist for itself, but so that the *res tantum* may be effected. In other words, what the scholastics called the *res* or the fruit of the sacrament of the Eucharist is the unity of the church, which is to say the ecclesial body of Christ in union with its Head. Thus there is an intrinsic relationship between sacramental realism, belief in the real sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and ecclesial sacramental realism, wherein the Eucharist is also sacramentally present in the Eucharist.

Within the Eucharistic prayer the sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist is inseparable from his ecclesial body. In Eucharist Prayer IV, the double nature of the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is particularly evident. The first epiclesis invokes the Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body of Christ. The second epiclesis invokes the Spirit to transform the assembly into the ecclesial body of Christ, so that joined to the Christ, they may be gathered up in his return to the Father. Thus the structure of the Eucharistic prayer is a great *exitus-reditus*, a coming forth and a return. We receive the gifts of creation from the Father to whom we give thanks. These gifts are transformed into the Body of his Son, who joins us to himself and gives himself to his Father.

Both baptism and the Eucharist realize what they signify, namely the body of Christ in the plenitude of the members of Christ's body joined to Christ their head. The church is not only built up numerically through the addition of new members through baptism in an extrinsic way; it is constituted as the body of Christ by baptism as it is with the Eucharist through communion in the body of Christ through these sacraments. Communion in Christ is inseparable from communion with the Church. The relationship is one of simultaneity and mutual interdependence. Jean-Marie Tillard expresses it thus: "... strictly speaking, a person is not made a member of the church because he is made a member of Christ. He is, in the same and unique moment, inserted into communion with the Head which does not exist without the Body and with the Body which does not exist without the Head"³.

3. J.-M.R. TILLARD, *Perspectives nouvelles sur le baptême*, in *Irenikon* 51 (1978) 171-185, p. 172.

Tillard contrasts the visibility of this sacramental communion and constitution of the church with the interior experience of the Spirit and hidden communion with Christ of within Protestant traditions. According to these traditions only God knows whether someone is more fully within the fullness of the church since interior sanctity escapes our judgment. Catholic traditions, on the other hand, while acknowledging the importance of this interior dimension, refuse to limit the church to its interior dimensions, but see ecclesial fullness in the union of the invisible interior dimension of communion and its visible expression.

II. ECUMENICAL AGREEMENT

An agreed statement between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics expresses this understanding of the relationship between baptism, the Eucharist, and the church. The Joint International Commission stated in 1982:

Believers are baptized in the Spirit in the name of the Holy Trinity to form one body (cf. 1 Cor 12,13). When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, it realizes "what it is", the body of Christ (1 Cor 10,17)⁴.

The Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1981-84), "God's Reign and Our Unity", affirms baptism as being constitutive of the church:

Baptism, by which Christ incorporates us into his life, death and resurrection, is thus, in the strictest sense, constitutive of the Church. It is not simply one of the Church's practices. It is an event in which God, by engaging us to himself, opens to us the life of faith and builds the Church. As Jesus was baptized, anointed by the Spirit from the Father, and declared to be the Son, so we are incorporated into the Church in the triune name, and are commanded: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28.19f.)⁵.

The same document makes a similar claim regarding the Eucharist: "Along with baptism, the Eucharist is fundamental to and constitutive of

4. JOINT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION, *The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity*, in J. BORELLI – J.H. ERICKSON (eds.), *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue, Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official Dialogues in the United States 1965-1995*, Washington, DC, – New York, United States Catholic Conference; Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, 53-64, pp. 54-55.

5. ANGLICAN-REFORMED INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION, *God's Reign and Our Unity*, London, SPCK, 1984, §54 (d).

the life of the Church. It is the sacrament given to the Church by her Lord for the continual renewal of her life in him"⁶. This statement affirms a liturgically-based identification of the church.

III. THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE CHURCH

The second issue of a sacramentally-based ecclesial identity is whether the church itself may be considered as a kind of sacrament (*velluti sacramentum*). Three different articles in *Lumen gentium* identify the Church as a sort of sacrament, each with a slightly different nuance⁷: sacrament of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race, sacrament of saving unity, and sacrament of salvation. In addition, three instances of identification of the Church as sign occur in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy⁸. The references in articles 2 and 26 stress the Church as a sacrament or sign of unity. Article 5 associates the Church with the blood and water issuing from the side of Jesus, which are also symbols of baptism and Eucharist.

