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MAURICE CREASEY ON WORSHIP AND SACRAMENT

HOWARD R. MACY

Until now, I knew little of the work of Maurice Creasey. So I welcome this collection of his essays, and I thank David Johns for his care in gathering and editing them. The essays give us a glimpse of Quakerism in the mid-twentieth century. Though the Friends movement and the discussions in the larger religious community have continued to change, I think these essays have enduring value in prompting our imaginations and clarifying our assumptions in theological thinking.

Creasey brings great gifts to his work. He writes clearly, not a universal trait of scholars, and escorts readers reliably through his essays. Some passages display notable clarity and power. As a theologian he brings wide perspective to exploring Friends particularities. He shows great range in theology itself, in church history, in biblical interpretation, and, of course, in Quaker history and thought. Creasey's range is even further enhanced by his significant engagement in the ecumenical conversations of his time.

Creasey wrote the essays under review here primarily for Friends audiences. He served his readers well by offering a broader context for understanding, a context which included church history, biblical theology, and contemporary ecumenical dialogue. Most Friends, in my experience, have little exposure to those resources, so this enhances their insight.

Creasey writes from a Christ-centered point of view, a stance that many Friends no longer share. At the same time, many Friends still rely on careful treatments of biblical teaching and theological reflection in the context of the larger Christian community. These essays should serve them well.

Creasey serves as a teacher, certainly, but sometimes also as a pot-stirrer, which is not exactly to say as a troublemaker. He wants to clarify and deepen understanding, but he also seems ready to deepen it by challenging his readers' thinking, asking hard questions, offering contrary ideas, and urging readers to truly examine their arguments.

The topics of worship and sacrament hold a distinctive place not only in Friends practice but also in conversation with the larger Christian community. Through tradition, Friends have received the practices of not using baptism with water and of worship based on silent, holy expectancy, and, with these practices, have received commonly held justifications for them. Within our own community, they often require explanation. Those who are not Friends often find our practices startling or puzzling. Why do we behave in a way that is so unique in the Christian world? Such questions require more, perhaps even better, explanation. Maurice Creasey explains well.

Creasey wrote the first of the essays in this collection, “Worship in the Christian Tradition,” as an introduction to a collection of essays edited by Francis B. Hall, *Quaker Worship in North America*. Given the range of practice among North American Friends, Creasey’s introduction seems particularly useful. This essay describes with clear, broad strokes the history and development Christian worship, partly to help Friends understand the notable traits of their own worship. This fairly brief overview is very well done.

The opening section on the character of worship sets the stage. Creasey thinks of worship as a “response to a real environment,” an environment that includes things, persons, and a “partly hidden and partly revealed, always mysterious and often ambiguous, a so-to-speak ‘larger’ environment” in which we are held. (168) We respond to that environment of “the mysterious ‘more’” in ways that hold together past, present, and future, that engage personal identity, and that choose symbols to grasp and express our encounter. (168-70)

In describing the history and forms of worship, Creasey rightly points out how synagogue worship gave early shape to Christian worship, and he is eager to show the variety and liveliness of worship in the Early Church. He writes: “They thus exhibited a freedom, flexibility and richness greater than is characteristic of any of the subsequent main traditions of Christian worship.” (175) He speaks of these characteristics as embodying a “third dimension” of worship, a dimension of worship that even in the changes of the Reformation was “left unattempted.” (184) Before the essay concludes, Creasey suggests that early Friends shared these characteristics and that this heritage can inform our practice still.

The other three essays deal with the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. The first of them, “Sacraments: A Quaker Approach,”

is a relatively short essay that explains the distinctiveness and the importance of the Friends understanding of the Sacraments. Creasey notes briefly some of the criticisms “fellow Christians” have of the Quaker approach, but insists that the Friends “attitude is intended as a positive witness to truths which are of deep significance for the whole Christian Church.” (189)

The core of the essay asserts two principles. First, Creasey writes, “Our experience leads us to emphasize the fact that entrance into the community of Christ’s people requires no outward rite, but is to be known only through trust, obedience, love and commitment.” (192) This, then, builds unity and leads us to experience together Christ’s real presence.

