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Quakers and the Sacraments

MAURICE A. CREASEY

The purpose of this paper is to invite Friends to look afresh at the Society's traditional attitude to the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. There are two main reasons why I think it is timely to consider this matter. The first is that a growing number of Friends through their experience of the ecumenical encounter are coming to realize both the profoundly spiritual significance which these practices possess for many of our fellow Christians, and also the seriousness of the issue raised by our non-observance of them. The second reason is that, as it seems to me, some of the developments that have taken place in our understanding of the biblical grounding and the theological significance of these rites have made some of our customary justifications of our distinctive attitude to them less cogent.

The scope of this paper is limited to a consideration of only the broader issues. The word Sacrament will be used simply as a convenient descriptive term and without implying either acceptance or rejection of any particular sacramental doctrine or theory. What some may feel to be an unduly critical attitude to the Quaker testimony concerning Sacraments is accounted for by the fact that, hitherto, almost the only purpose of Quaker writing on this subject has been to justify and support this testimony, not to examine it. So far as possible the two Sacraments will be treated together, and no attempt will be made to go into points of detailed biblical exegesis or historical analysis. The method of the paper will be to try to raise right questions rather than to proffer right answers, and my purpose in writing it will be accomplished if others are stimulated to think about this matter more deeply than I have been able to do. In due course, when we are spiritually mature and humble enough, I believe that, with all other Christians, we shall be led forward together into an understanding deeper than any of us, in our separation, has yet obtained.

The paper falls into three main parts. In the first, two questions of a factual and historical kind will be raised. The former is, “On what grounds did Friends in the seventeenth century justify their attitude to the Sacraments?” The latter is, “On what grounds have Friends subsequently justified their attitude?” The second part of this paper will seek to raise critical and theological questions. It will ask how far the original Quaker attitude was biblically and theologically valid, in terms of the understanding of these matters shared by early Friends and their Christian contemporaries, and it will go on to ask the parallel question concerning more recent attempts to give biblical and theological justification for our practice. In the third part, I shall try to raise questions of a constructive kind, with the purpose of encouraging exploration of ways in which the unquestionably true and important intention which has always motivated our traditional practice in this matter may be more positively and more relevantly expressed at this time.

Before embarking upon this discussion I wish to say, as explicitly and as clearly as I can, that I am concerned to advocate no hasty or ill-considered change in our historic practice. If change there is to be, it can rightly come only after costly reappraisal in deep fellowship with our fellow Christians, from some of whom changes no less radical, in doctrine or in practice, may in obedience be required.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before setting out the grounds on which Friends in the seventeenth century justified their attitude to the Sacraments, it may be well to remind ourselves of one or two features of the general attitude of their contemporaries. It is often assumed that among their contemporaries a quasi-mechanical — or, indeed, magical — conception was prevalent, and that it was this, more than anything else, that provoked the Quaker rejection of Sacraments. But such a view cannot be sustained. The sixteenth-century Reformers, Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer, had always insisted that our feeding upon the Body of Christ was a spiritual
activity not to be thought of as limited to or equated with participation in the Eucharist. It is true that many of the Laudian bishops and clergy tended to limit this spiritual appropriation to the participation in the Eucharistic rite, but "any doctrine of the 'real presence' that was used in any way kindred to transubstantiation was unknown among Laud's Churchmen."4

So far as the Puritans generally were concerned, the Savoy Declaration stated their position thus: "Worthy Receivers outwardly partaking of the visible Elements in this Sacrament do then also inwardly by Faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death."5 It has been pointed out that, so far from adopting a materialistic or crude doctrine, the Puritan teaching "pervaded by a mystic and sacramental tone."6 Matthew Henry's "The Communicants' Companion," published in 1704, which has been called by Horton Davies "the most complete statement of the Puritan doctrine of the Lord's Supper," describes the rite as "a commenorating Ordinance, and a confessing Ordinance; a communicatn Ordinance, and a covenanting Ordinance" — surely a much richer and more spiritual conception than any that is merely memorial or primarily ex opere operato.

Why, then, did the early Friends reject the Sacraments which meant so much to most of their contemporaries and which, on the whole, were understood by them in a spiritual and ethical manner? Three "basic reasons" have been given by Horton Davies: their conviction that "no external rite could guarantee internal sincerity"; their mystical apprehension of "the entire universe as a sacrament of God"; and their interpretation of clerical celebration of the Sacraments as a denial of the priesthood of all believers.8 There is, I think, more justification in the early Quaker writings for the first and third than for the second of these reasons. It is true that, as Hunt has said, the rejection of external ordinances by George Fox and the early Friends, like that by Henry Nicholas and the Familists, sprang from a "recoil against mere ceremonial." It may even be true to say that "their error was generated by an error in another direction," and that "their was a battle for the reality against the shadow, for the substance at the expense of the form, for the law in its spirit even at the risk of sacrificing the law in the letter." But I do not think this view sufficiently emphasizes the extent to which early Friends rejected the Sacraments on theological grounds and sought to justify their rejection by biblical exegesis. In other words, I believe they saw themselves as not simply supplying a corrective to what was an essentially right but actually exaggerated practice of the church. Rather, 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.