The identification of the Church as a sacrament occurs within a chain of sacramentality in the theological writing of Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner⁹. Christ is a sacrament of the Father. The Church is a sacrament of Christ, and the seven sacraments are sacraments of the Church. The sign or sacrament is the actualization in the world of that which is signified, namely, God, Christ, and the Church, respectively. This, of course, is precisely the disputed ecumenical issue. However, the point is that the Church is most visibly fulfilling its mission and ministry when it is engaged in those acts of salvation through which Christ sustains the Church. When the Church is engaged in the acts of Christ it is most authentically being itself, the Church of Christ.

The idea of the Church as sacrament is closely related to the image of the body of Christ. In the concept of sacrament, there is unity and difference, unity between the sign of the sacrament and what is signified,

6. *Ibid.*, §71 (g).

7. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 1, 9, 48.

8. Y. CONGAR, *Un peuple messianique: L'Église: sacrement du salut, salut et libération*, Paris, Cerf, 1975, p. 31.

9. K. RAHNER, *The Church and the Sacraments*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1963; E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, Kansas City, KS, Sheed and Ward, 1963; See also A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*, New York, Doubleday & Co., 1974; P. SMULDERS, *L'Église sacrement du salut*, in G. BARAUNA (ed.), *L'Église de Vatican II* (vol. 2), Paris, Cerf, 1967, 313-338; J. GROOT, *The Church as Sacrament of the World*, in *Concilium* 1 (1968), no. 4, 27-34.

difference, because what is signified is not absolutely identical with the sign which makes it present. Historical presence and sacramental presence are two different modalities.

In a similar way, there is both a unity and a difference between the Church, under the aspect of the biblical image of the body of Christ and Christ. Strictly speaking, the Church is not a prolongation of the Incarnation, but is that which enables Christ to act sacramentally in the world. This distinction allows the Church's members to be frail human beings liable to sin. In the case of the Church, the visible sign includes the institutional and social aspect of the Church, that is, all that is manifest in history and located in space and time. The referent of the sign is the resurrected Christ. It is important not to confuse the sign with its referent. As with the incarnation, in the Church there is the union of the divine and the human, the human being the manifestation and revelation of the divine. However, "as with Christ the distinction between his Godhead and his humanity remains without confusion though they are inseparable signs and reality, manifest historical form and Holy Spirit are not the same in the Church, but as in Christ, are not separable any more either"¹⁰.

The relationship between the invisible interior dimension of the church and its visible expression gives the church a quasi sacramental structure since the outward, visible manifestation of the church reflects an inner spiritual component of the church¹¹. This complex relationship between outward sign and inward spiritual dimension, the one inseparable from the other, is one reason for the insistence on the visibility of the church, although it must be noted that at the time of the Reformation, the dominant view of the church was that of a society rather than a sacrament. The great theologian of the Catholic Reformation, Robert Bellarmine, defined the church institutionally: "The one true Church is the society of men bound together by profession of the same Christian faith, and by communion of the same sacraments, under the rule of legitimate pastors and in particular under the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff ... And it is as visible as the kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice"¹². The emphasis in this definition of the church is on observable characteristics and actions: profession of faith, communion of the sacraments, and the rule of pastors. This Post-Reformation Catholic polemical reaction

10. K. RAHNER, *Studies in Modern Theology*, London, Burns & Oates, 1964, p. 201.

11. *Lumen Gentium* no. 1 says: "Cum autem ecclesia sit in Christo *veluti* sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis..." (emphasis added). The force of *veluti* is that the church is "sort of" a sacrament.

12. R. BELLARMINUS, *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei, adversus hujus temporis haereticos*, Napels, Giuliano, 1856-1858, III.ii.

against Reformation ecclesiology focused on the church almost exclusively as a visible entity identified by creed, sacramental structure, and hierarchy. More spiritual conceptualizations of the church came later with the retrieval of the notion of the church as the body of Christ in Pius XII's encyclical, *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and the application of the category of sacrament to the church by the Second Vatican Council. This history of Roman Catholic ecclesiology is significant for ecumenism, for it represents a nuancing which softens the polemics of the 16th century.

