

J. Ratzinger “On the Meaning of Sacrament”

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The concept of “sacrament” is still very familiar to the contemporary Christian. In his daily life he encounters it continually. But it is very far removed from the mental disposition and consciousness of the modern man. Sacrament seems somewhat strange to him—something he is inclined to downgrade to a magical or mythical age of mankind. It does not seem to fit well into a rational and technical world. Therefore we have a dilemma: that this reality is central for a Christian consciousness but marginal for the normal awareness of everyday life today. Here we have an example of the rupture in Christian consciousness that is quite noticeable today. If we want to attempt, under these conditions, to recover the concept of sacrament, it is necessary first of all to inquire about what common human presuppositions and ideas it contains within itself so that, based on them, we can arrive at what is specifically Christian about it.

If we do this, we run into two problems. On the one hand, we encounter a basic form of human understanding and communication that in the sacrament found its Christian expression in “symbols.” In order to understand the essence of the sacrament—its lasting validity and the way in which it reveals reality—one must therefore ask what a symbol is and how it can be the foundation for communion among individuals and communion in the common understanding of reality. One must also ask to what extent it is even possible to gain access to reality.² If one does this, the second step is obvious. Whoever studies the essence and “functioning” of symbols, necessarily encounters their natural surroundings, where these primordial human phenomena are at home. For symbols do not simply stand by themselves, available, so to speak, for any use whatever. They take place and they are effective only in an event supported by the authority of the community, which the individual cannot simply bring about by himself. This common event is the feast. The feast is, as an extraordinary event, the place that shapes the symbol and makes it come alive. Both together [feast and symbol]

form the human horizon in which the sacrament is to be understood. Essentially the Christian sacrament is also a symbol-event. In this sense each sacrament, in different ways, is connected with a feast. The common proceeding of the feast is the reference point on which it is built.

With this look at the human roots of sacrament we are presented with the possibility of gaining a better understanding of this apparently purely Christian phenomenon, which is very foreign to modern thinking, and forming a concept of sacrament that allows us to understand what is specifically Christian as the acceptance and development of what is human and universal. Accordingly, if the methodological course of our considerations at first seems clearly defined, we now certainly face an objection that might close this path as a fatal blind alley. Karl Barth saw the essence of what he called the Catholic apostasy in the insertion of what is Christian into the common analogy of the human—an apostasy that reduces to the merely human what in God’s new activity in Jesus is unique, with no point of reference and incapable of being deduced. Thus the divine is now deduced from what belongs to us, from the human, and so misses precisely what is uniquely Christian.³ This objection today does not strike us so dramatically as it did thirty years ago, for in contrast to that time we are living today in an anthropological phase of theology as well and have long since become tired of Barth’s purism. But because the consideration of what is not obvious, what is unpleasant and strange in our culture belongs to the search for truth, it may be useful to remember this objection and to spend some time reflecting on it.

Actually, this objection has perhaps found a new form, one that is also immediately troubling to us, in two short lectures by the Protestant systematic theologian at the University of Tübingen, Eberhard Jüngel.⁴ To his mind Barth’s idea seems to be no longer merely a protest of strict theology against the purely human, but the necessary criticism by exegesis of dogmatics, which for him is at the same time the criticism by the Reformation, whose thought was based on Scripture, of the Catholic Church, which appropriates Scripture as part of tradition. Without doubt today we are very aware of such an objection of historical reason such as that of the Reformation against tradition and the