Their affirmation was made in the form of two complementary assertions. In the first place, they insisted that with the coming of Jesus Christ as the inaugurator of the New Covenant, all ceremonial or outward forms of worship, being essentially "Jewish" and belonging to the Old Covenant, were in principle abrogated. That Jesus commanded his disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me" they did not deny, but they argued that this command meant only that the followers of Jesus should use every social meal as an occasion for the remembrance of the Lord — a command which they insisted they were careful to observe. That Jesus gave any command concerning Baptism they denied. They strongly emphasized the identity of John's baptism with the baptism practiced by the first Christians, and equally strongly emphasized the contrast between such water baptism and that baptism with the Spirit which was to be the distinguishing work of the Christ. They admitted, indeed, that water baptism was practiced in the apostolic Churches, but they regarded this as a sign of the "carnal" and "literal" state of the earliest Christians, to which the practice was an "accommodation."

In the second place, early Friends claimed that their present experience was of such a kind that the merely symbolic feeding upon Christ and the symbolic baptism with his Spirit could add nothing to their experience of the realities which these rites expressed. Christ's disciples had indeed been commanded to show forth his death in this manner "until he come": "But," said early Friends, "he has indeed come; we know his real Presence
in our gathered worship: what need have we to practice a rite appropriate only to the period of his absence?"

It may be of some importance to note the attitude of the early Quaker leaders to those Christians who practiced and highly regarded the Sacraments. Barclay can speak of Sacraments as "mere Conceans and Inventions of men," of which "neither Name nor Number is to be found in the Scripture."

Of those who, like himself, cease to observe the Supper, he can say, "And to turn away from such an Ordinance, so called, is no sin or hurt; but all who become obedient to the Light of Christ in them will find it their place to forsake it, as being such an Ordinance which the Apostle said 'Touch not, taste not, handle not, which is all to perish with the using' . . . ." By contrast there is a more lenient tone in Samuel Fisher's "Yet I deny not the use of them (i.e., the Sacraments) to such as are not satisfied as to the Lord unless they use them."

Penington also, with characteristic charitableness, says of Christians who conscientiously observe the Sacraments, "I am persuaded the Lord is tender to Persons that do things in tenderness of Heart to him, notwithstanding some error or mistake in their Judgments." It should also be mentioned that Barclay finds no fault with the practice of observing "an Agape or Love feast" — "a being together not merely to feed their Bellies, or for outward Ends; but to take thence occasion to Eat and Drink together in the Dread and Presence of the Lord, as his People: which Custom we shall not condemn. . . ."

It is necessary now to review the ways in which the question of Sacraments has been treated by Friends since the seventeenth century. It is not unfair to say that in the eighteenth century no significant attention was paid to this question by Friends. With the increasing contacts between Friends and other evangelical Christians in the early nineteenth century, however, the need to restate and defend the Quaker position was met by J. J. Gurney. In the fourth chapter — "On the disuse of all Typical Rites in the Worship of God" — of his Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends, Gurney's argument is that "these rites, as they are now observed, are of precisely the same nature as the ceremonies of the ancient Jews. . . . It is clear, therefore, that the principle on which these practices are founded appertains to the old covenant; and equally plain (in the opinion of Friends) that such practices do not consist with that spiritual worship which is described as so distinguishing a feature of the dispensation of the gospel."

Gurney, as might be expected, elaborates this argument with detailed consideration of biblical passages, relating Baptism and the Supper respectively to the Jewish baptism of proselytes and the Passover ritual. The validity of his exegesis will be examined in the following section of this paper. Here it is sufficient to say that, exactly like the seventeenth century Quaker apologists, Gurney's argument is simply that the Christian Sacraments are "wholly ceremonial," "a mere shadow or figure" — and that since under the Gospel "all mere types and shadows are at once fulfilled and abrogated" they "can have no permanent place in the System of Christianity."

Like Barclay, Gurney is willing to admit that "those persons who continue the observance of the Lord's Supper, not as a religious ceremony constituting a necessary part of divine worship, but on the simple system of primitive Christians, are not without their warrant for the adoption of such a course." He admits, too, that there are "many persons who avail themselves of the rites in question, on principles which cannot be deemed superstitious; and who derive, through these signs and memorials some real instruction and edification." But he continues, "I cannot but deem it probable, that as serious Christians, not of our profession, draw yet rarer in spirit to an omnipresent Deity, they will be permitted to find, in the disuse of all types, 'a more excellent way'."