Although all churches agree that the church is a sign and an instrument, the language of sacramentality as applied to the church is an ecumenical stumbling block. The World Council of Churches document, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, notes that the churches who identify the church as a sacrament do so because they understand the church to be an effective sign of communion of all human beings with each other and the Triune God. Those churches who reject the concept do so because they consider that this does not sufficiently distinguish between the church and sacraments. They consider the sacraments to be "means of salvation by which Christ sustains the Church, and not actions by which the Church realizes or actualizes itself"¹³. This position clearly opposes the kind of theology articulated by Tillard which represents a liturgical ecclesiology. Churches also reject a concept of the church as sacrament because they consider the church to be a communion that, while being holy, is still subject to sin. The WCC document also observes that "behind this lack of agreement lie varying views about the instrumentality of the Church with regard to salvation" even though "those who have become accustomed to call the church "Sacrament" would still distinguish between the ways in which baptism and the Lord's supper on the one hand, and the Church on the other, are signs and instruments of God's plan"¹⁴. In fact, as the German Catholic-Lutheran dialogue has noted, the use of this term "serves to illustrate that the church, although it is the body of Christ, may not simply be identified with the Christ, the "primal sacrament"¹⁵. Thus the concept of sacramentality as applied to the church is meant to distinguish

13. WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper, 198), Geneva, World Council of Churches, 2005, p. 29. See also the discussion in the document by the Bilateral Working Group of the German National Bishops' Conference and the Church Leadership of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of German: *Communio Sanctorum: The Church as the Communion of Saints*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2004, §§86-88.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

15. *Communio Sanctorum*, §87.

between Christ and the Church, avoiding too close an identification between them, at the same time it shows the church's dependence on Christ and its task to represent him visibly in the world.

IV. THE REFORMATION: THE CHURCH AS CREATURA VERBI

Generally speaking, churches issuing from the Reformation view the church as born from the word of God. The church is a *creatura verbi*, a creature of the word. Paul Avis identifies the question raised by the link between the two aspects of the church as the Reformers conceived it, the invisible, spiritual reality and its physical manifestation, as being whether the marks of the church, among which word and sacrament hold a privileged position, are *constitutive* of the church or merely *descriptive* of where the church is to be found in its visible manifestation¹⁶. Even though Avis concludes that the marks of the church are indicative and not constitutive of the church in the thought of the Reformers, the word of God is arguably unique as being both constitutive and indicative of the church. Luther defines the church in terms of the preached word, for where that word is, there is faith, and where there is faith, there is the church¹⁷. The word of God builds the church¹⁸. More precisely, the church is constituted and defined not just by any word, but by reference to the Gospel¹⁹.

The same would not be as true of the sacraments, for all the other notes of the church are subordinated to and serve the preaching of the word, and thus are signs of where the true church is located. Nevertheless, the sacraments, as visible words, also serve a function of proclamation and from that, a function of gathering the church. However, since the word of God is none other than Jesus Christ, this principle underscores the Christological center of the church.

16. P.D.L. AVIS, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, Atlanta, GA, John Knox Press, 1981, p. 7. Martin Luther enumerated seven marks of the church in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539): the word of God; the sacraments of baptism and the altar, rightly administered according to Christ's institution; the offices of the keys and the ministry; public prayer including the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Decalogue; and the bearing of the cross.

17. M. LUTHER, *Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2, Weimar, Böhlau, 1884, p. 208.

18. M. LUTHER, *Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 43, Weimar, Böhlau, 1912, p. 596.

19. AVIS, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (n. 16), p. 25. Avis refers here to the work of Edmund Schlink.

In the post-Reformation period, a polemical wedge was often driven between word and sacrament, the Protestant churches emphasizing word and the Catholics emphasizing sacraments. However, this is a false dichotomy, if understood absolutely, for the Reformers unambiguously identified the church by word *and* sacrament even while linking the latter to the former, and the Tridentine reform attempted to improve clergy education and provide for more adequate preaching²⁰.

Nevertheless, as the actual practice of the churches developed after the Reformation, it would be fair to say that the Protestant traditions clearly emphasized preaching and the Catholics, the sacraments. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) addressed this imbalance by urging that the administration of every sacrament include scripture readings and a word of explanation with pastoral application by the sacramental minister²¹. This liturgy of the word *precisely as liturgy* forms part of the ritual action of the sacrament. Furthermore, the Council's teaching that preaching is the first responsibility of priests and bishops supports this emphasis on the word. The homily within the sacramental rituals forms an intrinsic part of the liturgy of the word.

The traditions of the Reformation emphasize the role of the word in eliciting faith, which serves as an identifier of the church. We are called to faith through the Word and the homily. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the dynamic role of the sacraments in the process of maturing in faith: "Sacraments not only presuppose faith, but by words and object they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called 'sacraments of faith.' They do indeed impart grace, but in addition, the very act of celebrating them disposes the faithful most effectively to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to worship God rightly, and to practice charity"²². A coming-to-faith is an essential moment within all sacraments acts and one which is inseparable from reception of the Word.

