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# On Christmas... and the Character of Sacramentality

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, [panderso@georgefox.edu](mailto:panderso@georgefox.edu)

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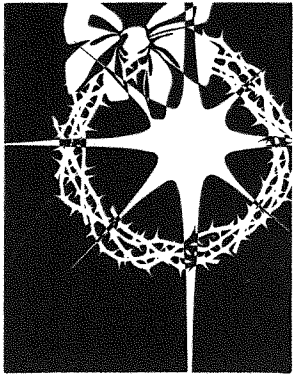
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# On Christmas . . . and the Character of Sacramentality

BY PAUL ANDERSON

**W**HAT MAKES something *sacramental*? Have you ever thought about that question? The classic answer, going back to St. Augustine, is that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. During the Middle Ages, the church embraced as many as 30 sacraments, but Peter Lombard reduced them to the seven that are still a part of the Catholic faith. With Luther and the Reformers, the number was reduced to two—as water baptism and communion are the two most closely connected to New Testament practices. But what is it that *really* makes something sacramental? Or put otherwise, what is the *character of sacramentality*?

Unfortunately, we Quakers have been rather shallow in our treatments of the issue. We too easily stress what we don't do and miss the whole point of a very beautiful and meaningful testimony—one that the world needs desperately to hear.

It's also true that many Christians who come to Friends from other denominations often miss the outward celebration of the Lord's Supper. It had been meaningful to them in the past, and they had not encountered the same sacrament abuses that earlier Quakers and others have. Furthermore, sacramental restlessness among Friends may be a sign that the local church leadership has not been thinking enough about how the *real presence* of Christ is experienced in the gathered meeting for worship, how *every* worship meeting should create the space for "communing" with the risen Lord, how the Holy Spirit can *fill* and *transform* the individual with Pentecostal fire, how the world can be *reached* miraculously by God, how the divine is made accessible

through outward means—the character of sacramentality.

One can appreciate the sentiment of those who advocate "liberty of conscience" regarding outward sacramental practices, especially if the local Friends meeting for worship has been sacramentally dormant. But this doesn't mean that Friends' positive testimony about the sacraments has become obsolete. It has simply been unexplored.

So just what is the positive Quaker testimony on the sacraments? In a nutshell, that God looks on the heart, and the heart that believes in Him receives Him. Outward ways of expressing ourselves to God and before others may help us at times, but they NEVER determine God's divine action toward us. Inward trust alone is the sole condition for receiving God's saving grace and sanctifying power.

**T**HE RIGHT words? God knows our thoughts even before we speak. The right postures? God sees through to the very core of our beings. The ritually, politically, or socially "correct" way? God is above all of these. He loves us and sent His Son to die . . . that we might live in the newness of life. Forgiveness of sins, forsaking the world, spiritual immersion, divine empowerment, all of these are received through *faith in Jesus Christ alone*; and the only true outward evidence of the newness of life is the changed and changing lives of those who abide in Christ and are immersed in His Spirit. Friends believe this is what Christ came to bring, and that no religious group or method regulates the divine dispensing of grace. God looks on the heart. That is enough.

Of course, objections come from Christians especially wanting to be faith-

ful to the Scriptures, and that's a worthy concern. Clearly, some early Christians practiced water baptism and held eucharistic meals, although there was a great deal of disunity regarding the ways they did so. But let us really look at the New Testament to consider how early Christian sacramentality developed.

**H**OW ABOUT starting with Jesus? Not a bad place to begin.

Two of the first things you notice about Jesus is that He dined with tax-gatherers and sinners, and that He pronounced woes upon the Scribes and Pharisees. But these stories grow shamefully "tame" to our ears. Table fellowship in those days was a statement of acceptance and solidarity between parties. They believed that God was present in a special way (sacramentally) in the breaking and sharing of bread.

Jews were not allowed to eat with Gentiles or with those who were ceremonially unclean. This would taint them too. Furthermore, to be deemed a "sinner" was basically to become a social outcast. It was the price to be paid by those who did not live up to the ceremonial and legalistic letter of Moses' Law.

Social anthropologists call these "purity laws," and all cultures have them. They prescribe what members of that society must do or not do in order to become acceptable and pure.

What Jesus did in that context was absolutely astounding! By claiming to be God's envoy and by dining with the "impure" and rejecting the "pure," He declared to the world that *God's saving presence is never confined to outward ways of doing it right*. Jesus' teachings and deeds in all four Gospels make this motif abundantly clear. God looks on the heart, and those who trust humbly in Him will be saved. Conversely, those who trust in their human-made attempts to obtain God's saving favor will always founder.

The cleansing of the Temple marks another radical demonstration by Jesus, but this time it is one of judgment. The division of the masses into two camps, the pure and the impure, motivated even the poor to try to go beyond their means in purchasing sacrificial animals

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and tithing tokens. In some cases, this reduced the standard of living significantly for the already poor, and it even made it impossible for the poorest folk to feel they had any access to God's grace. They were "sinners"—the kind of people who did not, and could not, attain ritual purity. But Jesus declared them to be acceptable in God's eyes, and He drove out of the Temple those who made a profitable trade of the religious system of purification.