Church of tradition. In his investigation, Jüngel begins from the indisputable fact that the word *sacramentum* in the Church Fathers is the translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. He concludes from that fact very sensibly that one can verify the legitimacy of the concept of sacrament by examining the meaning of the word *mysterion* as it is used in the New Testament. This undertaking leads him to an alarming conclusion. In the New Testament, so he maintains (and historically it is absolutely incontestable), first of all, the word *mysterion* does not often appear, and secondly—what is more important—where it does appear, it expresses a Christological and eschatological perspective. Nowhere, however, does it show any relationship to cult or liturgy or even to the mystery cults, the sacramental actions of the non-Christian world. It might be interesting here as an aside to add that Odo Casel, the great theologian of the liturgical movement in the period between the two World Wars, thought that the pagan mystery cults were the vessels provided by providence for the Christian concept of sacrament, which had no precedent in the Old Testament.⁵ Now apparently Jüngel would not contest this connection for the early Church, but he would see precisely in that her apostasy from the New Testament and from the whole Bible—the Hellenization of what is Christian. For, his conclusion that the word *mysterion* in the New Testament has nothing to do with the mystery cults, nothing to do with sacramental liturgies, is strengthened by the further assertion that the word is, conversely, absent in those places in the New Testament which deal with liturgical actions, such as Baptism and Eucharist. Jüngel accordingly writes: “Where such connections are discernible (for example, in the sacramental texts), the concept of *mysterion* is not found; but where the concept does appear, they (liturgical references) are absent.”⁶ When he says further that the early Church established this connection—one not created by the New Testament—and developed the sacraments in competition with and in imitation of the pagan mysteries, the purpose of his thesis is clear (and, since up to this point everything is historically correct, apparently also indisputable): he does not in fact wish to do away with the concept of sacrament as such. However, he considers the Catholic understanding of sacrament that developed in the early Church to be so dubious that a fundamental reinterpretation (such as he finds in Luther) seems unavoidable.

A thesis of this magnitude needs to be examined. Along with it, the claim of the anthropological reference is at issue, from which we started out earlier with-

out any problem, but with it also there is a question regarding the relationship between the human and the Christian, which means a question about the nature of Christian universalism as such. There we see the difference between the Catholic and the Protestant concepts of sacrament as the fundamental question about tradition and its interpretation of the Scriptures; there also the question arises about Christian worship as such. First of all, it is advisable in this dispute to follow the methodological path of Jüngel and go a bit further in examining the history of the words “mystery” and “sacrament.” But then we will have to see whether it is correct to develop the whole question from an analysis of the meaning of a particular word, or whether it might not also be necessary to present another factual connection as the source of the historical development.

The first thing to consider in any New Testament question is to take a good look at its roots in the Old Testament. If we do that, we see that the word “mystery” does not appear in the early writings of the Old Testament. It makes its first appearance in the later writings—in each of the three groups into which they are divided: in Daniel’s apocalyptic, in the wisdom literature (Wisdom and Sirach), and in the religious-edifying story literature, that is, in Tobias, Judith, and Second Maccabees. It is also correct that there is no cult connection there; the word *mysterion* means simply: something hidden. To be sure, in apocalyptic writings, which are concerned with the revelation of the future, something more appears: there it means something like a revelation veiled beneath symbols, a veiled proclamation of future mysteries determined by God.⁷ These ideas then find a significant modification in the theology of the Rabbis, that is, in the theology that developed in the time of Jesus, even though our witnesses to it came later. Here the “mysteries of the Torah” (the five books of Moses) are spoken of. The Torah appears as the clothing “of God’s mystery of creation that underlies all being and which allows itself to be penetrated in mystical interpretation.”⁸ According to the Rabbis, therefore, the many words of the Law have a hidden center, a hidden meaning which is not obvious but is, rather, truly an unveiling of reality.

This reminds us of a saying of Jesus that we find in Mark 4:11. In the previous verses we learn that Jesus’ disciples do not understand his parables and they ask him what they mean. Jesus answers them: “To you has been given the secret (*mysterion*) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables”. This sentence is very difficult to explain, but one thing

is surely clear regarding its content: Behind the striking parables which Jesus proclaims to the people there lies a hidden truth that leads down to the heart of reality. What this truth is, is not expressed and obviously this is not even possible in the form of normal human speech. Obviously, normal discourse cannot make this truth as perceptible as the narrated parable can. It can only be given by seeing the speech as *reality*. It means entering into the reality itself; it has to do with the person of the one addressed and of the speaker, namely, Jesus Christ.

