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The Validity of the Sacraments in Reformed Church-bodies

P. E. Kretzmann

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Validity of the Sacraments in Reformed Church-Bodies.

The immediate occasion for the writing of this article is found in an address on "Some Thoughts on the Values of Baptism and the Supper," printed in the *Review and Expositor* for April, 1933, although a request had also been received for the distinction observed by Lutherans with regard to the Sacraments as observed by the Reformed churches. The address was delivered by J. H. Rushbrooke at the General Assembly of the Australia Baptist Union, and it has a very pronounced polemical point directed against the Lutheran doctrine of the Sacraments.

In his address Dr. Rushbrooke made the following statements: "In themselves they [the Sacraments] are just external physical happenings, totally incapable of securing any spiritual benefit and too easily capable, when misinterpreted, of inflicting spiritual injury. . . . The Lord's Supper reminds us that the Lord Himself wished to be remembered in a definite way: 'This means My body. This means My blood.' (Italic Moffatt's translation without pausing to defend it; *we do not doubt that he is right.*)* The bread signifies the body broken, the wine the outpoured blood. . . . Baptism rightly follows the beginning of conscious discipleship. It does not create personal faith; it expresses it. . . . Assert a presence of Christ that is located in the elements, is different in kind to His presence at other times and places, and you are drifting. It doesn't matter how you try to make distinctions: the Romanist says by 'transubstantiation' the elements are changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. Bad theology, bad philosophy, and bad science! Many Anglicans and Lutherans talk of 'consubstantiation' [?!] — the body and blood are present 'in, under, and with' the elements of bread and wine. This whole complex of ideas is foreign to our thought and experience. Connect a special presence of Christ with visible and tangible elements that can be kept in a box, and forthwith the door is open for adoration and reservation and every form of superstition."

It is evident from this presentation of course that the author is not clear on the whole question of sacramental union and of the divine promises attached to the Sacraments, aside from the fact that he charges the Lutherans with holding the doctrine of consubstantiation, a notion which has time and again been corrected by our teachers. But we are here chiefly concerned with the statement that the Sacraments are "totally incapable of securing any spiritual benefit." This is all the more strange since the author associates

* This is Rushbrooke's parenthesis.

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certain spiritual values with the Sacraments; in fact, he takes the Lutherans to task for not evaluating the grace of God sufficiently. It is this fact that causes us to inquire into the validity that we can accord to the Sacraments as celebrated by the various Reformed organizations.

From the confessions of the various Reformed denominations it seems clear that a difference exists with regard to the degree in which they deny the spiritual benefit of the Sacraments. As for Zwingli, his position is apparent from numerous passages of his writings. In his *Fidei Ratio* he remarks, for example: "Credo igitur, sacramentum esse sacrae rei, hoc est, factae gratiae, *signum*. . . . Credo, quod in sacra Eucharistiae, hoc est, gratiarum actionis, coena verum Christi corpus adsit, *fidei contemplatione*; hoc est, quod ii, qui gratias agunt Domino pro beneficio nobis in Filio suo collato, agnoscent illum veram carnem adsumpsisse, vere in illa passum esse, vere nostra peccata sanguine sua abluisse et sic omnem rem per Christum gestam illis *fidei contemplatione* velut praesentem fieri." (*Collectio Confessionum*. Editio Niemeyer, Lipsiae, 26.) Zwingli expressly denies that the body of Christ is present *per essentiam et realiter*. Charles Hodge quotes other passages from Zwingli's writings, which definitely show that the Swiss reformer regarded the Sacraments as mere signs and ceremonies, as when he states: "Credo, imo scio, omnia sacramenta tam abesse, ut gratiam conferant, ut ne adferant quidem aut dispensent . . . neque id unquam legimus in Scripturis Sacris, quod sensibilia, qualia sacramenta sunt, certo secum ferrent Spiritum." (*l. c.*, 24. Cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, 491; Guenther-Fuerbringer, *Symbolik*, 280.) Hodge rightly says: "It is obvious that all that Zwingli here says of the Sacraments might be said of the Word of God; and therefore, if he proves anything, he proves that the Sacraments are not means of grace; he proves the same concerning the Word, to which the Scriptures attribute such an important agency in the sanctification and salvation of men."

