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TOWARD A LIVELIER SACRAMENTALITY

Robert G. Schoenheider

INTRODUCTION

The evangelical catholic faith of the early Church, rooted in Scripture and summarized in the three ecumenical creeds of the first few centuries was a faith that believed in a God who relates to people and their world sacramentally. This was in sharp contrast to the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, including the various Gnostic sects, and Hellenistic philosophy which tended to see a sharp division between the physical and spiritual realms. In the latter, anyone who hoped to reach communion with the divine needed to divorce their religious aspirations from the material world. Only through a spiritual seeking could one hope to reach out and grasp the divine. This tendency made sharp inroads in the ancient Church and Christianity has never completely rid itself of some of the consequences. But, after the smoke of doctrinal controversy of the first four-five hundred years cleared, the catholic-apostolic faith of the Church was a faith in a God who works sacramentally in our world. Perhaps it was the influence of the Hebrew thought patterns of the Old Testament which saved the day. Certainly one must not forget the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the development of the Church.

What is meant by the statement that God's kingdom comes in this world sacramentally. Already in the Genesis creation account it becomes evident that in the beginning God made the world for the benefit of humanity—that it might be the means by which God related to men and women and they in turn related to God. The first sin involved man turning in on himself and in doing so making the created world an end in itself. Man refused to offer all of life back to God from whom it came. In restoring life to man and indeed to the whole world, God condescends to man's creaturely limitations. He acts within the context of the world through earthly means which man

can grasp. The ultimate expression of this is seen in the incarnation of Christ—God becomes a human being like you and me in the person of the Son. The incarnation is “mystery” in the biblical sense, i.e., beyond our limited human reason’s ability to understand, but not supernatural, not “out of this world.” In fact, it’s just the opposite, God humbling himself and accepting the confines of that which he had created. Thus God works out our salvation in the context of the creation and human history or life.

The Lutheran Reformation of the 16th Century professed adherence to this same catholic-apostolic faith including the fact that God works sacramentally. A major contention of the Lutheran party was the claim that they had not departed from the biblical faith which was attested to by the Church fathers of the early centuries. In the *Augsburg Confession*, Article V, Of the Ministry, they say: “That we may obtain this faith (namely, justifying faith in Christ as Savior and Lord), the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel . . .” And in Article XIII, Of the Use of the Sacraments, one reads: “. . . they teach that the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them.”

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE SON OF GOD

It may puzzle us to find that there were so few writings about the third person of the Trinity. One could find a deluge of books on Jesus Christ. And there were almost as many books about God, usually in the context of God as Father or Creator. But one had to look extensively to find much on the Holy Spirit either among ancient or modern writings.

The reason for this becomes clear when one turns to the fourth Evangelist, especially chapters 14, 15 and 16, where Jesus talks about the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. There it becomes evident that the primary purpose of the Spirit is to lead people to a knowledge, not of Himself or of God in general, but of the Gospel, the good news that in Christ God has redeemed the world.

Turning to the other Gospels, Acts, and a number of the Epistles, this same factor is borne out. The Spirit’s work is to present Christ to the world, for it is the love of God for us in Christ’s redemptive life, death and resurrection which is the only power to turn the hearts and minds and wills of an alienated humanity back to God. Conversely, it is only through the working of the Holy Spirit that the human being can and does confess Christ as his/her Savior and Lord. Other Bible references in this connection are: Luke 2:25-32; Acts 5:27-32; I Corinthians 2:2-13; Hebrews 10:12-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21. So the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ is to facilitate the world’s coming to awareness of God’s grace and love in his Son.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

The Church is, in this life, the beginning of God’s re-establishment of communion or community with the human being and between the individual and his fellowman. Thus we speak of the vertical and the horizontal dimension in the Body of Christ. In

Christ I am related with God and through that renewed relationship I am related to all those countless others who live the life of God in Christ.

This reconciliation or re-establishment of the perfect unity of love which existed at the beginning of God's creation is what God accomplished in the atoning life, death and resurrection of Christ. That is the end purpose of God's grace in Christ. That is the end purpose of our faith and hope. As Paul notes in I Corinthians 13, eventually, in eternity, faith and hope disappear. For there is no need of faith and hope once we directly experience God's love face-to-face.

Through the Gospel, the good news of Christ's atoning life, death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit calls the Church into existence by calling individuals to the renewed life in faith, the renewed life of God in Christ. This is why we call the Gospel the "mark of the Church." The Church, and Christians for that matter, do not exist apart from it. We have God's promise that His Word of life is efficacious (Romans 10:9-17; Isaiah 55:6-11). So where the Gospel is set before men in proclamation of the Word and administering of the Sacraments the Holy Spirit is at work bringing people to faith and thus creating the Church.

