



## **Sacrament and Sign In Protestant Worship**

**Celestine Ryan, O.P.**

“If the church cannot give us a sacrament that is not divided, it should not ask us to attend an assembly where our relationships are embarrassed by this crucial division.” These striking and bold sentiments were expressed at a recent meeting of the Ecumenical Youth Movement at Lausanne. It was the response of young Protestant men and women who sharply scolded their elders when told that they could not partake of Holy Communion together. This explosive situation was indicative of two forces at work among the Protestant churches: *first*, the serious efforts of the various branches of the Reform to bring about the unity of all Christians and *second*, what has come to be known as the Protestant Liturgical Revival. The activities of the present Vatican Council have focused great attention

on the Catholic Church's desire to renew her worship-life, but many have failed to realize that Protestantism is also seeking a more vigorous direction in her liturgical services.

The original changes that the Reformers introduced into Christian worship brought about doctrinal conflict with Catholicism especially in the areas of the Eucharist and the value of a sacramental life. However, their intentions were directed towards a stronger balance between Word and Sacrament as well as an increase of intelligibility for the layman's sake. Many of these emphases underwent a gradual decline or disappeared altogether. The passage of time brought with it a stereotyped image of Protestant worship as a preaching service. It was characterized by the preeminence of the Word, the de-emphasis of the Eucharist and the stress placed on each individual's relationship to God. Today we find the liturgical movement striving for a worship that is theologically balanced, sacramental and corporate in nature.<sup>1</sup> Christianity is not pictured as a private affair or a casually formed group of people who like religion, but the vital family of Christ, the God-Man, who desires to unite mankind to himself. Man is not an isolated soul but an integral part of the worshipping community. This community enters into Christ's redemptive act not only through the preaching of the Word but also through the living-out of the sacramental action. To grasp the full picture of present day stirrings within Protestantism one must examine the teachings of three reformers: Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. These religious leaders initiated liturgical changes 400 years ago and today their spiritual descendants are seeking the roots and foundation of Christian worship.

### **Luther**

Martin Luther's break with traditional Catholicism developed from a total confidence and belief in the Word of God. His theological and, consequently, liturgical innovations were all prompted by and structured within a framework of Scripture. The Word signifies God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. Thus, God is to be discovered

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *The Protestant Liturgical Revival* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963), pp. 5, 6.

not only in the sacraments but also in the words of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Luther saw the superstitious tendencies of Catholics in regard to the Mass and sacraments. To correct the situation he called for an informative explanation of sacramental life through preaching. He felt that the Mass had been removed from the individual, something to be looked at from afar. It was this realization that prompted Martin Luther to re-examine the Eucharist and seek a balance of Word and Sacrament.

The leader of the Reform did not consider the Eucharist a sacrifice or offering but a *communion*, an intimate joining together of Christ and the soul. He deplored the notion that the Mass was a sacrificial act. Christ died once-for-all and any liturgical act that attempts to duplicate Calvary is blasphemous.<sup>3</sup> However, the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord's Supper but the totality of the bread and wine also remain. These latter do *not* change and any questioning of how two complete realities can exist side by side is merely idle speculation. Christ's sacramental presence is achieved through the words of institution; they effect what they signify. The consecration results "not on account of our speaking or those words uttered, but because of His command. . .".<sup>4</sup> Luther calls for an authorized minister to consecrate the elements but it is the Word which brings about the Sacrament since the minister only functions as an instrument. He is not considered to be a priest "in any other sense than that which regards all believers as priests because they are members of the priestly people of God." Union with Christ and one's brothers is the chief effect of the Eucharist. It also brings about the forgiveness of sins because Christ comes in the Sacrament to give life to the sinner. Luther expressed a great love for the Mass and urged its frequent celebration. Yet, he emphatically maintained that it did not achieve an atonement for sins because of the once-for-allness of Christ's death. The Mass is essentially a gift from God intended for man who can do nothing to merit his salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Richardson, "Word and Sacrament in Protestant Worship" from *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard*, ed. by Miller and Wright, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1964), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Works of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1915-22), II, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Martin Luthers Werke*. Weimarer Ausgabe, 26, 285, 13 ff.