Let us set this insight aside for now and direct our attention to the rest of the New Testament. Then it turns out that the word “mystery” has a noteworthy use only in the Pauline letters, where it appears twenty-one times with a concentration on three sets of texts in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. This concentration shows that the word is not at all one of Paul’s own words, but rather adopted because of his dialogues with those to whom he is writing. This means, therefore, that he makes it his own by using the language of others. Accordingly, it is still in an open process of development so that we can only attempt to sense the outlines of the development insofar as they are visible in the New Testament. The result is that Rabbi Paul of Tarsus adopts the rabbinic interpretation. The rabbinic question about the mysteries of the Torah was also his question. Now he knows that it is answered. He has come to know “the *mysterion*”. The *mysterion* of the Torah and of all the parables has become visible for him in the crucified Christ. *He* is the hitherto hidden content that stands behind the manifold words and events recorded in the Scriptures, the mystery of God which is the source of everything that exists. In him the how, why, and what of creation and man become clear. In him is revealed the central point of the parable present in the Scripture. In him God has revealed himself and given the authentic hermeneutic of Scripture—the authentic entrance into it. For this reason, Christ can then simply be named “The Mystery of God” (1 Cor. 2:1; see 2:7 along with 1:23; Col. 2:2; see 1:27 and 4:3).

In this respect the concept of mystery belongs—an important finding!—to the question about the correct interpretation of Scripture: it is a hermeneutical concept. But at the same time this makes it possible for Paul to give an answer to the mystery cults in Corinth. He borrows this new word from them in order, of course, to raise it to a completely new level. Against the mysticism of an elitist wisdom, of a Christianity of the initiated for whom normal church life is too lowly and which it therefore wishes to transcend hermeneuti-

cally—against this view one must object that precisely the simple scandal of the crucified Christ is *the* mystery, than which nothing is more profound, more hidden, or more elevated. No initiation can go deeper than that, and no hermeneutic can go higher. This is not an intellectual formula that one can interpret away, but only the banal event itself: it is precisely the Crucified One proclaimed by the simple *kerygma* who is the mystery.

In this connection Paul gets involved in the schematic and language of the mystery religions. Of course secrecy belongs to the *mysterion* of the mystery religions; it is elitist. Not every person can see it; one must go through initiations. To that Paul says: *This mysterion* also has its secrecy and it is that of “Sophia,” that is, of elite wisdom that is hidden from those who always know better without respect to hermeneutics and is made known precisely to those who do not know better, the uninitiated, the naïve: to the “fool,” he says, namely, to one who is considered an “idiot” by the hermeneutically enlightened elite.

The *mysterion* draws its boundaries in a way that is directly opposite to the way men draw boundaries. It sweeps aside all the “mysteries” because it delivers what they promise but do not have: entry into the innermost thinking of God, which at the same time finds the innermost foundation of the world and of man. It opens itself precisely if one abides in simplicity, and in this respect it is ordered in a special way to simple and not to elite spirits. We consider it remarkable that Paul adopts the terminology and ideas of the mystery religions but, from the Christian point of view, virtually turns them into the opposite. The naïve and unanalyzed *kerygma*, the past historical reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is in fact the innermost wisdom, and the analyzer, the one who imagines himself to be the initiate, is precisely the one who sinks into the “psychic” and unspiritual. The one who lives and stays in the simple unity of the universal Church is the one who is initiated. From the fact that the new wise ones are divided into opposing groups shows that, while they suppose themselves to be wholly spiritual, they are actually “fleshly,” devoid of wisdom.

The expansion beyond a narrowly conceived, purely salvation-historical view into what relates to the theology of creation and humanity as a whole has already been presented with the rabbinic component of St. Paul’s theology. For the Torah, whose fulfilling meaning Jesus proves to be, is at the same time and fundamentally a word of creation. This view is quite explicitly developed in Ephesians, whose concept of *mysterion*

can perhaps be briefly paraphrased in this way: The Jewish Bible speaks, while speaking about Jesus, about the salvation of the pagans, and this is its true meaning. Whoever reads the Jewish book correctly finds that it speaks about the salvation of the pagans *and* of the Jews, because it speaks about Jesus, who is the salvation of all, the uniting principle of creation. The meaning of creation, which appears in Jesus as the unveiling of the Scriptures, is unity in which the fullness of God shines forth and illumines.