Karl Rahner has proposed that a theology of the word in the Church as the eschatological presence of God is a fresh common point of departure for both the Catholic and Protestant traditions²³. Although there has been very little developed theology of the word in Catholic theology, he believes that this could be "the basis for a theology of the sacraments in which the sacrament figures as the supreme human and ecclesiastical

20. Council of Trent, Session 5, 17 June 1546, Second decree: on instruction and preaching; Session 24, 11 November 1563, Decree on Reform, Canon 4.

21. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 24, 35.

22. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 59.

23. K. RAHNER, *What Is a Sacrament?*, in ID., *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14, trans. D. Bourke, London, Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1976, 135-148, p. 136.

stage of the word in all its dimensions"²⁴. In the polemical climate of the Reformation, too often word and sacrament were seen as different entities. Rahner suggests that this dichotomy between word and sacrament can be overcome by understanding the sacrament as a "word-event within a theology of the word"²⁵. The sacraments are embodied proclamations. Both baptism and the Eucharist proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord. In this proclamation the saving event is itself made present in sacramental sign, and the grace of that event is extended in a personal way to the recipient of the sacraments.

Conversely, the word itself can be seen to have a sacramental structure. The materiality of the word represents and makes present the meaning which it represents always somewhat inadequately. As Louis-Marie Chauvet has observed, "There is no language except through the mediation of a given, particular, and limited *tongue*"²⁶. Language itself becomes a consent to mediation, for idea only exists in, through, and under language. Thus language is as mediatory as sacrament. Chauvet's insight is that "the most 'spiritual' happens through the most 'corporeal'"²⁷. Body is speech; word is body. Sacraments are embodied word; word is spoken sacrament. Thus ecclesial traditions which are constituted sacramentally and those which are constituted verbally are but mirror images of each other. Each represents the sacramental principle, one through embodied signs, the other through spoken signs.

There may be a tendency for some Protestant traditions to view sacraments as the work of the church while viewing the word as God's word or Christ's word. There may even be an effort to see where the church's work begins or leaves off and where God or Christ's work begins. However, the church's work and Christ's work are not *partim ... partim* as if they occur side by side, but Christ's work is effected in and through the work of the church. The point here is that both emphases – word and sacrament – have a Christological center, for the subject of the preaching is the Gospel, which is to say the Jesus Christ. The same is true of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. To say that the sacraments constitute the church or that the word constitutes the church is to say that Jesus Christ constitutes the church. The ecumenical point of dispute is how the church, especially in its complex nature, with all the imperfections of its institutional and social character, can mediate spiritual reality.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

26. L.-M. CHAUVET, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. P. Madigan – M. Beaumont, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1995, p. 141.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

V. BAPTISM WITHIN A CHURCH OF THE ELECT

The Reformed tradition has a view of the invisible church of the elect and the mixed visible church where the saints and reprobate mingle. It also emphasizes the birth of the church from Word of God. However, with respect to what concerns us here, the most distinctive aspect of Calvin's theology as it impacts on sacraments and the church is his theology of God's election. Although Calvin describes the church in terms of its marks, only the elect are truly members.

The doctrine of election in Reformed theology is subject to multiple and varied interpretations. The classic interpretation has been to think of the elect and the reprobate as two classes within the empirical church, with the true, invisible, church being known only to God. This is also the view which conceives of election in individualistic terms: God preordains some individuals, and therefore presumably not others, to salvation. This view, supported on biblical grounds in such texts as Deut 7,7-8; Jer 1,5; Rom 11,2, and Eph 1,4, is also the doctrine of election according to John Calvin. Several problems ensue. First, God's choice seems to be gratuitous rather than gracious. Why are some individuals chosen and other not? Neither being chosen nor not being chosen is due to any merit on the part of an individual nor to any fault. Nor is an individual's fate affected either by their willing or their acceptance of God's gift²⁸. Second, since this election is prevenient and particular, the danger is that it seems to render both baptism and the church superfluous as means of grace. God's choice operates outside of and prior to any experience of the means of grace. Election is by grace alone, and this is an unmediated grace. Baptism is only efficacious for the elect. Nor can we say that baptism is efficacious on account of faith, for faith is the work of election, but election does not depend on faith²⁹. The elect will profess faith, be baptized and will be members of the visible church, but none of these are guarantors of election. Falling from faith is a sign of the absence of election from the beginning.