In this connection it should be stated at once that the doctrine of the Remonstrants on the Sacraments is very close to that of Zwingli. Hodge writes (*l. c.*, 490): "It has already been shown that it was the tendency of the Remonstrants to eliminate as far as possible the supernatural element from Christianity. They therefore regarded the Sacraments not properly as means of grace, but as significant rites, intended to bring the truth vividly before the mind, which truth exerted its moral influence on the heart." He then quotes from the *Confessio Remonstrantium*: "Sacramenta cum dicimus, externas ecclesiae ceremonias seu ritus illos sacros ac solennes intelligimus, quibus veluti foederalibus signis ac sigillis visibilibus Deus gratiosa beneficia sua, in foedere praesertim evangelico promissa, non

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modo nobis representat et adumbrat, sed et certo modo *exhibet atque obsignat.*"

But what about the position of Calvin? We find in his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* the following statements: "Baptisma enim nobis quod purgati et abluti simus *testificatur*; Coena Eucharistiae, quod redempti. In aqua *figuratur* ablutio; in sanguine satisfactio. . . . Non enim voluit significare ille [Petrus], ablutioem et salutem nostram aqua perfici aut aquam purgandi, regenerandi, renovandi virtutem in se continere. . . . Age, si corpus et sanguinem Domini pani ac vino effigere libet; alterum ab altero necessario delimitur. Nam ut panis seorsum a calice porrigitur, ita corpus pani unitum a sanguine in calicem incluso divisum esse oportebit. Quum enim corpus in pane, sanguinem in calice esse affirmant, panis autem et vinum locorum spatiis inter se distent; nulla tergiversatione elabi possint, quin a sanguine corpus sit discernendum." (*L. c.*, 363. 367. 412.) And in Calvin's *Catechismus Genevensis* we find the question with its answer: "Quid est *Sacramentum*? Externa divina erga nos benevolentiae testificatio, quae visibili signo spirituales gratias *figurat*, ad obsignandas cordibus nostris Dei promissiones, quo earum veritas melius confirmetur." (Niemeyer, 160; cf. Guenther-Fuerbringer, 300.) The *Catechesis Palatina sive Heidelbergensis* has the following question with its answer: "Was seind die Sacrament: Es seind sichtbare heilige warzeichen vnd Sigill, von Gott darzu eingesetzt, dass er vns durch den brauch derselben, die verheissung des Evangelions desto besser zuuerstehen gebe, vnd versiegele." (Niemeyer, 407.)

Having now briefly reviewed the *genesis* of the Reformed position concerning the *power* of the Sacraments on the basis of the statements made by Zwingli, Calvin, and the Remonstrants, we next inquire in what form these views were *codified* in the confessions of the chief Reformed denominations. In the *Helvetica Prior sive Basileensis Posterior Confessio Fidei* of 1536 (Zurich, Bern, Basel, Strassburg, Costenz, Santgalln, Schaffhusn, Millhusen, Biel usw.) we read: "Von dem Touff. Der touff is vsz der insatzung des heren, ein widergeberliche abweschung, woeliche der her sinen vszerwoelten mit einem sichtbaren zeichen, durch den dienst der kilchen wie obengeredt vnd erlertret ist *anbeudet und darstellt*. . . . Vom Nachtmahl des heren, oder von der dancksagung. Vom helgen nachtmal haltend wir also, das der her im heiligen aubendmal sin lib vnd blut, das ist, sich selbs den sinen warlich anbeudet. . . . Nit das der lib vnd dz blut des heren, mit brott vnd win natuerlich vereinbaret, oder rumlich dar inn verschlossen werdend, oder das ein libliche fleischliche gegenwirtigkeit hie gesetzt werde, sondern das brot vnd win vsz der Insatzung des heren, hochbedeutende heilige ware *zeichen syend*. . . ."

In the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549 (Geneva and Zurich) the