So far as the Sacraments are concerned, the "Declaration of Christian Doctrine" of the Richmond Conference of 1887 adequately expresses the generally accepted nineteenth-century Quaker conviction. It states that "our Lord appointed no outward rite or ceremony for observance in His Church"; that Baptism is to be understood as "a spiritual experience"; that whereas "the old covenant was full of ceremonial symbols, the new covenant . . . is expressly declared by the prophet to be 'not according to the old' (Jer. 31:32, Heb. 8:9)"; and that "the presence of Christ with His Church is not designed to be by symbol or rep-
resemblance but in the real communication of his own Spirit." He
views are advanced by Richard H. Thomas, with the
addition of a strong emphasis upon the "argument from silence"
in the New Testament, in such a sentence as the following: "The
utter absence... of any approach to specific directions in regard
to these things in the writings of men whose education would
have led them to lay emphasis upon the new ceremonial, is an
exceedingly strong prima facie evidence that nothing of the kind
at all was laid upon the Christian Church." 19

In the early decades of the present century the Quaker treat-
ment of the Sacraments underwent certain significant changes
at the hands of such Friends as Alfred Kemp Brown and Edward
Grubb in England, and Rufus M. Jones in the United States of
America. The basic positions remain, I think, essentially the
same, and are enumerated by Alfred Kemp Brown under the fol-
lowing five heads: a) "the a priori improbability... that Jesus
would institute any new ceremony which, equally with the re-
quirements of the Mosaic System, would be a 'shadow of good
things to come'"; b) the "argument from silence" in the New
Testament; c) the "painful history of misconception, supersti-
tion and sacerdotalism" resulting from the practice of Sacra-
mants by the church; d) the "tendency of outward sacraments
to create a double standard" — the belief that "by their means
on stated occasions men have a unique opportunity of drawing
nigh to God..."; and e) the "sacramental nature of all experi-
ence." 20 The "significant changes" to which I have alluded are
referred to by Alfred Kemp Brown in a Foreword, where he ex-
presses his belief that "the last quarter of a century has witnessed
some modifications of belief, tending in general to confirm the
Quaker view." It is clear, from his subsequent treatment of the
subject, that he has in mind such considerations as the extent
to which a critical study of the Synoptic accounts of the Last
Supper weakens belief in its Dominion institution, and the
probable influence of Hellenic Mysteries upon the early Church's
understanding of both Baptism and the Supper, tending to-
wards their interpretation in categories alien to the New Testa-
ment.

A similar standpoint is adopted by Edward Grubb. He
draws a sharp distinction between a practice which "can be
traced to the mind of Jesus Himsel!" and one for which "the
Church's authority" is all that can be claimed. 21 He makes
much of the alleged opposition between "institutional" and
"prophetic" religion in the Old Testament, 22 and asks the ques-
tion, "Is Christianity a religion of the institutional type, or is it
purely spiritual?" 23 For Grubb, it naturally follows that, since
Christ's "direct authority... can no longer be appealed to," the
sacramental question "becomes one not of obedience but of ex-
pedience." 24 A similar point of view is expressed by Gerald K.
Hibbert in these words: "Probably in the last resort it is a mat-
ter of temperament. Some natures are hindered, others helped,
by the outward symbol; and the Quaker witness is still needed
to provide a spiritual home for the former." 25 Not only does the
Society of Friends need to exist for this purpose, but in the
"Universal Church as its several branches come into closer union,
a place must be found for those who believe they reach the Re-
ality without the Symbol." 26 The position of Rufus Jones is
substantially the same as that of Edward Grubb, and he describes
the Quaker attitude to the Sacraments as entailing "a most costly
experiment, namely, that of demonstrating that there can be
maintained a type of worship in spirit and in truth without the
usual outward aids to secure it, that there can be a religion of
life and spirit without legal and ceremonial forms, and that there
can be a sacramental life without specific sacraments." 27

In a category by themselves, John William Graham's The
Faith of a Quaker 28 and J. Rendel Harris's Eucharistic Origins 29
may be mentioned. Both carry much further the tendency, al-
ready noted in connection with Alfred Kemp Brown, to inter-
pert the Sacraments in relation to pagan rituals, and so to di-
minish their claim upon our loyalty and to strengthen the Quak-
er case for their rejection. Typical of the point of view of both
writers is the following quotation from the former: 'The com-
munion is a spiritual stimulant, and we believe that on the whole
it is better to do without stimulants. ... From all sacramental
contentions we are able to stand aside, and we believe that the
only safe ground amid conflicting theories is to have no sacra-
mental theory at all; clearly to understand that no variety of

[Quaker Religious Thought, Vol. 9 [1963], Art. 2](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol9/iss1/2)
any such theory is to be found in the Christianity of Christ.”