We must now, however, also give special attention to one text which seems to be rather incidental, but that can give us an opening for a significant step forward. I am referring to the famous passage in Ephesians 5:31. Here the conclusion of the creation account is included where it is said about Adam and Eve: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." To this Old Testament citation the author of Ephesians adds the comment: "This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church".

What does this text mean for our inquiry? First of all, it fully agrees with the previous considerations. The author applies the basic idea that Jesus is the mystery of the Torah to a particular text. Since, in the last analysis, Jesus is the meaning of all the words in the Scripture, naturally it can be shown in particular texts. The quoted sentence points to the same center as all sentences: it refers to Christ and the Church, in which no longer Israel alone, but all mankind is drawn into the unity of love that leads to an indissoluble merger into one single existence. So far, that is still simply the application of the general basic idea of the mystery of the Torah. But it goes farther inasmuch as it is here no longer simply a *word* of the Bible interpreted "typologically," that is, in a Christological sense, but a *reality* of creation: marriage—the union of man and woman in a marital community. This creation event is included in the Scripture and it has, as the Scripture shows, its own mystery and even carries Christological transparency in itself. For this reason, the "mystery" is no longer the literal meaning of a biblical text, as we have come to know up to now; rather, it is the meaning of an event. It dwells in the event, which reaches down to the center of creation and reaches up to the innermost and definitive will of God. Thus we are faced with a twofold circumstance which is very important for the formation of the concept of sacrament.

I. The mystery of the Torah, of the Bible as a whole, in Paul's view, as we have heard, is Christ. But

that presupposes that the individual words are mysteries, the breaking up of the large into something small so that Christ is visible behind each one. Moreover, this further implies that not only the words, but also the realities described by them are mysteries, emblematic references to Christ. And this can apply to the realities of creation as well as to the realities of the history of Israel. Translated into Latin, this means: Scripture is in the whole a sacrament. Therefore it is in each part full of sacraments, which can be the literal meaning of words or the meaning of events of creation or of salvation history. Accordingly, we can now say in a summary way: In the horizon of Paul's interpretation of Scripture, three types of sacrament appear, namely, word sacraments, event sacraments, and creation sacraments. With this observation we are in the very center of the early Church's concept of sacrament, although her basic exegetical principle only becomes clear when we add the second circumstance which is made known to us from an examination of Ephesians.

2. From the conviction that the individual words of the Scripture, as reflections and realizations of it as a whole, are mysteries, the words of the Scripture are interpreted as references beyond themselves and point to Christ. They become, as Paul expresses it, "*typoi tou mellontos*", types of the One who is to come. They are types. In Latin that means *sacramentum futuri*, sacrament (type) of the One who is coming. The word "type" as used in the New Testament and even more in the writings of the Fathers has virtually the same meaning as mystery and sacrament.

To consider Scripture as mystery, as the Rabbis had already done, in the context of Paul's thought means to consider it Christologically as a manifold nexus of references to Christ. Now if mystery, sacrament, and type are synonyms, then Christological interpretation and typological interpretation have the same meaning: What is said in Scripture is a type, a sign pointing to the One who is coming.

Accordingly, we can now ascertain that the Christian concept of sacrament, as it took shape from Paul in the early Church, is based on the close contact of the concepts of mystery and type in the New Testament. The word "sacrament" translates the blending together of these two concepts, as it emerged from St. Paul's Christological understanding of Scripture. In this respect the early Church's word "sacrament" is the result of New Testament thinking, a new concept that arose out of this early history. Of course this also means that the Catholic concept of sacrament is based on the

“typological” interpretation of Scripture, on an interpretation with correspondences to Christ. Where this interpretation is completely lost, sacrament then loses its footing. And where that happens, the scriptural understanding of the New Testament itself is also lost. For, everything the New Testament says is not an attempt to produce a new Scripture; rather, it wishes only to give guidance on how to understand the Christ-directed content of the Old Testament. Whoever thinks that this way of handling the Bible is illegitimate, may perhaps gain a literal understanding of the Old Testament, but he thereby completely rejects the New Testament and its understanding of the Old.⁹