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very headings of the paragraphs show the position of both parties: "Sacramenta per se nihil efficiunt. Sacramenta non conferunt gratiam. Christi corpus est in caelo ut in loco." In paragraph XXII an exposition of the words of institution is given, in which the authors state: "Nam extra controversiam ponimus, *figurate accipienda esse, ut esse panis et vinum dicantur id, quod significant. Neque vero novum hoc aut insolens videri debet, ut per metonymiam ad signum transferatur rei figuratae nomen.*" In the *Confessio Fidei Gallicana* of 1559, adopted at the first national synod of the French Huguenots, Article XXXIV states: "*Nous croyons que les Sacraments . . . sont tellement SIGNES EXTERIEURS que Dieu besogne par iceux en la vertu de son Esprit.*" (Niemeyer, 324.) In the *Confessio Scotiana* of 1560, on the other hand, the article *De Sacramentis* contains the statement: "Itaque vanitatem eorum, qui affirmant, Sacramenta nil aliud quam mera et nuda signa esse, omnino damnamus." (*L. c.*, 352.) The writers indeed ventured to go so far as to assert the union of the earthly elements in the Lord's Supper with the body and blood of Christ, in the real presence, their statement being: "Unio haec et coniunctio, quam habemus cum corpore et sanguine Iesu Christi in recto Sacramenti usu, operatione Spiritus Sancti efficitur, qui nos vera fide, supra omnia, quae videntur, quaeque carnalia et terrestria sunt, vehit, et ut vescamur corpore et sanguine Iesu Christi semel pro nobis effusi et fracti, efficit, quodque nunc est in coelo, et in praesentia Patris pro nobis apparet. Et quamvis magna sit loci distantia inter corpus ipsius nunc in coelis glorificatum, et nos nunc in his terris mortales: nihilominus tamen firmiter credimus, *panem, quam frangimus, esse communionem corporis, et poculum, cui benedicimus, esse communionem sanguinis eius, sic quod fideles in recto usu coenae Dominicae ita edere corpus et bibere sanguinem Iesu Christi confitemur, et certo credimus, quod ipse in illis et illi in ipso manent.*" This faithfully reproduces the position of Calvin, who uses language closely approaching that of the Lutherans, while he showed his denial of the real presence by insisting that the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood was a spiritual act.

In the *Anglicana Confessio Fidei* of 1562 (the so-called *Thirty-nine Articles*) the general definition states in Article XXXV: "Sacramenta a Christo instituta non tantum sunt notae professionis Christianorum, sed certa quaedam potius *testimonia et efficacia signa gratiae* atque bonae in nos voluntatis Dei, per quae invisibiliter ipse in nos operatur, nostramque fidem in se non solum excitat, verum etiam confirmat." The Article *De Baptismo* states: "Baptismus non est tantum professionis signum ac discriminis nota, qua Christiani a non Christianis discernantur, sed etiam est signum regenerationis, per quod tamquam per instrumentum recte Baptismus suscipientes,

Ecclesiis inseruntur, promissiones de remissione peccatorum atque adoptione nostra in filios Dei per Spiritum Sanctum visibiliter obsignantur, fides confirmatur, et vi divinae invocationis gratia augetur." The Article *De Coena Domini* seems at first blush somewhat more satisfactory: "*Coena Domini non est tantum signum mutuae benevolentiae Christianorum inter sese, verum potius est Sacramentum nostrae per mortem Christi redemptionis. Atque adeo rite, digne et cum fide summentibus, panis quem frangimus, est communicatio corporis Christi; similiter poculum benedictionis est communicatio sanguinis Christi.*" (Niemeyer, 606 f.) But the good impression made by these words is spoiled by the next paragraph, in which we are told: "*Corpus Christi datur, accipitur et manducatur in coena tantum coelesti et spirituali ratione.*" (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 506.) This might refer to the sacramental presence, especially since the clause proposed against the real presence of Christ's body: "*Non debet quisquam fidelium et carnis eius [Iesu] et sanguinis realem et corporalem (ut loquuntur) presentiam in eucharistia vel credere vel profiteri*" was struck out in synod, as Schaff notes. But the real presence is denied in Article XXIX, where it is said of the unbelievers who partake of the Sacrament: "*Nulla tamen modo Christi participes efficiuntur.*" (*Ibid.*)

In the *Confessio Bohemica* (additio 3, 1575 and 1608), on the other hand, we find the statements: "*Credimus et confitemur, quod venerabilia sacramenta sint visibilia signa et sigilla promissionum divinarum et illustres significationes gratiae Dei: in quibus sacramentis visibilia elementa, Verbo et institutione divina, vere et reipsa sunt res coelestes, invisibiles et humana ratione incomprehensibiles, quae illa, quae de misericordiae voluntate Dei in verbo sacrosancto evangelii nobis sunt proposita et foedere in Christo nobiscum de participatione Christi Domini et omnium beneficiorum eius pacto confirmant. . . . De sacro baptismo confitemur et credimus, quod sacramentum illud ab ipso Christo Domino institutum sit lavacrum regenerationis et renovationis Spiritus Sancti, qui in nos opulenter effunditur per Iesum Christum, Salvatorem nostrum. . . . De venerabili sacramento testamenti et ultimae coenae, ab ipso Christo Domino ante passionem suam instituto, credimus et confitemur, quod panis in coena illa sit *verum corpus Christi Domini* pro nobis traditum et proditum et vinum in calice sit *verus sanguis Domini nostri Iesu Christi* pro nobis effusus in remissionem peccatorum."*

(Niemeyer, 839 f.)