Such a point of view is congenial to not a few Friends, even today—a fact which illustrates the need for a re-examination of the whole matter, an enterprise to which this paper seeks to make a contribution.

II. CRITICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It seems to me that the Quaker attitude to the Sacraments which has now been sketched suggests a number of questions concerning its theological and biblical adequacy. I realize, of course, that this attitude was not primarily an inference from biblical and theological premises but arose in a corporate experience which was then given biblical and theological justification. But this fact does not exempt us from the need to ask how far such biblical and theological justification can still be accepted as valid, if, indeed, it was ever valid.

It also leaves open the question whether the original experience could ever have been erected into a permanent “testimony” if an apparently strong case had not been made out purporting to demonstrate its being the real meaning of the New Testament.

I propose to ask first the question whether the biblical exegesis relied upon by Friends with remarkable uniformity throughout the Society’s history really proves what it has always been held to prove. Friends cannot evade this question, for the Society has always stood with Isaac Penington when he says, “Yet (though we do own Christ to be the Rule) we do not deny making use of the Scriptures to try Doctrines, and Forms of Religion, by; but know, that which is of God, doth, and will agree therewith, and what doth not agree therewith, is not of God.”

The underlying principle of our usual mode of exegesis is by no one more frankly expressed than by Joseph John Gurney. In the work from which I have already quoted, Gurney proposes to examine the principal passages in the New Testament in which, as they are understood by the great majority of Christians, the practice of Baptism and the Supper “is not only justified, but enforced; and which, in fact, render such practice binding upon all the followers of Christ.” But before embarking upon an examination of such passages, Gurney makes “one general observation,” and it is not too much to say that having made it, the conclusion to which he will come, no matter how meagerly he appears to examine the text, is already firmly decided. He claims that “if any such passages be found fairly to admit of either a literal or a spiritual interpretation, and if it be allowed . . . that the latter is far more in harmony than the former with the nature of the Christian dispensation—in such case, we are justified, by the soundest laws of biblical criticism, in adopting the spiritual, and in dropping the literal interpretation.”

That this is the principle followed by the early Quaker writers is apparent. Barclay, for example, gives the following interpretation of the phrase “one loaf” in I Cor. 10:16-17: “Now what is that one Bread? Is it the Outward? or is it the Inward and Spiritual? If it be the Outward, then there is no Inward and Spiritual Bread: Or if it be the Inward and Spiritual which is the one Bread, then that Outward Bread (as being but a Figure) is ceased from being of use, as to any necessity . . . . So that now the bread being one, which is the Body of Christ, the Outward Bread hath no place in the Supper of the Lord; for then there should be not one Bread, but two: for the Outward Bread and the Inward are two, and not one Bread.”

Barclay is clearly unable to apprehend the thought that the “outward bread” may be a means used by Christ to enable us truly to feed upon the “inward.” Again, could Barclay have permitted himself to quote Col. 2:21-22 (“Do not handle this, do not taste that, do not touch the other”—all of them things that must perish as soon as they are used”) and Gal. 4:9 (“How can you turn back to the mean and beggarly spirits of the elements”) to justify the Quaker rejection of the use of bread and wine and water, unless he had already made up his mind about the matter on other grounds? And will any non-Quaker exegete be satisfied with Barclay’s interpretation of I Cor. 11:17-34, “Which place” he says, “we shall particularly Examine, because our Adversaries lay the chief stress of their matter upon it”? Typical of the whole is his exegesis of verse 20. (“The result is that when you meet as a congregation, it is impossible for you to eat the Lord’s Supper . . . .”) which he understands to mean “That their com-
ing together into one place is not to Eat the Lord’s Supper; he saith not, This is not the right Manner to Eat, but, This is not to Eat the Lord’s Supper; because the Supper of the Lord is Spiritual, and a Mystery.” Despite Barclay’s superior education and scholarly instincts, such excess is no better than that of Fox who interprets “ordinances” in such passages as Col. 2:14 and Eph. 2:15 and Heb. 9:1-10 to mean “the Ordinances,” i.e., Baptism and the Supper, and claims that it is these that have been “blotted out” by Christ in establishing “the Second Covenant, the Everlasting Covenant.”

I am not suggesting that in Quaker treatments of the Sacraments, whether in the seventeenth or the twentieth centuries, there are no more respectable examples than these. But the question I am seeking to raise is whether we, as Friends, can claim any more objectivity for our biblical interpretations concerning Baptism and the Supper than our fellow Christians can for theirs. Is it not clear that we, no less than they, have formed a general conception of the nature and requirements of the Christian dispensation, and that we, no less than they, have brought this to the interpretation of the biblical text? Neither they nor we are blameless in so doing, but it has to be admitted, I think, that our efforts as Friends to reach towards a more soundly-based biblical and theological understanding of Baptism and the Supper are no more than minimal, lagging behind, and showing little awareness of the efforts being made in this direction in other Christian communions.