We also need to note that the Church exists for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the Sacraments (the Gospel in visible or material form). As co-workers with the Holy Spirit our chief objective is to share the love of God in Christ so that the life of God might be strengthened and sustained in ourselves and also come to others. It's sort of a "chicken and egg" type situation. The source of the Church's life is the Gospel and the Church exists for the purpose of propagating that Gospel. The Holy Spirit then is the giver of life to the Church and the sustainer of that life.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER

A question which may be asked is: "Which comes first? The individual's faith or the Church, the community of faith?" As already noted, renewal of life through faith in Christ is the work of God's grace in the individual human being through the power of the Spirit. No one can believe or have faith for another. God works in the heart and mind and will of the individual. (We know the futility of those situations in the history of the Church where whole populations were declared to be Christian because the ruler was Christian.)

However, one must remember that faith is not an end in itself. The end of faith is that perfect communion of love with himself and with one another which God wills for his creature man. In being called to life in Christ by the Spirit, i.e., in being called to faith, the individual is being called to life in the Body of Christ, the Church. The call is one and the same; it can't be separated. We are joined in the community of faith by the Holy Spirit who works faith.

In a sense then there is no faith apart from the Church. For genuine faith brings the individual into this renewed relationship. The question of individual or Church first is unnecessary. It's not either/or, but both/and.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE SACRAMENTS

That brings us the Holy Spirit and the Sacraments. The calling of the individual to the renewed life of God in Christ is accomplished sacramentally. The tool or instru-

ment used by the Spirit of God is the Word of the Gospel. Even more specifically, that Word is the embodied or en-fleshed Christ in his life of obedience, death and resurrection. The Church, as co-workers with the Spirit, shares not just some written or spoken Word, it shares Christ in all of his active, lively love for the world. Faith is not the acceptance of a series of intellectual propositions or a system of dogma; faith is acceptance of Christ in his person as Savior and Lord. Christ gave himself for the life of the world in order that God's creation might become once again the vehicle or means of our communion (or community) with God. That's what is meant with the statement: God acts sacramentally when He breaks into the world to re-establish his kingdom/kingship with man.

How then do we appropriate or share the embodied or en-fleshed Word who is Christ? He himself gives us direction. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The Word we share is the call to repentance and forgiveness in Christ. This is actualized by baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. In that Baptism, the Holy Spirit is active initiating the individual into renewed communion with God and with fellowman. For us in the evangelical-catholic tradition, the primary doer in baptism is God. The one baptized is acted upon. The assembled congregation, the sponsors, the parents are the believing witnesses of God's sacramental action.

What about the Lord's Supper? Christ also gave us direction in this regard. "This is my body." "This is my blood." "It is for you, that your sins may be forgiven." "Do this for the remembrance of me." "Remembrance," in the New Testament and the early Church had the force of making actually present the results of some past event. Thus the Spirit, who is Christ's gift to his Church, is active in the Lord's Supper sustaining and nourishing the renewed communion of the life-in-faith which that sacramental action of God makes real or actualizes. The unity of faith is a gift of God through his Spirit. In the Sacrament unity is concretely nourished, and sustained, and made visible by the Spirit in its most intimate form.

An interesting note to the activity of the Spirit in the Lord's Supper is the different emphasis which the Eastern Church gave to the question of the efficacy of the sacrament. In the West, the focus has always been placed on the consecration of the elements by a duly ordained minister of the Sacrament. In the East the focus is rather on the *Epiclesis*, the prayer for the Holy Spirit's power and presence and blessing upon the elements.

Our contention that the faith of the Church is faith in a God who works sacramentally is not a claim or presumption that we have taken God captive in the spoken or written words of a book or in water, bread and wine. It is simply and yet profoundly the recognition that God in his grace and love has chosen to condescend to a lost humanity's humanness or createdness. God in his wisdom circumscribes his breaking into our world to bring us his kingdom, his life renewed, within the confines of that world. As the ultimate act of love he humbles himself to become one with us, a man among all humanity, that we might, through his humanity, share in the life which is divine.

No one can bind the Spirit of God. Jesus reminded Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." But the Lord of the Church has given to his Church the gift of the Spirit and also the gift of his Word and

Sacraments for the life of the Church and the life of the individual believer. Why then do we look elsewhere for the working of God?

You have been born again of water and the Spirit by baptism into Christ, including Christ's humanity! For it is through his humanity that he identifies with you and becomes your Savior.

“. . . The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom—not because it possesses divinely instituted acts called 'sacraments,' but because first of all, it is the possibility given to man to see in and through this world the 'world to come,' to see and to 'live' it in Christ. It is only when, in the darkness of *this world*, we discern that Christ has *already* 'filled all things with Himself,' that these *things*, whatever they may be, are revealed and given to us as full of meaning and beauty. A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him. And this joy *transforms* all his human plans and programs, decisions and moves, makes all his mission the sacraments of the world's return to Him, who is the life of the world."¹

1. Schmemmann, Alexander, THE WORLD AS SACRAMENT. Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1966, p. 142.

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