My main thesis first of all allows the reason for the crisis in Catholicism in modern times to become clear; for, the loss of typological thinking, that is, an interpretation that reads the texts from the future and with an eye to their future, is part and parcel of the intellectual makeup of the crisis, a loss occasioned by literary-historical thinking, that is, an interpretation that reads the texts by looking back in time and wishes to lock them into their earliest original meaning. That is exactly the reversal to which the modern mentality leads in its new understanding of history and historical texts: an interpretation of texts on the basis of what comes from them, from which it rejects any future construed in them and thinks that a text is only properly interpreted if it is put back in its past, if it is fixed in the past, and if it is spelled out in its most primitive form. But with this thesis the twofold knot of Jüngel’s objections from which we began, is in principle loosened. For, the assertion that the early Church’s concept of sacrament is not scriptural fails there, because with the fusion of mystery and type the path of the New Testament is mapped out. The barrier against linking sacrament with what pertains to the whole of mankind and creation ceases to exist because the sacrament of the word is always also a sacrament of creation, of course a creation purified and refashioned in the word.

With that, however, we are only with the early Church and with a result formulated in a very general way. There are still two considerable difficulties standing in the way of a final solution to the dilemma posed at the beginning of this essay. In our final consideration we will now give some thought to both. Here is the first question: How did we get from the early Church’s concept of sacrament, which was broadly diversified and at the same time quite simple, to our specific understanding of sacrament in the sense of the seven sacraments? In other words: How did it come about that

suddenly one day in the twelfth or thirteenth century in the wide and general field of theology, theologians made a distinction between sacraments in the proper sense and what afterwards were called “sacramentals”? Is that not really a rupture?

The second question is: If the concept of sacrament is inseparably connected with an interpretation of Scripture that looks forward, with the Christological or typological interpretation, then has it not lost its foundation in its historical era, in an era of strictly literal interpretation?

Both questions are fundamental and make it possible for us, I think, to recognize the far-reaching importance of the theme. Thus it is also impossible to give them a complete answer, but only a suggestion regarding the direction to take is necessary. Regarding the first question we must take a closer look at a circumstance that up till now has been touched on only incidentally. We said that the words of the Bible are “*sacramenta futuri*”, an emblematic outline pointing forward to the One who will come, an approach to what is coming. Events are sacraments of the One who is coming. This also implies that the liturgical rites of the Old Covenant that point towards the future refer to Christ and therefore are sacraments. This theme is extensively developed in the Letter to the Hebrews, but is in no way foreign to the thought of St. Paul.¹⁰ With that we take another step forward. For, if we establish that, with its words and events, the liturgical actions of the Old Covenant are also references to Christ, that they are sacraments, a fracture emerges in the concept of sacrament that is identical with the difference between promise and fulfillment, between preparation and present reality, between the Old and the New Covenant. The New Testament rites are no longer simply “sacraments of the future”, outlines of what is coming; rather, they are descriptions of the present, expression and fruit of the life, suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ that have occurred.

The Old Testament sacraments are without exception a movement into the unexplored—they are an invitation to a way. One celebrates them correctly only by walking, by setting out with them on the path toward what is coming, which they themselves are not yet. But at the moment, since Christ has suffered and has been sent by the Father to be with us forever, something new has happened, the reality is present before which everything else was pending. Therefore sacrament now is the presentation of what has been given, a conveyance to what has already happened.

Later, the theology of the Middle Ages explained that with a comparison—since that time much misunderstood—between *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis*.¹¹ Originally this distinction belonged to the contrast between the Old and the New Testament, between promise and fulfillment. At first the formula was not just *ex opere operato* but *ex opere operantis Christi*.¹¹ That means: the sacraments no longer work by referring and asking; rather, they work from what has already happened, and in that the act of liberation accomplished by Christ is manifested. Man is no longer, on the basis of his own doing and going, referred to something coming that is still hidden; rather, he may surrender himself to the reality that already awaits him and comes to him as something that has already occurred.