Following this line of thought, it is necessary now to ask how far this general conception which Friends have brought to the interpretation of the biblical material can be accepted as theologically valid. It appears to me to be in need of re-examination on at least four counts.

1) Can it any longer be seriously maintained that, merely because material substances — bread, wine, and water — are used in the Christian observances, they are, therefore, in principle identical with the pre-Christian Jewish rituals? To make this identification is to ignore all the most theologically significant differences and to seize upon the common feature which is theologically least important. It is also to do less than justice to the spiritual meaning which was undoubtedly conveyed to many by those pre-Christian practices. This is not to deny that the Christian observances have been too often and for too long understood in a formal, ritualistic, legalistic manner, but such an understanding is entirely alien to the New Testament conception. Moreover, however indistinguishable to Friends has been the difference between “John’s baptism” and “Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus,” it is clear that the difference was obvious and deeply important to Paul, and was demonstrated powerfully among the believers at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). It was not for Paul the simple contrast between a baptism with water and a baptism which was simply a metaphorical name for an inner experience. It was the contrast between a baptism with water which was not understood as expressing a participation in the power of the Spirit, and a baptism with water which was part of a larger experience involving the reception of the Spirit. Can we, also, continue to be content with the argument so regularly employed by Friends in the past, that the Apostles “con-descended” in their employment of these sensible signs, to the “low and unspiritual apprehensions” of their first converts? Is there any evidence that, in his doctrine, Paul ever adopted such a cause? If the Corinthian correspondence is any guide, even the “milk” which he thought appropriate diet for his Corinthian converts contained, “in solution,” so to speak, spiritual proteins which we may well find are no easier for us to assimilate than they were for the “infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1 f) to whom he first wrote. The truth is, surely, that Paul took these simple, lowly observances which the first Christians were already following, and opened up their profound and creative meanings and suggestions in ways which made them vehicles to convey and witnesses to attest the deepest meaning of a common life in Christ.

The fact which these examples illustrate, as it seems to me, is that by identifying in principle Baptism and the Supper with Jewish rituals; by invoking the concept of the New Covenant to mean primarily the abolition of all regular forms and symbolic expressions in worship; and by accounting for the undoubtedly use of such forms and expressions by the earliest Church on the
grounds of its spiritual immaturity and its bondage to Jewish rituals — by all these means Friends have adopted a device which effectively dulls our perception of the real inwardsness of the New Testament witness concerning these practices. No such simple a priori reasoning is any longer permissible, I believe. If we persist in it, we shall lose the right to be heard by our fellow Christians, and we shall fail to make effectively the positive witness which I believe is still required of us.

2) A second question which needs to be examined is the extent to which the early Quaker abandonment of the Sacraments is an expression of a defective awareness of what is often called the "eschatological tension" between the "now" and the "not yet." It is very clear that the early Friends were so vividly conscious of the reality of the spiritual fellowship into which they had been gathered that they felt they were living fully within "the kingdom." For them, the events of the Incarnation and Pentecost had ushered in the New Age in its fullness — there was nothing further, in principle, to be entered upon. There had, indeed, supervened the "dark night of Apostasy," and Friends did not, I think, sufficiently consider the theological implications of this fact. But they were joyously confident that now, in their own day, the Church was "coming forth again in the brightness and glory of the Father . . . fair as the morning, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners."29

In this mood and experience they saw the Sacraments as, in principle, displaced and rendered obsolete. They found an argument ready to their hand, in regard to the Supper, in the words of I Cor. 11:26 — "For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes." As those who believed themselves to be already experiencing the powers of the age to come, they felt under no obligation to continue a practice so clearly interim in character. In support of this attitude they frequently added a reference to Rev. 5:20: "Here I stand knocking at the door; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him and he with me."30 This, they said, is the true and permanent Supper of the Lord which we observe — the opening to him of the door of the heart. The same sense of the impermanence and merely representative character of the Supper is expressed in William Penn's questions concerning the unnecessary and unsatisfactory experience of gazing upon the portraits of our friends when we have it in our power to gaze directly upon their faces.

The question is prompted whether, if Friends had realized more fully the fact that, even now, Christ's presence with his people is apprehended by faith and not by sight, that he gives himself to us "in, with and under" the forms of our historical existence, that the time for the full manifestation of his glory is both "now" and also "not yet" — then I believe they would have seen in the profound simplicities of the Christian "ordinances" a "visible word" most perfectly appropriate to the conditions of our present existence; for in it there is a re-presentation of the past, and the future is, in faith, already realized.