Liturgically speaking, Protestant scholars find much to appreciate in Luther's worship-rite. He retained the basic structure of the Mass but, in his emphasis on intelligibility, he introduced the vernacular and the use of hymns. The service was to be audible and facing the people. Vestments, candles and the like provided a sacred and warm context for liturgical action. However, the oneness of the congregation was not that of a worshipping body which gave adoration to God. Rather, one finds a personal approach developing, a "God and me" outlook where the liturgical rite brings grace and forgiveness. Some Protestant liturgists feel that the sense of mystery is absent due to the elimination of the sacrificial and offertory aspects and this, they think, is necessary for the totality of Christian worship.<sup>5</sup>

### Zwingli

Ulrich Zwingli's influence on Reform liturgy definitely lies in the area of de-emphasizing the sacramental, both in thought and practice. He saw abuses and superstition in the Church especially in regard to the materials and "mechanics" of the liturgy. His prime objective, therefore, was the spiritualization of man's movement to God. Faith is the channel through which God enters the soul and, thus, there is no necessity of concerning one's self with rubrics and externals. Sacraments are a witness or a public sign of interior justification; they do not bring new life into the soul for they testify to the grace that has already been bestowed.

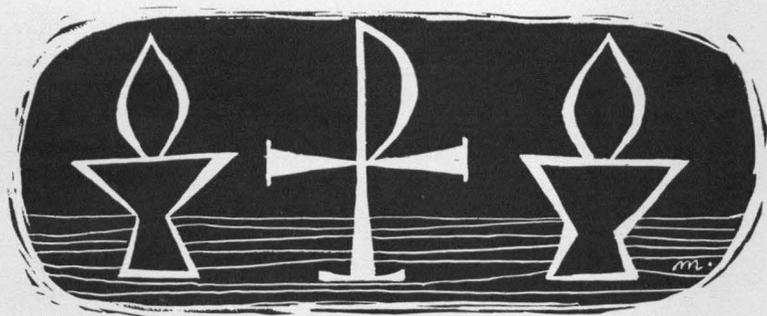
By following Zwingli's fundamental principle we see that all meaning and depth are removed from the Eucharist. The "real presence" and the Mass become memorials, picturesque ways of recalling Jesus Christ's goodness to the believer.<sup>6</sup> The words of institution are to be understood figuratively and the Christian feeds on his Lord through faith. It would almost seem that Zwingli finds no reason for maintaining a Eucharistic observance at all. Yet, in compliance with Christ's command to "do this in remembrance of Me" the Lord's Supper is to be held occasionally. Besides its memorial and witness

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

aspects, the Supper becomes a meal of fellowship; Christian brethren come together as one to give thanks for God's mercy.

Under Zwingli the *altar* gives way to the *table* as the Mass loses all sacrificial elements. The external setting of vestments, ritual and musical accompaniment, which Luther himself had kept, are completely removed. As the Communion service is limited to a quarterly observance, we find worship becoming centered upon the preaching of the Word. It is through the Word that the believer manifests his belief



in Christ. No liturgist would object to these elements but taken alone they are incomplete, seeking fulfillment in a sacramental expression. The focus of the liturgy concentrates upon man and his edification rather than God and his adoration. The liturgist sees that the sacred signs given by Christ have been hollowed of their significance and that personal subjectivity has yielded to the worship that God desires: the praise of the Father by his people through his Son.<sup>7</sup>

### Calvin

John Calvin attempted to strike a middle course between the Lutheran and Zwinglian teachings on the Eucharist and its consequences. He felt that Luther had overemphasized the *realistic* side of the Sacrament while Zwingli's approach was too *symbolic*. For Calvin, the Eucharist was not the "body" strictly speaking, nor was it merely a sign. It was the presence of Jesus Christ in a spiritual manner. Now, the body of Christ is in heaven and as such it remains

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Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

there. The Christian is united to his Lord through the Spirit who brings him a participation in Christ's body and blood. The power of God achieves this miracle of communion when the believer approaches the Father in faith.

. . . on the one hand we must, to shut out all carnal fancies, raise our hearts on high to heaven, thinking that our Lord Jesus Christ is so abased as to be enclosed under any corruptible elements. On the other hand, . . . we must hold that it is accomplished by the secret and miraculous virtue of God, and that the spirit of God is the bond of participation for which reason it is called spiritual.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin's explanation of the fruits of the Eucharist is no different from his fellow Reformers. For him, the two chief effects are union with Christ and the increase of fellowship among Christians. It is a vain question to seek the precise manner in which Christ's body and blood are present. The important factor is the believer's possession of the Lord and a share in his saving graces. At the same time, when the faithful partake of the Eucharist they become one body in Christ. One important thought should be impressed upon the Christian's mind:

that none of the brethren can be insulted, mocked, laughed at, despised or in any way dishonored, but that we at the same time insult, mock, laugh at, and despise Christ; and that Christ cannot be loved by us unless we love him in the brethren . . .<sup>9</sup>

Calvin considered the Lord's Supper as the extension of faith and love among Christians and as such it should be celebrated frequently. Anything less than a weekly observance would be a departure from Apostolic practice.