Presuming that the baptized is elected, baptism has a strengthening, assuring, nourishing and deepening function by bearing witness that the baptized belongs to God's covenant of grace, is implanted into Christ, is accepted into the community and has the remission of sins. Baptism is not the cause of salvation, but mediates knowledge and certitude of salvation for the elect. It seals the application of the Gospel to the one

28. J. CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 24, 3.

29. *Ibid.*

being baptized who receives it as a sign and pledge that the promise given through the Word of proclamation is really true in his regard. The point of departure of this analysis is the election, salvation, and faith of individuals.

Karl Barth's teaching attempts to address some of these concerns by identifying Jesus Christ as God's elect. The point of departure of his analysis is not the salvation of an individual believer and the election of individuals, but what God accomplished in Jesus Christ. In his view, potentially everyone is included among the elect by being contained within the corporate Christ³⁰.

Barth's mature work on baptism in the fourth volume of his *Church Dogmatics* (1969) reverses his earlier 1943 position on baptism³¹. In the later work, Barth distinguishes sharply between baptism with the Holy Spirit and baptism with water. He makes the second dependent upon the first and rejects the sacramental nature of baptism, identifying it as a human act, as an obedient response to God requiring freedom and personal faith. He summarizes the meaning of baptism as the human work of basic confession of faith which consists in a washing of the candidates with water³². This confession leads to conversion of life and hence to a Christian ethic of life lived within a community already engaged in this manner of life³³. The relationship between baptism with the Holy Spirit and baptism with water lies within a dialectic of God's gratuitous election through the Holy Spirit, an event that is in no way dependent upon baptism, and human response to this election in baptism. Thus baptism is a human rather than a divine act; more precisely, it is a human act in response to a divine act. Consequently, he rejects the practice of infant baptism since infants are incapable of free obedience, and faithful response.

As for the relationship between baptism and the church, Barth makes a very fine distinction, when he states that a person "becomes a Christian in his human decision, in the fact that he requests and receives baptism with water. But he does not become a Christian through his human decision or his water baptism"³⁴. The Holy Spirit brings about the change in a person by which a person, in virtue of God's faithfulness to him, becomes faithful to God in return, is baptized, and thus becomes a Christian. However, it is the action of the Holy Spirit in him and not

30. K. BARTH, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1957, especially §33.

31. K. BARTH, *Church Dogmatics IV/4*, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1969.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 149.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

the agency of water baptism that makes him a Christian, even though the action of the Holy Spirit leads him to the profession of faith and baptism with water that identifies him as a Christian. Baptism with the Holy Spirit does not dispense with baptism with water, but makes it possible and even demands it³⁵.

Barth describes the change wrought by baptism with the Holy Spirit in ontological terms with existential consequences:

... if it is to be possible for a man to be faithful to God instead of unfaithful, there must be a change which comes over this man himself. Nor may this change be simply an awakening of his natural powers, nor his endowment with supernatural powers, nor his placing by God under another light and judgment in which he may stand before God. It must be an inner change in virtue of which he himself becomes a different man, so that as this different man he freely, of himself, and by his own resolve, thinks and acts and conducts himself otherwise than he did before³⁶.

This passage at once refutes a Catholic theology of an ontological change effected by grace and Lutheran theology of imputed grace as well as any variation of Pelagianism. Baptism with the Holy Spirit "cleanses, renews and changes man truly and totally"³⁷, an effect which other traditions such as the Catholics and the Orthodox would attribute to baptism with water. For Barth, however, the human activity of being baptized with water does not mediate grace, although a person enters the historical Christian community, that is, the church as a religious society, by way of baptism with water. However, it is only baptism with the Holy Spirit that is identical with a person's reception "into the church as the assembly of those who...continuing in a circle around Jesus are engaged in doing the will of God as His people" (Vulgate, Mk 3,34)³⁸. In Reformed thought, the historical community is not co-terminus with the Church of the elect.

With respect to the church as the administrator of baptism with water, Barth states: "The Church is neither author, dispenser, nor mediator of grace and its revelation"³⁹. One of the greatest differences between Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology, on the one hand, and the ecclesiology of traditions issuing from the Reformation, on the other hand, is over this issue of mediation, that is, whether an institution comprised of fallible and sinful members can mediate God's grace. Sacraments mediate grace, but the later Barth does not consider baptism to be a sacrament. Thus it

35. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

is not efficacious of grace, justification, or salvation. Nevertheless, the community is not indispensable, for its work is to recognize his faith and thus his membership of itself and of Jesus Christ and to baptize him⁴⁰. No one can dispense with the baptizing community and baptize himself. Barth also departed from Calvin in thinking that the ability to baptize was restricted to any particular ecclesiastical office, but could be granted by any member of the community, but as a member of the community, not as a private individual⁴¹. In Barth's theology, even though he finds that after Pentecost, Christian baptism has a gathering and uniting character, baptism proclaims, but does not establish fellowship⁴². Thus, for him, it is in no way constitutive of the church.