3) A third question concerns the legitimacy of the distinction between "inward" and "outward" as employed by Friends in connection with the Sacraments, as well as in a great many other connections. Linked with this, is the identification of "inward" with "spiritual" and of "outward" with "carnal," "formal," or "dead."40 Although in other connections they recognized that "outward" acts (e.g., plain dress and the refusal of "hat honor") could express and give rise to profound spiritual insights, they seem to have found it impossible to admit this principle so far as Baptism and the Supper are concerned. They would have justified their attitude on this question by pointing to the undeniable tendency for such outward acts, by repetition and customary practice, to become merely formal; but the Society's history shows clearly that this tendency is not confined to the practice of the Sacraments. Indeed, may it not be legitimate to ask whether, having abandoned such practice, Friends were not all the more disposed to develop numerous other "outward" acts by which to express and deepen their awareness of belonging to one another and their sense of being called to bear a common witness to the world? In other words, did not their distinctive practices come to possess for them sacramental value? There is, indeed, no occasion for criticism in this, but the question forces itself upon us whether there is any real ground for recognizing the legitimacy and the sacramental significance of
all such actions except those which can trace their origin to the practice of Christ himself and his apostles.

4) A fourth question suggests itself, in which the implications of the preceding three are brought together. It concerns the understanding of the nature of the Christian fellowship, for I believe it is their preoccupation with this which constitutes the central, positive witness of Friends. For the sake of brevity, I may say that I accept, broadly speaking, Emil Brunner’s distinction between the Ekklesia and the “church” as institution.48 I accept also Brunner’s contention that, parallel with the emergence of “the church” as an institution, there was the development of “the Sacraments” as a concept which radically transformed the understanding of Baptism and the Supper which is to be found in the New Testament. The two developments encouraged and supported each other. Thus Brunner can say, “The Sacrament belongs just as much to the institution of the Church as the fellowship-meal belongs to the Ekklesia.”49 and he describes the “fundamental sociological change” which comes over the structure of the Ekklesia when the Lord’s Supper is conceived of as a Sacrament.44

It seems to me that the deepest meaning of the early Quaker movement was precisely this — that it marked a thoroughgoing attempt to recover the reality of the Ekklesia as a “brotherhood or fellowship of love” gathered around the living Christ, and informed by his Spirit. If this is so, it is not difficult to see that, as one expression of this recovery, the whole idea of “the Sacraments” as this had taken root within the institutional churches, Reformed as well as Roman, had to be radically called in question. The sad fact is, I believe, that, in order to make this radical criticism of the whole idea of “the Sacramental,” Friends have thought it necessary to protest against the profoundly different meaning which the primitive Ekklesia saw in Baptism and the Supper.45 The biblical and theological straits in which they have found themselves as they attempt to carry out this protest have already been indicated. The question I wish to raise, therefore, is this: Granted that the whole concept of Sacraments as held in the institutional churches represents a decline from the profoundly spiritual, ethical, and social reality of Baptism and the Supper as known by the first Christian fellowships, would 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? Is this not one more example of a pattern which repeats itself throughout Quaker history — the outright rejection of wholesome practices on the ground that they have actually been, and may be again, misunderstood, abused, and perverted? It is sad indeed to see how slow we have been to recognize that this “all or nothing” attitude cannot save us from falling into other misunderstandings and sterilities no less dangerous than those we have taken such care to avoid.

III. CONSTRUCTIVE ISSUES

In this concluding section I wish to bring together a few of the questions and comments that have formed themselves in my mind as I have worked through the bulk of Quaker writings concerning the Sacraments from the earliest days until the present. They are questions and comments of a general kind, intended only to open up lines of thought and investigation for the future.

I begin with a quotation from Edward Grubb. Of the Christian Eucharist he writes: “So far as it is found to minister to the deepest needs of the Christian life, to bind the followers of Jesus in deathless bonds to Himself and to one another, to make the Cross a living experience and to energize their lives by His indwelling Spirit, it will continue to be practised in His universal Church.”46 In these words I find an admirable recognition of some of the grounds upon which not only the Eucharist but also Baptism, both understood in a manner which is in harmony with their meaning in the New Testament, are to be observed and, I doubt not, will continue to be observed by the Christian fellowship. It is recognized that they have vital and spiritual significance, and that their use of material media is a contributory factor to their effectiveness. There is no suggestion that they appeal only to the spiritually immature, or that their use will pass away with a growing Christian experience, or that they are out of place in the Christian dispensation. With all this I heartily concur, and such an estimate marks a very great advance, I believe, on that formed by most early Friends.
But the question that occurs to me is this: On what grounds are we justified in foregoing the opportunity offered in these practices for entering into an experience of these benefits? It is not claimed that these practices are exclusive channels of divine grace, and I would reject any such claim. But it is claimed that they "minister to the deepest needs of the Christian life." Are we really so different from other Christians that we can afford to dispense with such assistance? Some words of David Updegraff, whose understanding of the Sacraments was a great deal more spiritually mature than that of the Yearly Meetings which criticized him, admirably express the point: "There is no man while in the flesh that is so spiritual as not to need the use of all God-appointed means that shall tend to promote a chastened spirit, communion with God, and a sense of 'the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ.'" 547