But this was no mere rejection of one religious system to be replaced by another. No. Jesus came to reveal the absolute bankruptcy of all human effort and instrumentality, as far as receiving God's grace is concerned. This applied to first-century Jewish religion, and it applies to us today.

**S**O WHAT ABOUT the ordinances? If believing in God through Christ was enough, why did Jesus ordain the rites of water baptism and the eucharist? Or . . . did He *really*? When we look at baptism and communion in the New Testament, the following facts become clear.

### Baptism

1. The central exhortation associated with baptism and the eucharist (when mentioned together by Jesus) was embracing the cross—not participating in a cultic rite. For instance, when Jesus asked James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I shall drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38), He was not quizzing them on their willingness to get ritualistic. Obviously, He was referring to their willingness to suffer, and even to die for their Lord.

2. All the times that the baptisms of John and Jesus are mentioned together in the New Testament (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26-33; Acts 1:5; 11:16) baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit is clearly prioritized over water baptism, which prefigures it. It always seems odd that those who insist on the literality of water baptism, fail to make the same interpretive move when it comes to baptism by fire, the baptism of Jesus, to which John's pointed. The "pneumatic" immersion always supersedes the "hydraulic" one in the Bible.

3. Apparently, in the fifties some of the followers of Apollos knew the baptism of John, but did not know the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Paul ran into some of these people at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-6), and when he explained that John's baptism of repentance was to help people believe in Jesus, they were then

baptized in Jesus' name by Paul. He then laid his hands on them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Water was clearly insufficient. One must be born of water *and the Spirit* (John 3:5).

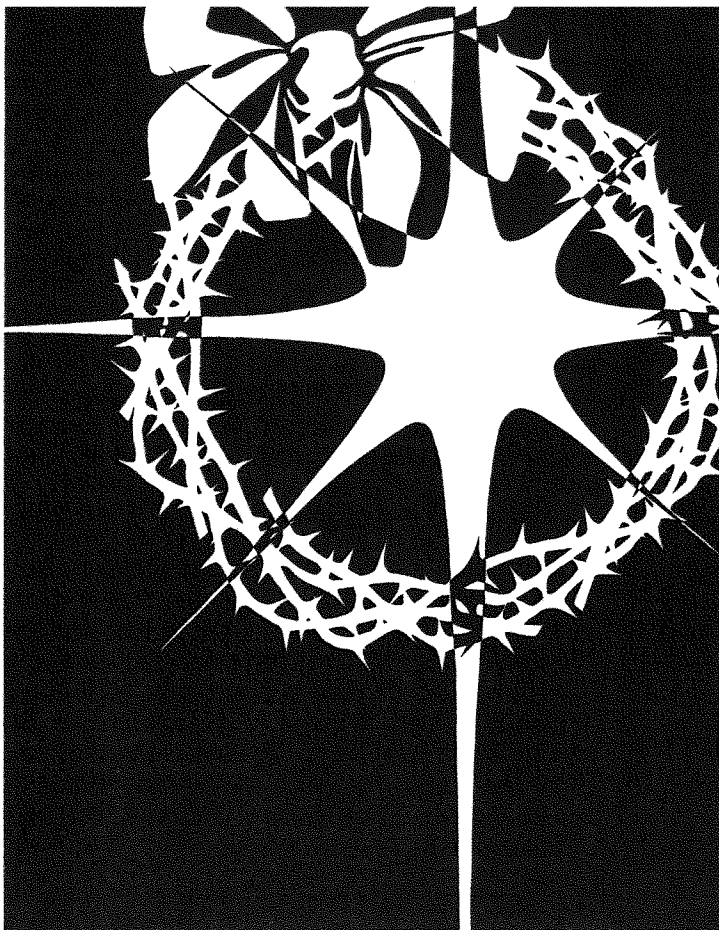
4. Perhaps because of this event, or simply because of the sometimes unclear relationship between spiritual realities and outward practices, jealous divisions arose also in the mid fifties between those who had been baptized by different Christian leaders. Some claimed, "I am of Paul," some claimed, "I am of Apollos," some claimed, "I am of Cephas," and some said, "I am of Christ." All of this partisan dissension makes Paul declare, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius!" (1 Corinthians 1:14) Obviously, Paul is not saying he was glad not to have evangelized more than he did. The problem was that Corinthian believers had begun to pride themselves in who had performed their outward baptisms, assuming that this made a difference in terms of their spiritual effect. This made Paul want to give up water baptism altogether.

5. Apparently, a generation or so later, some were even claiming that Jesus performed water baptisms, and John 4:2 sets the historical record straight: "Jesus Himself did not baptize, but only His disciples." While water baptism became the standard norm symbolizing the new Christian's rejection of the world and decision to follow Christ, it did not originate with Jesus' practice or teaching. It even created enough problems for Paul that he felt like leaving it behind. Spiritual immersion is always the New Testament priority.