Of the later confessions accepted by the Reformed denominations we quote pertinent passages as follows. The American Revision of the *Thirty-nine Articles* agrees exactly with that of 1562/3: "*The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only after an heavenly and spiritual manner.*" (Schaff, *l. c.*, 506.) The *West-*

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minster Confession of Faith of 1647 states: "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits and to confirm our interest in Him. . . . Baptism is a Sacrament of the New Testament ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. . . . The outward elements in this [second] Sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to Him crucified as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ. . . . Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this Sacrament, yet they receive not the thing signified thereby." In the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1647 Baptism is defined: "Baptism is a Sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace and our engagement to be the Lord's." (Schaff, *l. c.*, 660 f. 696.) In the same document the Lord's Supper is so defined: "The Lord's Supper is a Sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to Christ's appointment, His death is showed forth, and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of His body and blood." (P. 697.)

In the *Declaration of the Congregational Union of England and Wales* of 1833 the statement with reference to the Sacraments reads (Art. XVIII): "They believe in the perpetual obligation of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; the former to be administered to all converts to Christianity and their children by the application of water to the subject 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost' and the latter to be celebrated by Christian churches as a token of faith in the Savior and of brotherly love." (P. 733.) In the *Baptist Confession* of 1688 we read: "Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament ordained by Jesus Christ to be unto the party baptized a sign of the fellowship with Him in His death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into Him; of remission of sins; and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life. . . . Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only Lawgiver, to be continued in His Church to the end of the world." (P. 741.) The *New Hampshire Baptist Confession* of the year 1833 states: "We believe that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer into the name of the Father and Son and Holy Ghost to show forth in a solemn and beautiful emblem our faith in the Crucified . . . and that it is a prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation and to the Lord's

Supper, in which the members of the Church, by the sacred use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ." (P. 747.) The *Confession of the Free-will Baptists of 1834 and 1868* contains statements of the same nature (chap. XVII). The *Savoy Declaration of 1680* agrees substantially with the *Westminster Confession of 1647*.

The connection of the chief confessions here quoted is as follows: The *Fidei Ratio* is recognized by a large part of the Reformed Church, especially that of Switzerland, the two *Helvetic Confessions* are generally accepted by the Protestants of France, of Southern Germany, and of Switzerland, the *Consensus Tigurinus* combined Zurich and Geneva, the *Heidelberg Catechism* had symbolical standing in the majority of the Reformed churches on the Continent, the *Westminster Confession* and the *Westminster Catechism* are acknowledged by the Presbyterians and the former, together with the *Savoy Declaration*, by the Congregationalists. The American Revision of the *Thirty-nine Articles* holds for the Protestant Episcopal Church in America; the Baptist confessions are designated as such.

We next inquire as to the present teaching of some prominent Reformed bodies, as shown in the writings of representative theologians. In the *Systematic Theology* of Charles Hodge we read: "The Lutheran definition of the Sacraments agrees in all essential points with that of the Reformed churches. . . . The question of the validity of the Sacraments is a question as to what is necessary to their being that which they purport to be. The answer to this question is that they must conform to the prescriptions given in the Bible concerning them. . . . The Eucharist is a supper; it *represents* our feeding upon Christ for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. . . . While Calvin denied the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist in the sense in which that presence was asserted by Romanists and Lutherans, yet he affirmed that they were dynamically present." (III, 488. 523. 615. 628.) In speaking of the *Consensus Tigurinus*, the author says: "The twenty-second article teaches that the words 'This is My body' in the form of institution are to be understood *figuratively*." (P. 632.) It is clear, especially from page 596, that the author does not believe regeneration to be wrought by Baptism, since faith on the part of the candidate alone can secure the remission of sins. It is the same notion of concomitant grace that is found in Calvin, which refuses to accept the Sacrament as efficacious in itself, so that its efficacy is rejected by unbelief. Hodge writes: "So far as the efficacy of the Sacraments is concerned, the main point of difference between the Lutherans and the Reformed is that the latter attribute their sanctifying power to the *attending influences* of the Spirit; the former to the inherent, supernatural power of the Word, which is an essential part of these

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divine ordinances." (P. 507.) In a similar manner Hodge will not concede more to the Lord's Supper than this: "The Lord's Supper is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ as a memorial of His death, wherein *under the symbols* of bread and wine His body as broken and His blood as shed for the remission of sins *are signified* and by the power of the Holy Ghost sealed and applied to believers." (P. 650.) The author shows the difference between the Calvinistic and the Lutheran position by recording his dissensus with the doctrine that holds the inherent efficacy of the Sacraments, his idea being that their sanctifying influence is to be referred to the accompanying power of the Holy Ghost. (P. 508.)