Unless our rejection of these practices can be shown to serve an even higher purpose than this and to rest upon a truer and deeper understanding of the divine will, I believe we reject them to our loss. And even if particular individuals find little help from them, does this justify us in excluding these things from our corporate practice, thus imposing a negative test upon those who, while in all other respects drawn to our conception of Christian faith, worship, and practice, feel the need for what these observances so powerfully convey? Is this procedure really consistent with our declared principle of following the Light wherever it may lead, of being "humble learners in the School of Christ"? Have we any right to assume that Christ will never teach any of his disciples, even if they be Quakers, to find him and their brother in the "one loaf"? Or do we simply mean that, if any are so taught, their needs must be met elsewhere than within our fellowship? Have we any right to confront any such with this painful dilemma? And what is the spiritual worth of a fellowship which regards this negative principle of association as essential to its existence?

Such questions as these will be met by a number of Friends with references to what they regard as two of the main justifications for our distinctive practice. In the first place, they will claim that we are called to bear a positive and permanent testimony to the non- necessity of the Sacraments. Now, in so far as we are confronted by a church which categorically limits the operations of divine grace to such sacramental channels, such a witness is entirely relevant. But there are three further points to be observed. Whatever may have been the case in the past, few churches today recognize such limitations. In general, they state only that sacramental observances are among the provisions made by Christ for the gathering and maintenance of the fellowship of his disciples, and that it is in this sense that they are "generally necessary to salvation." There is little disposition on the part of leading churchmen today to confine the grace of God to sacramental channels. 48 Our testimony that sacraments are "not essential" is met, increasingly, by the reply, "But of course we agree with you," so that we run the risk of finding ourselves "frozen" into an attitude of protest which has little relevance to the outlooks and attitudes of a growing number of our fellow Christians.

But there is a further point to be made. While it may be necessary to witness to the "non-necessity" of sacraments regarded as exclusive channels of divine grace, such a witness appears somewhat irrelevant when made with reference to the observances of Baptism and the Supper, understood as by the New Testament Ekklesia to be among the powerful helps and encouragements offered to us in the humility of Christ. It may appear as if we were intending to say, "Thank you, but we can get along quite well without this help." It may not be altogether irrelevant to note the fact that Friends do not usually recognize the value of the "non-necessity" argument if it is used against them by those who would justify their non-attendance at Meeting on the ground that it is not necessary to attend Meeting in order to worship for they can worship just as truly "out under the blue sky." Nor would most of us feel that the argument carried much weight if it were used by a group who, in reaction against overvaluation and misuse of the Bible, refused to make any use of it, in order to "bear a witness to its non-necessity." Yet another point seems relevant in this connection. Even if it be granted that the Quaker position is adequately described as a testimony to the non- necessity of sacraments, is it not clear that, for a large number of Friends, this testimony has transformed itself into a testimony to the necessity of having no sacraments? This, surely,
is a very different testimony, and one which it is difficult to justify either on biblical and theological grounds or on grounds of its organic connection with the central and basic Quaker testimony "that every man is enlightened by the divine light of Christ."

The second main justification that is traditionally advanced is usually expressed as a witness to the sacramental nature of life. It is believed that by refusing to isolate certain areas of life as specially transparent to the divine Presence we are thereby made more able to glimpse that Presence everywhere. As it seems to me, several questions are suggested by such an assertion. If by the statement that "all life is sacramental" we mean only that all experience in life may become charged with divine meaning for us, or may be made revelatory experiences, or that it is possible to penetrate through all experience to the eternal reality that lies behind it, then we may be asserting a truth, even if it be a truth that most of us recognize in desire rather than in attainment. It is, moreover, a truth that is written clearly across the pages of both Scripture and Christian experience. But it is not the same truth that is being set forth in Baptism and the Communion. These points not simply to the general truth of divine immanence but to the event of the Upper Room, of Calvary, of the Resurrection, and of the formation of the Community by the Spirit of Christ. They are saying to us something other and greater than the message of the "radiant orbs" of Joseph Addison's "spacious firmament on high" —

"For ever singing as they shine,
The hand that made us is divine."