Logically and very early the theme of liberation was joined together with the idea that the concept of sacrament is fractured by the difference between promise and fulfillment. Liberation means at the same time simplification, purification, and deepening. The pure simplicity of the Eucharist of the Resurrected One replaces the complicated cultic structure of the Old Covenant. This release from the oppressive multiplicity of what is not yet transparent, to the liberating simplicity of what is Christian, proves to be release also by the fact that the rites, which formerly were performed in front of the closed barrier of what was to come, now become transparent; now they are *rationabilia*, that is, open to reason, as the Fathers say. There is no longer mere duty, whose meaning remains in arrears—amounting to a legality. With the discovery of the previously hidden *mysterion*, comprehension and its freedom have replaced legal obligation. It was obvious to the Fathers that simplicity, freedom, and intelligibility, as what necessarily takes place at the moment of fulfillment, when the curtain is drawn, also imply moral requirement and discipline. They therefore also saw that the necessarily cumulative multiplicity in the time of waiting, in which so-called ever-new attempts were regularly made, stands in contrast to the few sacraments of the New Covenant, the simplicity of the fulfillment. Certainly this did not result in any systematization. With this fundamental insight, however, the circumscription of the Christian concept of sacrament in the Middle Ages was obviously being prepared for. Thus it is clear that the number seven, into which this circumscription was then, in turn, fixed, was the result of typological considerations: it was due to a theological a priori and did not arise from an a posteriori adding together of what was found.¹² But that surely corresponds as well to the structure of the

whole and is objectively in conformity with the basic approach of the whole. With that the first question may be answered: How did the Fathers' broad concept of sacrament become the specific one of the Tridentine dogma? On that point we can now say that already for the Fathers the concept of sacrament was structured in the Old Testament multiplicity and its final goal: the simplicity of the New Testament. In this respect, the medieval circumscription presents itself as a systematization of the starting material from the early Church.

At the same time we have arrived at the second question, namely, the one about the legitimacy and permanent possibility of such a continuous interpretation of the Bible as *sacramentum futuri*. Luther was the first to bring this question into sharp focus. We can clearly recognize in him two dimensions of the problem that are objectively still ours. To begin, there is the circumstance that the Church as institution and the Church as theological, spiritual dimension come apart. But if that is the case, then the divine worship of the Church as such can no longer guarantee the coherence of salvation history; it can no longer sustain the Church as the institution of the origin of everything from Jesus Christ. Then the individual necessarily stands naked before the biblical word. Historical reconstruction and whatever it can find replaces the unity of typological history. Sacrament is no longer inherent in the institution of the Church but refers to history. Secondly, this means that the typological-sacramental interpretation of Scripture now seems to be the Church's appropriation of it; it also means that this alienation of Scripture by the Church into the typological-sacramental is in opposition to the pure text dissociated from the Church, the pure historical meaning as the only original one. Seen historically, this process had the mark of a liberation movement. If the transition from the law to the faith and liturgy of the Church was once a great act of liberation—made possible and mediated by typology—through which one could keep the whole Old Testament without being bound to its letter, so now the return to the letter against the Church becomes an act of liberation from the burden of the Church and her liturgy. That is more or less the historical understanding of what happened.

With that, however, the question inevitably arises of how one can bring the content of the old liberation into the new. For now we have a completely new problem: If the Bible must be read literally, then the Old Testament becomes a problem. With the Fathers it was clear: I can have the whole Old Testament without being tied to the letter because everything is preparation

for Christ, and the preparation is naturally transcended and yet, nevertheless, is my own if I myself am with Christ. But if I am not allowed to think any more in the typological-sacramental way, if only strict historical exegesis is valid, which means considering only the letter without the Church as the unity of the past, present, and future, then this liberation from the domination of the law is no longer effective.