A second issue is that where Catholic teaching considers the church to be a complex entity, comprised of a human and a divine element, Barth's dialectical theology sharply divides the human institution, the religious society, from the heavenly church or the assembly of the elect. Barth cleanly separates baptism with the Holy Spirit from baptism with water, God's Word and command expressed in his gift and human obedience in faith, the church as a religious society from the church as the assembly of the saints, and divine agency from human agency. His dialectical theology does not admit of human and divine synergism or the possibility of human instrumentality as mediatory of God's grace. His dismissal of the sacramental character of baptism is consistent with this dialectic as is his assumption that baptism with the Spirit is a separate event from baptism with water⁴³. One consequence of this separation is that he considers the baptism of John and that of the community after Pentecost to be one and the same baptism⁴⁴.

The fact that baptism is received, not taken or self-administered means that it is a gift given. Thus it cannot solely be an act of obedience, a one-sided human act. While Karl Barth sharply distinguished divine initiative in baptism with the Holy Spirit and human response in baptism with water, the paradigm of baptism, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, indicates that both divine initiative and human response occur in one and the same baptismal event. Nor can we suppose that baptism would not impart the gift of the Spirit, into whose name we are baptized. When Jesus submitted

40. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 77. Some Catholic scholarship attempts to integrate the two. See K. McDONNELL – G.T. MONTAGUE, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1994.

44. BARTH, *Church Dogmatics IV/4* (n. 31), p. 86.

himself to John's baptism, this personal action was accompanied by the *theophany* of the appearance of the Spirit and the voice of the Father. In this event the gift of the Holy Spirit is associated with baptism with water. This necessarily gives the community a mediating function. Depending on the tradition, this would at least be God's promise of grace mediated through the word proclaimed by the community. Proclamation does not occur in a vacuum. Other traditions would say that the community also mediates sanctifying grace, justification, and rebirth. The community itself is not the source of these effects, which can only come from God through the power of the Holy Spirit, but when the word is proclaimed, when the community acts in obedience to the dominical command to baptize into the name of the Trinity, God's renewing grace is present by the very fact of the promise. The sacramental effect is attached to the sacramental event as the embodied word-promise of God, making it tangible within an incarnational principle of an enfleshed word. The sacramental event is impossible apart from the community to whom it is entrusted.

Colin Gunton proposes a third interpretation of the doctrine of election, suggesting a community-centered doctrine of election of Israel as the people of God and the church as the body of Christ⁴⁵. His analysis rests on the election and calling of particular communities rather than particular individuals. He places the church in the context of creation as ordered to an eschatological perfection in which all things are reconciled in Christ (Col 1,20). From this perspective, "the elect are not primarily those chosen for a unique destiny out of the whole; rather, they are chosen out of the whole as the community with whom the destiny of the whole is in some way bound up"⁴⁶. Where Barth saw the whole human race *immediately* in Christ, Gunton, borrowing insights from John Owen⁴⁷, suggests that the whole human race is *mediately* in Christ as Israel and the church. Election means being part of the community identified as the body of Christ engrafted in some way to share Israel's election (Rom 11,17-22). One is incorporated into this body and into this community and thus shares in this communitarian election through baptism: "... if the church is the body of Christ, those incorporated by baptism are more than merely called. There is an ontological change, because they have entered a new set of relationships – with God, with other people, and with the created

45. C. GUNTON, *Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constantinian Church*, in W.M. ALSTRON – M. WELKER (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2003, p. 104.

46. *Ibid.*

47. J. OWEN, *The Works of John Owen* (24 vols.), London, T&T Clark, 1862.

order"⁴⁸. In this theology of election the means of grace, here the sacraments and the church, are no longer contingent, but truly the means by which one is literally incorporated into the election of the community. Those so incorporated participate in the reconciling mediation of the community serving God's universal purposes on behalf of all of creation. The election of these communities does not imply the perdition of everyone else, but simply that they are instruments, the servant church, of God's purposes. Undoubtedly, much remains unanswered in this evocative essay, not least the relationship of those incorporated into the elected communities to those not so incorporated and how God's final reconciliation is accomplished through this mediation and what its eschatological form will be. Nevertheless, Gunton offers the beginnings of an alternative view of election that allows for a robust theology of baptism which is truly efficacious and transformative of human nature.

