

1-1-1973

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Recommended Citation

Brinton, Anna C. (1973) "Friends and Sacraments," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 34 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol34/iss1/5>

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Friends and Sacraments

ANNA C. BRINTON

The religion of the Society of Friends is based on the belief that a religious act results from direct inspiration of the Spirit which, like 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." (John 3:8). In the meeting for worship this moving of the Spirit is awaited in expectant silence, though it may occur unpredictably at any time or in any place.

Friends do not forego or condemn all forms. The Spirit must express itself in some way, but we feel that the form cannot be arranged in advance of the inspiration which produces it. Forms, planned in advance, are indispensable in daily life as for example, maps, blue prints and all educational devices, but we must be careful in our religion to adopt such forms as are genuine expressions of the holy reality.

If the sacrament be defined as an outward sign of inward grace, then any act such as self sacrificing service to one's fellow man may be considered sacramental.

The Holy Supper is kept indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need.

— J. R. Lowell, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*

Friends do not find in the New Testament scriptures any definite command to perform what has become the traditional ritual of the sacraments. The disagreement between Catholics and Protestants as to the number of the sacraments and the disagreement among Christian sects as to the efficacy, meaning and mode of procedure, indicates this lack of explicit biblical authority. The whole tenor of New Testament Christianity as

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well as the teachings of the Hebrew prophets discourages dependence on outward forms. Jesus condemns the formalism of the Pharisees, and Paul repeatedly declares that Christians, inspired by the Spirit of Christ, are no longer bound by the outward requirements of the Mosaic law. (Gal. 3:5 f.)

Friends accept the doctrine of baptism by the Holy Spirit and communion of devout souls with God as goals which they seek to attain, not only in meetings for worship, but also in the circumstances of daily life. We believe that if the inward states shown by these outward rites are to be truly realized, a ritual is not needed, and if baptism and communion are not inwardly realized, the outward ritual will not produce them. Those who practice the visible sacraments often attain through them an authentic experience of the holy, but we hold that any outward form, arranged in advance and carried out as a routine, may become empty.

In Paul's account of the Last Supper Jesus is quoted as saying: "Do this in remembrance of me." (I Cor. 11:25). These same words when they occur in Luke's gospel are found to be a late addition. There is no evidence that Jesus was speaking to any others except his immediate disciples. Paul's account is not given to prescribe a procedure but to persuade the Corinthian Christians to act at their *agape* or love feast in a decorous and solemn manner. Paul says: "When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another drunk." (I Cor. 11:20)

John, who gives by far the most complete account of the Last Supper, cites as the only "sacrament" enjoined there, the washing of feet. (John 13:14). In this beautiful symbol the act and its meaning are perhaps more closely connected than in any other instance.

In recent times the ecumenical movement has focused attention on the variety in Christian observances. The practice of the Society of Friends in emphasizing the "non-necessity" of clergy and visible sacraments has been noted. To some ecumenically minded churchmen it has appeared that the Society of Friends preserves a forthright witness in its silent

worship to "that universal liturgy in which all nations can unite." (T. Edmund Harvey, *A Wayfarer's Faith*, p. 65)

Let us, then, labor for an inward stillness, —
An inward stillness and an inward healing;
That perfect silence, where the lips and heart
Are still, and we no longer entertain
Our own imperfect thoughts and vain opinions,
But God alone speaks in us, and we wait
In singleness of heart, that we may know
His will, and in the silence of our spirits,
That we may do His will, and do that only.

— H. W. Longfellow,
The New England Tragedies, Act I, scene 3