That, incidentally, has had consequences throughout the whole history of exegesis. For example, that the creation texts suddenly became a problem and in their literalness were at odds with the natural sciences is based on the fact that the texts were considered no longer in the dynamic structure of interpretation but in the literalness of that time. Such contradiction could not arise so long as it was clear that everything should be read beyond the letter and as pointing to Christ. That is the source of freedom from the letter.

That was only in passing; our question is this: After the abolition of the ecclesial-sacramental, that is, “typological” exegesis, what about the Old Testament? There are really only two possibilities: either to continue to recognize the Old Testament as the Bible and then to observe it again literally, or to drop it from the canon of Scripture. Concerning this question the early Church battled with Marcion and other strands of gnosis who did not accept typology, did not want to be bound by the law, and then saw only the possibility of looking at the Old Testament as the Bible of a counter-god.¹³ Luther had a very deep sense of this problem and sought to give it an answer by saying that he saw at work in Scripture the dialectic of law and gospel. In place of the analogy of faith he substitutes the dialectic of law and gospel, the gospel as the power of salvation, the law as accusation and condemnation.¹⁴

To discuss this in detail would far exceed our theme. But also we do not need to do that because the crux of the matter is already fundamentally in sight. For, we can now say that even Luther could not adhere to the pure literalness of the historical as the last word. Even he needed a center of understanding that goes beyond that, just like anyone who wishes to find the present in this text, a current potential for life, and more than statements about the past. The faith cannot be reconstructed out of mere history, as important as the historical method is. But whoever wishes to receive the present, which means faith, from Scripture, cannot remain stuck in mere history which observes only the past. Faith is an understanding, and understanding always transcends pure facticity.

The historical method, therefore, does not exclude a hermeneutical center but actually requires it. In this sense a “*sola scriptura*,” which would be a mere historical self-giveness, would be a contradiction in itself. By its own inner structure the word refers to sacrament. It points to the vibrant community of those who live it. It is so structured that it reaches beyond itself and carries the dimension of sacrament within itself. Word and sacrament are not opposites; rather, they presuppose and complete each other. Neither are they in opposition to creation and to mankind; rather, they are their union, purification, and fulfillment.

What are the results to which our considerations have led us? I will now try to summarize them in four points.

1. The understanding of the sacraments presupposes a definite attitude toward Scripture. It presupposes that we learn how to read Scripture again not only by looking to the past in order, in each case, to determine its earliest state—which is of course an important process—but that we learn at the same time how to read it by looking forward, from the dimension of the future in its totality and unity, in the difference and unity of promise and fulfillment. I believe that here ultimately the decision is reached on whether a Catholic theology based on the idea of the unity of Scripture is possible.

2. The understanding of the sacraments therefore presupposes the historical continuity of God’s activity and, as its concrete locus, the living community of the Church, which is the sacrament of sacraments. That means: the biblical word can only then sustain and enhance the present time, if it is not just a word but has a living subject, when it belongs to a life context that it determines and it, in turn, carries.

3. Sacraments are liturgical acts of the Church, in which the Church as Church takes part, that is, in which she not only functions as a society, but is active on the basis of that which she herself has not made and in which she gives more than she herself can give: namely, the inclusion of man in the gift that she herself receives. This means that the entire continuum of history is present in the sacrament—past, present, and future. As memory it must reach down into the roots of all human history and so meet man in his present moment and give him a present tense, a present moment of salvation whose essence is that it opens the future beyond death.

4. Thus the sacraments are at the same time the Christian newness and what is immemorially human.

The newness of what is Christian and the unity of what is human do not contradict each other. In Jesus Christ creation is taken up and purified, and precisely so he reveals himself as the One who gives an answer to man and is his salvation. The symbols of creation are signs pointing to Christ, and Christ is the fulfillment not only of history, but also of creation: in him who is God's "mystery" everything attains its unity. ✠