The more contemporary scholarship represents attempts within the Reformed tradition to respect the doctrine of God's sovereignty and divine election, but to relate it more closely with Christology, in the case of Barth, and to the community, on the part of Gunton. Of these three interpretations of the Reformed tradition, only Calvin represents mainstream Reformed thought regarding the relationship between election, baptism, and the church. Reformed churches have not followed Karl Barth's proposal to restrict baptism with water to those who can freely respond to God's action in their lives with obedient faith. Colin Gunton's suggestion is too brief and recent to have had a reception or even a hearing within his tradition, although it is very promising from an ecumenical perspective.

VI. PRACTITIONERS OF BELIEVERS BAPTISM: A COMMITTED COMMUNITY

From a Baptist perspective, Morris West has noted that the approach towards a mutual recognition of baptism based on common elements of an initiation process begs certain questions, notably that of the doctrine of the church. He comments:

It may be argued that those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers baptism start from different "models" of the Church. Those practicing infant baptism see the church as an ontologically given community into which child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practicing

48. GUNTON, *Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constantinian Church* (n. 45), p. 107.

believer's baptism, view the church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community⁴⁹.

For Baptists, the faith of an individual precedes in some fashion the formation of a faith community. God's action on an individual brings that individual to a profession of faith and this leads that person to affiliate with others with a similar experience to form a church which is congregationally defined. In 1927 Wheeler Robinson observed that the one-sided emphasis on the human response of faith in baptism made it possible to talk of faith as if it occurred in a vacuum and the products of faith then came together to form a church⁵⁰. In his view, members do not join a church, but rather "constitute it as a society of men and women drawn together by common convictions and needs and entering into a social experience of the Christian faith for which their individual experience has prepared them"⁵¹. The church is a gathered community of the faithful and the focus is primarily on individuals accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The experience of faith is primarily personal, individual, and experiential. From this perspective, the church is not liturgically constituted. This means that an individual does not necessarily enter the church by way of baptism, thus potentially separating church membership and baptism both ritually and in fact.

What gave rise to the Baptists as a distinct group of Christians was the issue "whether or not it is possible to have a visible church of visible saints, a truly regenerate church membership"⁵². Baptist ecclesiology is grounded in a regenerate church membership which is the basis of their insistence on believers' baptism as a prerequisite to membership for those churches practicing closed membership. The Baptist conviction is that "Christian faith is a personal voluntary commitment of one's self to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; and that the church is a gathered fellowship of persons who have made such a commitment to Christ"⁵³. The requirement of a public profession of faith and repentance prior to baptism and reception in the fellowship of a church is the means used to make the

49. W.M.S. WEST, *Towards a Consensus on Baptism?* Louisville 1979, in *The Baptist Quarterly* 28 (1980) 225-232, p. 227.

50. Cited in N.G. WRIGHT, 'Koinonia' and Baptist Ecclesiology: *Self-Critical Reflections from Historical and Systematic Perspectives*, in *Baptist Quarterly* 35 (1994) 363-375, p. 367.

51. This is Wright's summary of Robinson's position. *Ibid.*

52. R.G. TORBET, *A History of the Baptists*, Valley Forge, PA, The Judsonpress, 1963, p. 32.

53. W.H. PORTER, *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church and Ecumenicity*, in *Report: Consultation on World Mission, Hong Kong 1963-1964*, Bound typescript, n.d., p. 92.

visible churches approximate the membership of the invisible communion of saints⁵⁴. The conviction is that the universal church is most visible in a local congregation of professed believers⁵⁵.

Yet it must be noted that a concept of a universal church is not uniform among all Baptists. Both the Southern Baptist Seminary in 1859 and the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925 omit references to the universal church, defining a "Gospel church"

as a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by his love, and exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth⁵⁶.

In this definition, the church is congregationally defined, associated not by sacrament but by covenant in the faith and fellowship in the gospel. The church "observes" the "ordinances" of Christ, but is not constituted by them.