The Mass itself is an insult to God. Calvary was completely sufficient and to attempt a reduplication is to diminish the fullness of the Lord's redemption. Thus, the only offering to be found in Calvin's rite would be the gift of one's self but in no way is Christ offered. Because the "trappings" of the Mass were a source of distraction Calvin simplified his liturgy to the point of being completely primitive. Communicants did not kneel at the altar to receive but were to share in the one bread at a table. Eventually communion was distributed to the faithful as they were seated in the pews.

<sup>8</sup> *Corpus Reformatorum*, (Halle, 1834), V. p. 460.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, I, 126.

Like his predecessors in Reform liturgy, Calvin's objective was to balance Word and Sacrament and from this point of view liturgists can appreciate his efforts. Unfortunately his followers did not strive so ardently to maintain a sense of real presence. The emphasis that Calvin placed on personal belief caused the Sacrament to gradually become a subjective thing where Christ's presence was frequently lost among the faithful. Because God is completely transcendent all the material settings of the liturgy are removed. The Lord's Supper, which takes place infrequently, is a meal of fellowship where Christians celebrate in a manner that is somewhat removed from the Lord. Many feel that Calvin's emphasis on God's transcendence caused his theology and worship to become overly spiritual. This imbalance eliminates the sense of Mystery that Christ brought by taking on the flesh and blood of man.<sup>10</sup>

### **Past/Present/Future**

When the Reformers made their break with traditional Catholicism they saw a rather perplexing situation in worship forms and attitudes. There was a marked lack of understanding among the faithful bringing superstition with it; this meant that mystery beclouded intelligibility. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin also felt that the Christian was not personally engaged in the sacraments; external trappings and complicated rubrics threw up a barrier between the believer and his Lord. It seemed that too much stress was placed upon the intrinsic workings of the sacraments and too little emphasis placed on personal dispositions.

The Reform leaders attempted to correct what they saw to be a dismal situation in Catholic worship-life. Intelligibility and simplicity came first. This meant the use of vernacular in services, extended readings from Scripture and an austere use of externals in the rite. The corporate in worship was stressed to show the congregation's part in liturgical services; the minister became the leader of the faithful rather than a mediator with God. One can fully appreciate many of the objectives that Luther, Zwingli and Calvin aimed at in their liturgical reform. Obviously, their theological positions on the Mass, the Eucharist and the working of grace were something more than a liturgical modification. The passage of

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2.

time brought with it several major departures from the original Reform spirit. The preaching of the Word almost entirely eliminated a meaningful Eucharist, for 'if the Word is fully proclaimed then the Lord's Supper is only a repetition of the same Word'. Stress on intelligibility ultimately yielded to an approach where religious symbols were separated from the realities which they signified. The intense emphasis on personal faith provided the basis for a subjective and non-corporate worship life. In short, it seems that when one element was emphasized, it was frequently done at the cost of another.

Present day stirrings within Protestantism give witness to a new and vital rethinking of liturgical theology and practice. The reasons for this self-examination are many: recent New Testament studies, the desire to return to the spirit of the Apostolic community, the ecumenical movement among Christians. Several concrete attempts at worship-renewal testify to the zeal of the Reform traditions. The Church of South India carefully formulated its liturgy when this great merger took place. Experiments in corporate Eucharistic worship are taking place in the Church of Scotland; the German Lutheran Church has a number of liturgical brotherhoods that seek to recapture the balance between biblical preaching and Sacramental worship; the Protestant community of Taizé has emphasized the great need for relating liturgy to one's daily life. And, of course, the *Faith and Order* conferences of the *World Council of Churches* have constantly explored the nature of Christian worship and the meaning of the Eucharist. In general, contemporary Protestant efforts are aiming at a strong sacramental character with theological depth. Many of its spokesmen see that the notion of sacrifice does not totally eliminate the concepts of thanksgiving and praise. Vestments and ritual do not have to be stumbling blocks as the Christian relives the mystery of the redemption. Liturgical action does not merely memorialize or recall religious events surrounding Christ's death and resurrection. Rather, it is the "re-presentation" of the Paschal mystery wherein the Christian offers himself to God, dies with his Son and rises to find fulfillment in the Eucharistic banquet.

It would take no great effort to select various liturgical emphases brought in by the Reformers and show their correspondence to the *Liturgy Constitution* of the Vatican Council. Similarly, one can observe that under the impetus of the present liturgical revival

Protestant services are regaining something of their Catholic past. In view of such developments, theologians and liturgists of both traditions have remarked that Catholic services are becoming more like Protestant ones and Protestant like Catholic. This may be very true but it is only a secondary consideration, and the Protestant or Catholic should not feel that his religious birthright is being bartered for the sake of "good fellowship". What matters is that as both sides attempt to renew their liturgical lives they might meet in unity, and worship at *one table* to feed upon the Word and Eucharist of Christ.

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