The second principle grows out of Friends’ “interpretation of the deepest significance of Jesus Christ.” In particular, he writes, Friends “believe that the living Spirit of Christ is now the ever and only adequate means whereby God draws near to men.” Christ’s presence in the world “does not need to be mediated by special sacramental means.” (192) Though Creasey does respond succinctly to questions about whether Christ instituted practices of baptism and communion, he emphasizes that Quakers have the duty to bear witness within the Christian Church to our continuing experience of the real presence of Christ and its effective power to transform us and bring us into unity. The concluding paragraph of this essay is one of those I found particularly clear and compelling.

The second of the essays on the sacraments is entitled, “Quakers and the Sacraments” and was published in an early issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* (vol. 5, Spring, 1963). This identifies Creasey’s audience, then, as a Quaker Theological Discussion Group crowd, a group that he might prod and tweak a bit, trying to get them to examine more carefully the ways they explain and justify Friends thinking and practice about the sacraments. He warns early on that he intends “to raise right questions rather than to proffer right answers,” hoping to stimulate others to think on these issues “more deeply than I have been able to do.” (196) He succeeds very well in asking questions and pushing our thinking still, even 50 years after he wrote this paper.

The first major section of the paper explores historical backgrounds to the Friends approach to the sacraments. Creasey points out helpfully that it is not adequate to think that early Quakers rejected

a mechanical or magical view of the sacraments. In fact, he argues, many of their contemporaries had a deeply spiritual, even mystical approach, understanding the sacraments “in a spiritual and ethical manner.” (197-8) So Friends were not trying to correct abuses or exaggerated practices of the contemporary church. “Rather,” Creasey writes, “they believed themselves to be witnessing to a radically different understanding of the nature and scope of the divine action in Jesus Christ, an action of such a kind that sacramental worship is, in principle, excluded from the church’s life.” (199) Along with this core conviction, Friends saw outward forms of as being “Jewish” and belonging to the Old Covenant, which was no longer operative. And they insisted that rites that symbolized feeding on Christ or being baptized with his Spirit could not deepen the spiritual realities they experienced all the time. (200) In the light of these core ideas, Creasey gives examples of significant Friends voices on this subject from the earliest days into the twentieth century (up to the 1930s).

The next major section takes up critical and theological issues, exploring whether Friends’ biblical and theological justifications for their approach to sacraments are adequate. In referring to abundant recent scholarship about sacraments in the larger Christian community, Creasey challenges that Friends have done very little recently to assure a sound basis for their thinking and are lagging behind contemporaries who are examining the questions of sacramental practice seriously. (211) He then proposes four points in Friends thinking that need to be re-examined.

Creasey first questions whether we can simply identify the use of material substances with pre-Christian Jewish ritual. He argues that the Apostles, and notably Paul, deepened the meaning of these practices and that among early Christians these practices came to have a significant inwardness, not just an outward ritual. Dismissing them out of hand, he argues, undercuts both our perception of their vitality and our witness among other Christians. (212-14)

Secondly, Creasey suggests that early Friends, in their sense that the New Age was arriving in its fullness, neglected the “eschatological tension” between the “Now” and the “Not Yet.” Perhaps if Quakers had maintained this tension, he proposes, they might have found the ordinances to be an appropriate “visible word” to represent the past, the future, and the Kingdom of God realized in the present. (215-16)

Thirdly, Creasey asks whether the Friends distinction between “outward” and “inward” is justifiable. He suggests that some Friends practices, “by repetition and customary practice,” have themselves become merely outward and, in effect, sacramental, in a ritualized sense. (216-17)