### Communion

1. Just as John emphasizes that Jesus himself never baptized, John completely omits any institution of the eucharist at the last supper (ch. 13). This is extremely odd if John's author was indeed an eyewitness who was there! Why would he not have picked up on something so important and so obvious? The only "ordinance" in John 13 is the command to love and serve one another, as Jesus exemplified by washing His disciples' feet. The more pressing question is not why did John leave the words of the institution out, but why did Mark (who is followed by Matthew and Luke) include them?

2. Mark clearly identifies the last supper with the Passover feast of Unleavened Bread (Mark 14:12-25) and connects the redemption offered through Jesus with the ultimate focus of something like the Jewish Seder meal. As they broke the bread of thanksgiving—recalling deliverance in the wilderness



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Jesus said something like, "The true deliverance symbolized by the breaking and eating of this Matzoh bread is *my body*—broken for you." Likewise, as they raised the cup of redemption—recalling the blood of the lambs, smeared on the door posts of Hebrew houses in Egypt, causing the spirit of death to "pass over" that household—Jesus said something like, "The true redemption symbolized by the Paschal lamb is really the *blood of my covenant*, which will be shed for you on the cross."

All of this suggests that Jesus was less trying to "ordain" a new ritual and that He was more seeking to *transform* existing customs by showing how they ultimately prefigure His sacrifice on the cross. The Passover points to the cross! This is the point of Mark's rendition of the last supper.

3. In 1 Corinthians 11 we see a clear move from a fellowship meal to a ritual meal in the Corinthian church. In chapter 10, Paul describes coming together for fellowship meals—perhaps like the kind that Jesus ate with sinners and tax gatherers, and certainly with His disciples at many times. What becomes clear, however, is that some participants had been abusing table fellowship (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). They were inconsiderate of one another—eating more than their share while others went hungry, getting drunk, etc. In response to this, Paul replaces the fellowship meal with a ritual meal, calling it "the Lord's

Supper" and citing the words of the institution (vv. 23-26). From then on (the midfifties in Corinth), if anyone is hungry, he should eat at home (v. 34). The Lord's Supper had evolved from a fellowship (potluck?) meal into a ritual one.

4. Between the writing of Mark and the writing of Luke (a decade or two later) we see a clear transition from the *contents* of the cup (Jesus' blood) to the *cup itself*. (Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood," reads Luke's rendition, which is very similar to Paul's. Whatever the reason for it, we clearly see an evolution from Mark's attaching Christological significance to the Jewish Passover meal to Luke's and Paul's rendering of the Lord's Supper as a Christian ceremony. Ceremonies can indeed be helpful ways of instilling group values, but this is still far from an ordained ritual by Jesus himself.

5. The instructions to eat Jesus' flesh and drink His blood in John 6:53-58 do *not* refer to the indispensability of the eucharist for salvation. This becomes clear in the light of verse 51. This "Bread" offered by the Son of Man is His flesh—given for the life of the world—and to ingest it is to be willing to go to the cross with one's Lord. After all, if one hopes to be raised with Christ on the last day, one must be willing to suffer and die with Him in the present.

The point of all this is to show that the same Jesus who came to reveal that

God's grace is not limited to those who keep Jewish purity laws did not ordain new, Christian ones to take their place. These rituals emerged within the middle to late first-century church, but not without struggle or controversy.

The more I learn about the New Testament, the more Quaker I become. The Friends testimony that true sacramentality hinges totally upon the inward authenticity of the believer's faith, not an outward means of ritual, is precisely what Jesus came to reveal. While rituals and ceremonies can be helpful for us, they never determine the receiving of God's grace. It probably wasn't until the second or third Christian generation that ritual means—as opposed to inward trust and corporate fellowship meals and meetings—were devised.

Jesus came not only to tell the world how to encounter God—He came to *be* that communication and the locus of encounter.

**S**O WHAT'S all this got to do with Christmas?! When God wanted to communicate His saving love to the world with finality, He didn't send us a ritual, a book, a song, or even a good sermon. He sent His only begotten Son, the Word-made-flesh. So Christmas celebrates the ultimate sacrament—the greatest ever outward conveyance of spiritual reality—the Incarnation!

Why? An incarnate form of sacramental revelation has more capacity to convey God's saving love and grace than do inanimate objects and rites. So if we think about how our spiritual lives might become most fully sacramental, three priorities remain. First, acknowledge Jesus Christ as God's saving/revealing self-communication to you personally, and do so often. There is no substitute for responding believingly to God's loving initiative. Second, create the sacramental space in your devotional life to daily feed on the Bread Jesus offers through prayer and Scripture reading. There is no substitute for being immersed in the Spirit. Third, regard the gathered meeting for worship—the people who love Christ, in whose midst He dwells—as the place to encounter the living presence of God radically. There is no substitute for communion with Christ in corporate fellowship.

When we see that God's sacramental work is finally incarnational, we begin to prioritize the concern to embody His healing/saving presence in the world. These are not just denominational distinctives. They are central insights into the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and ones the world—and perhaps fellow Christians—deserve to consider. Merry Christmas! ■