Turning now to a man with Arminian connections, H. C. Sheldon of the Boston University, we find that he also holds the typical Reformed views of the Sacraments. In his *System of Christian Doctrine* he writes: "Baptism in its Christian use served from the beginning as an initiatory rite. . . . Cleansing, washing, making new by taking away the old ingrained corruption — this is essentially the *typical sense of Baptism*. . . . The Lord's Supper is a most deep, solemn, and tender message of divine truth. It memorializes the greatest deed of divine love and invites by its *apt emblems* to a trustful and affectionate appropriation of the highest grace." (Pp. 511. 524.) One looks in vain for some statement about conveying and appropriating the divine grace by means of the Sacrament. On the contrary, Sheldon expresses his dissensus from the doctrine of the real bodily presence, saying that there is no proper warrant for this doctrine. (Pp. 529 f.) To complete the picture of the attitude taken in recent utterances on the part of the Reformed denominations, those quoted from Rushbrooke, as made in the *Review and Expositor*, which were used in the introduction of this article, will suffice.

What conclusions may we now draw concerning *the position taken by various Reformed church-bodies with regard to the Sacraments as true means of grace? And to what extent may we recognize the validity of the Sacraments as administered by them?*

It seems evident, in the first place, that, although all the public confessions (except the *Bohemica*, which was not properly Reformed) and all the declarations of their leading theologians (many more of whom could be quoted) are not correct in their doctrinal content, yet there is a difference in the degree to which they have yielded to error. Some of them at least try very hard to maintain the idea of the means of grace as associated with the Sacraments, while others have practically reduced the Sacraments to the level of church rites. (The latter is particularly true in our days, when some temperance fanatics have also insisted upon removing the second element of the Eucharist and when the spirit of Modernism is sweeping away the last vestiges of Biblical truth.) It seems, for example, that the

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High Church party of the Anglican Church has accepted transubstantiation, while the Low Church (evangelical) party occasionally refers to the true or real presence in the Sacrament. But the *Thirty-nine Articles* have never been rescinded, and therefore the official position of the Anglican Church is still with the Reformed denominations.

A second distinction is more important, having also a direct bearing on the practical problems connected with the recognition or non-recognition of the Reformed Sacraments. This distinction concerns the difference made between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is true that all the denominations concerned, with the exception of the Episcopalians, have the false conception of the doctrine of Holy Baptism; but they accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and they use the baptismal formula prescribed by the words of the institution. For that reason, all other things being equal, we recognize the validity of Holy Baptism administered in the Reformed denominations. The exceptions are those which show Modernism rampant, with a denial of the vicarious atonement and the Trinity as revealed in the Word of God. (Cp. *Theol. Monthly*, IX, 289 ff.; *CONC. THEOL. MONTHLY*, II, 818 ff.; III, 167 ff.) In Holy Baptism we have the earthly element, but associated with it, through the Word, the more intangible gifts of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Hence a false view concerning Holy Baptism as a means of grace is not so apt to eliminate belief in the efficacy of the Sacrament if administered according to Christ's institution. In other words, in Holy Baptism the Reformed churches deny the *efficacy*, but not the *essence*. — On the other hand, in the Lord's Supper we have definite spiritual values (the real or sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood) connected with definite earthly elements (in, with, and under the bread and wine); hence the repudiation of this fact, together with the denial of the heavenly content, means the loss of the whole Sacrament. For in the case of the Eucharist the Reformed denominations connect an entirely wrong conception with the words of institution, by the false doctrine which they have taken pains to express in their confessions, the result being equivalent to a denial of the institution of Christ. The Reformed churches, in this instance, deny *both* the *essence and the efficacy* of the Sacrament. Hence one of the former presidents of Synod said, in a fine epigrammatic saying made years ago: "If we discount transubstantiation, the Catholics have at least half a Sacrament; but the Reformed Churches have lost the Eucharist." The Lutheran Church has hitherto charitably assumed favorable conditions in the administration of Holy Baptism by Reformed bodies. We trust that, to this extent at least, we may continue to have this confidence.

P. E. KRETZMANN.