The particular question we need to consider is, I believe, whether by the setting apart of certain specific areas of experience, connected directly with the historic words and actions of Jesus Christ and with the earliest corporate experience of the Christian fellowship, we are made more, or are made less, able to discern the universal presence of Christ in the world. We, as Friends, have always claimed that from such a setting apart a tendency arises to depreciate the divine meaning of all other areas of experience, whereas the majority of our serious fellow Christians claim that the recognition of the specific Sacraments opens their eyes to and forms a constant reminder of the hidden and mysterious presence of Christ everywhere else. But I doubt that we consistently apply the principle to which we make appeal. Do we really think that, by deliberately setting apart certain hours in the week for worship we are thereby rendered less likely to experience the spirit of worship at all other times? Do we really believe that by learning to love in the deepest and truest manner one or two people we are less able to enter into loving relationships with all others? Is not the truth the direct opposite of this? Would we not wish to maintain that it is only by the fullest entering into relationship with a limited number of concrete things and persons that we are prepared to extend the relationship so learned over ever-widening circles of experience? It therefore appears to me that in much the same way as we have, almost unconsciously, transformed a positive testimony for the non-necessity of Sacraments into a negative testimony for the necessity of not having them, so by our claim to express a witness to the sacramental nature of all life we have often come dangerously near to meaning "all life — except these two particular kinds of experience known as the Sacraments."

A related point is often made in defense of our traditional practice. It is claimed that our Meeting for Worship, as such, has for us "sacramental significance" and takes the place of the Communion Service of other churches. If by "sacramental significance" is meant simply the fact that in and through the gathered Meeting we are enabled to realize the presence of God and communion with Christ, that is, of course, thankfully recognized. This discovery of the unifying and mediating power of corporate silent waiting is indeed a great and precious thing, intended surely for the good of the whole church. But the question which such an affirmation does not answer is this: Would our discovery be any less significant if we continued to practice, in appropriate ways and on appropriate occasions, the historic communion of the shared cup and the one loaf? It is my belief that not only would it not be less significant, but our gathered waiting would be, more often than it is, a gathering "in his name" who used these symbols to set forth to sense and heart the deepest meaning of his presence amongst us.

So far as the question of symbols is concerned, early Friends were, of course, consistent in their distrust of religious and artis-

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tic symbolism. The same principle which led them to abandon the Sacraments led them to eschew art and music. We, their religious heirs, have gradually, and rightly, reinstated artistic symbolism and have come to a discriminating appreciation of its value to convey that which lies beyond the confines of conceptual thought. We highly value verbal symbols when appropriately employed. We rejoice in our corporate re-discovery of the powerful symbol of silence and have even developed a number of our own peculiarly Quaker symbols. Why then need we so stiffly refuse to consider whether, in those most powerful and moving symbols of the broken bread and the shared cup, we might not find once more, with all other Christians, the "visible words" of which Augustine and the Reformers spoke?

In so far as the Quaker testimony concerning Sacraments claims to express the mind of Christ and to be the true meaning of the New Testament, I believe the most that can be said of it is that its claim is not proven. If it seeks justification on the ground that it is a permanently necessary witness against crude and limiting conceptions of how God's grace reaches us, the question remains open whether this "total abstinence" is the most positive form which an unquestionably necessary witness can take in the circumstances of today. If it is simply part of an attempt to offer an acceptable mode of worship which has no place in it for features which some people find unhelpful or even offensive, this may provide some pragmatic justification, but it leaves all the deep historical and theological questions unrecognized and therefore unillumined.

It will, I hope, be realized that the purpose of this paper would be entirely misunderstood if it were regarded as making a plea for Friends to "adopt the Sacraments." My claim is that Friends were and are right to reject the "sacramental" understanding of Baptism and the Supper — the understanding according to which these "Sacraments" impart a grace not otherwise available. The questions it is desired to raise are whether Baptism and the Supper, understood as in the New Testament, need be excluded from our corporate experience and practice and whether, if practiced, they could not be experienced as complementary to our mode of gathered, waiting worship, and, indeed, as contributing to it: a rooting (which it not infrequently lacks) in the history of God's saving acts.

It is no real answer to this question to say, "Let any Friends who feel the need partake of the Communion elsewhere." The essence of the Communion of the Lord's Supper, understood as in the New Testament, is its power to express and deepen the common sharing of a corporate life in Christ. To seek in it primarily the satisfaction of a personal spiritual "need," and to be compelled to do this elsewhere than where our regular and growing experience of the meaning of Koinonia is rooted is, surely, both to misunderstand the Communion and to impede our growth in grace.

As I see it, the Society of Friends came into existence to be an embodiment of the Ekklesia — the living and obedient fellowship of men and women gathered around the living Christ, to do his work in and for the world. If this is so, the decisive question concerning this or any other of our traditional "testimonies" is whether it helps or hinders us as we seek to embody the purpose of our existence today.
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35. See *op. cit.*, p. 36 and “A Catechism and Confession of Faith,” *ibid.*, pp. 147-149. (Texts quoted from the New English Bible.)
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43. “An Address on the Ordinances,” Columbus, Ohio, 1885, p. 94.