In his fourth point, Creasey examines Quaker “understanding of the nature of the Christian fellowship,” which he regards as “the central, positive witness of Friends.” In doing so, he builds on the work of Emil Brunner, who distinguishes between the *Ekklesia* of the emerging primitive church and the church as an “institution.” Brunner understands the fellowship meal of the *Ekklesia* to be radically different from the sacrament of communion in the later institutional church. Here and elsewhere, Creasey seems tempted or even ready to apply Brunner’s description of *Ekklesia* to understanding the early Friends community as the restoration of “primitive Christianity.” In view of this identity, Creasey asks, “...would not Friends have been truer to their claim to express a revival of primitive Christianity if they had allowed a place for this reality in their corporate experience and practice?” (218)

In a section he calls “Constructive Issues,” Creasey affirms the importance of the Friends witness to the non-necessity of the sacraments, but he questions the value of the witness requiring “total abstinence” from these practices. He discusses this in the context of the modern Christian community, and here his experiences in ecumenical conversations seem to shape his thinking. He also calls on Friends to think more consistently about what we mean in using the term “the sacramental nature of life.” (219-223)

Along the way, Creasey is eager to point out the pot-stirring character of his essay. At one point he says that he intends “only to open up lines of thought and investigation for the future.” (219) At another he warns that “the purpose of this essay would be entirely misunderstood if it were regarded as making a plea for Friends to ‘adopt the Sacraments.’” (227) Readers should honor these disclaimers, certainly, but they also should honor his challenge to think carefully about these issues in a newer day of scholarship and renewed relationships with the wider Christian community.

The last of the four essays is “The Quaker Understanding of Baptism.” The essay grows out of ecumenical conversations about Christian unity and it notes that fellow Christians had turned away

from hope that they might find unity in the Eucharist. Instead, they were now hoping that they could find unity in baptism. Creasey clearly thinks that this is an unlikely path to unity. (229)

The force of the essay is to teach Friends about the larger conversation about baptism and some of the excellent work in biblical theology that contributed to it. Creasey clearly has engaged the leading scholars of his era, Oscar Cullmann, D. M. Baillie, Neville Clark, and others, but in this essay he gives detailed attention and response to the work of G. W. H. Lampe. Creasey also offers a succinct summary of central points about baptism on which these scholars agree. (231-233)

In regard to the biblical evidence, Creasey notes that Friends would agree with emerging scholarship at two points. First, that the earliest church had no “controversy” over baptism, but did have diverse approaches to its meaning and practice. Part of Paul’s teaching sought to heighten and deepen the meaning of a rite already practiced in various ways. (235-236) Second, Friends would agree with scholars who have concluded that “Jesus instituted no sacraments.” (236, 242)

In response to Lampe’s essay, Creasey objects that Quakers feel “compelled to question the manner in which ‘being baptized,’ ‘being a Christian,’ and ‘being a church member’ are practically identified.” (240) Instead of seeing the sacraments or the sacrament of baptism as a source of unity, Creasey asserts that “the basis of Christian Unity is, for Friends, a common loyalty to the Person of Christ, both as Leader and Lord, and a common commitment to his cause in the world.” (242)

In the section “Exegetical,” Creasey summarizes five points of New Testament evidence about the sacraments to which Friends give greater weight than most other Christians. (242-244) In a brief historical section, he observes features from the past that help explain the Church’s current understanding of baptism. (243-244)

While presenting Friends theological views, Creasey welcomes the ecumenical concern to “interpret Baptism christologically,” but goes on to affirm with early Quakers the power and reality of Christ’s immediate presence that renders further outward acts unnecessary. (245-246)

Having treated exegetical, historical, and theological arguments, Creasey focuses on the root of the Friends witness, experience. He writes: “Friends themselves have never based their attitude

to Sacraments primarily upon exegetical, historical or theological grounds...” but on their “... personal and corporate experience of the presence of the living Christ.” (247)

As a fact of experience, Creasey continues, Friends feel they should “bear a corporate testimony to the fact that, while to be made a member of Christ’s Body does not necessarily involve any outward rite, it does inescapably require an inner transformation of the whole self by the indwelling Spirit of God.” (249-250)

I’m glad that these four essays on worship and sacraments are now available to us. Certainly we need to stay fresh in our thinking and practice about these important issues, and Creasey’s writing can contribute a useful voice in that work.