VII. CONCLUSION

Are the sacramental foundations of ecclesial identity a barrier or a passageway to ecumenical unity? An honest answer would be that they are a barrier for some traditions and a passageway for others. Views of the church are often prior to and condition theologies of baptism and Eucharist, there being a close correlation between those traditions professing a strong sacramental realism and those for whom the church is sacramentally constituted. This paper has shown unity around the sacramental identity of the church among Catholics, high church Anglicans, and the Orthodox. With respect to those traditions for whom the church is the *creatura verbi*, the polemical distinction between word and sacrament, between the church as constituted by baptism and Eucharist or as constituted as a creature of the word, is a false distinction if used to separate churches which are more catholic from those which are more evangelical. The church is constituted by Christ both through the proclamation of his word and through incorporation into his body through the sacraments of

54. W.A. DALTON, *Worship and Baptist Ecclesiology*, in *Foundations* 12 (1969) 7-18, p. 11.

55. See H.L. MCBETH (ed.), *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, Nashville, TN, Broadman Press, 1990, p. 369.

56. J.H. LEITH (ed.), *Creeds of the Churches*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday and Co., 1963, p. 348, cited in DALTON, *Worship and Baptist Ecclesiology* (n. 54), p. 11.

baptism and the Eucharist. A theology of these sacraments as embodied words connected with an explicit promise of Christ gives them the character of proclamation. Since the unity of word and sacrament lies in the person of Christ, for both the sacramental traditions and the more evangelical traditions, the Church is constituted by Christ as the body of Christ. The ecumenical resolution of difference lies in the church's relationship to Christ. Yet it must be admitted that differences remain as to the mediatory power of the sacraments. As stated earlier, an ecumenical rapprochement may be achieved through an enhanced theology of sacraments connected to the word.

The doctrine of election in the Reformed tradition poses a particularly difficult ecumenical problem with respect to the role of church and sacraments. As we have seen, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Colin Gunton represent three quite different interpretations of the doctrine of election. Although least developed, Gunton's position has the most potential ecumenically. In Calvin's theology God's choice operates outside of and prior to any experience of the means of grace. There is no role for a mediatory role of church and sacrament in Barth's theology. Thus sacramental foundations of ecclesial identity are incompatible with theologies of election that operate apart from membership in an invisible church granted through the prevenient will and election of God.

Finally, with respect to the Baptist tradition, the church is not liturgically constituted nor is baptism necessarily tied to church membership. Sacramental foundations of ecclesial identity are incompatible with those traditions for whom baptism is primarily a human act in obedience to an ordinance, but which is separate from baptism in the Spirit or a person's personal conversion.

As for the question of the sacramental character of the church itself, there are major issues of compatibility between a theology of a complex church comprised of human and divine elements, and a theology where the church is defined as the assembly of the sanctified. Here two major issues are first, the capability of an institution to mediate grace, and second, the relationship of sinful "members" to the church. An ecumenical rapprochement may be achieved by a stronger distinction between the assembly of the saints in the *eschaton* and the mixed and provisional character of the pilgrim church. The church only reaches its completion in heaven⁵⁷. In the meantime, although holy, it is always in need of purification⁵⁸.

57. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 49.

58. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

What this survey of various traditions shows is that a tradition's sacramental theology is intimately connected with its theology of the church. In spite of the ecumenical difficulties, those churches for whom the church is liturgically constituted can neither abandon their sacramental realism nor their ecclesiological realism. However, their dialogue partners must understand that the sacramental theology in question is profoundly Christocentric. The church's foundation is Christ through the action of his Spirit mediated through the sacraments on the strength of Christ's word of promise. Faith is intrinsic to the efficacy of sacramental action. This is in contrast with the view of many who view sacramental action as an extrinsic and mechanistic apart from faith.

Before the issue of the sacramental foundations of the church can be resolved with some Reformed traditions and with the Baptists and other evangelical traditions, further conversations are needed on such issues as the communal character of faith versus a more immediate and individual faith and the capacity of imperfect persons and institutions to mediate the word of God – something which applies to preaching in any tradition. Conversations about the nature of the church and the nature of sacramental activity must go hand in hand.

As for the sacramental nature of the Church, this was a teaching of Vatican II, which we have seen, has the advantage of actually preventing too close an identification of Christ and the church. It has the advantage of indicating that the church is to be a sign and instrument of the unity of God and humankind. Thus it keeps the church honest insofar as it must itself embody the values it preaches to other if it is to be an authentic sign. Its instrumentality is nothing other than its mission, the reconciliation of all in God. Thus there is great pedagogical value in this description of the church. Nevertheless, the quasi sacramentality of the church is not defined doctrine and need not be church dividing in our relationship with our ecumenical partners.

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