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The original German version of this essay, *Zum Begriff Des Sakramentes*, was delivered as a lecture in January of 1978 and published in 1979.
- 2 On this point the discussion of Jean Daniélou with René Guénon is important. It is to their credit that they have worked out, in its uniqueness, symbolic as compared to scientific knowledge and made it respectable. See Jean Daniélou, *Vom Geheimnis der Geschichte* (Stuttgart, 1955), 144-70. Important for the development of the concept of Christian symbol and sacrament are the 1936 and 1937 writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar on Origen's concept of mystery, which are found in a revised form in his book *Parole et Mystère chez Origène* (Paris, 1957). From more recent literature, we will mention only: Horst Jürgen Helle, "Symbol und Gottesdienst", in *Zum Gottesdienst morgen*, ed. Heinz G. Schmidt (Wuppertal, 1969) 24-32; Schmidt, *Soziologie und Symbol: Ein Beitrag zur Handlungstheorie und zur Theorie des sozialen Wandels* (Cologne and Opladen, 1969). Ingrid Jorissen and Hans Bernhard Meyer, *Zeichen und Symbole im Gottesdienst* (Innsbruck, 1977).
- 3 On this, see esp. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, Trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, Communio Books, 1992), 3-161; Gottlieb Söhngen, *Die Einheit in der Theologie* (Munich, 1952), 235-64.
- 4 Eberhard Jüngel and Karl Rahner, *Was ist ein Sakrament?* (Freiburg, 1971).
- 5 See Theodor Filthaut, *Die Kontroverse über die Mysterienlehre* (Warendorf, 1947), 73-80; Odo Casel, *Das christliche Kultmysterium*, 2nd ed. (Regensburg, 1948), 60ff.
- 6 Jüngel, *Was ist ein Sakrament?* 30.
- 7 Günther Bornkamm, article *μυστήριον* in ThWNT 4: 809-34, here 821.
- 8 *Ibid.* 823.
- 9 See Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); de Lubac, *Der geistige Sinn der Schrift*, Christ heute, 5/2 (Einsiedeln, 1952); Jean Daniélou, *Sacramentum futuri: Études sur les origines de la typologie biblique* (Paris, 1950); Maximino Arias-Reyer, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget: die Prinzipien seiner Schriftdeutung und seiner Lehre von den Schriftsinnen*, Sammlung Horizonte, s. 3 (Einsiedeln, 1971).
- 10 See Rom. 3:25f.; 1 Cor. 5:7; Rom. 15:16; Phil. 2:17; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:14, etc. In this regard we should refer to the most liturgically shaped book of the New Testament, Revelation. Concerning the question of the interpretation of Jesus' death from the point of view of cultist "typoi" see: Gerhard Delling, *Der Kreuzestod Jesu in der unchristlichen Verkündigung* (Göttingen, 1972); Karl Kertelge, *Der Tod Jesus: Deutungen im Neuen Testament*, QD 74 (Freiburg, 1976); Heinz Schürmann, *Jesu ureigener Tod: Exegetische Besinnungen und Ausblicke*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, 1976)
- 11 See Venicio Marcolino, *Das Alte Testament in der Heilsgeschichte: Untersuchungen zum dogmatischen Verständnis des Alten Testaments als heilsgeschichtliche Periode nach Alexander von Hales*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, s. 2 (Munster, 1970), 201-8.
- 12 See the enlightening investigation by Michael Seybold, "Die Siebenzahl der Sakramente", *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift für das Gesamtgebiet der katholischen Theologie* 27 (1976) 113-38; Josef Finkenzeller, *Die Zählung und die Zahl der Sakramente*, in *Wahrheit und Verkündigung*, Festschrift Michael Schmaus, II. ed. Leo Scheffczyk, Werner Dettloff and Richard Heinzmann (Munich, 1976) 1005-33.
- 13 See Réal Tremblay, *La manifestation et la vision de Dieu selon St. Irénée de Lyon*, Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie 41 (Münster, 1978), 49-65; Kurt Rudolph, ed., *Gnosis and Gnostizismus*, WdF 262 (Darmstadt, 1975).
- 14 See Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen, 1967); Theobald Beer, *Der frühe Wechsel und Streit: Grundzüge der Theologie Martin Luthers*, (Leipzig, 1974).

Condom Use Versus Church Teaching: The On-Going Saga

By Kenneth D. Whitehead

I.

On the basis of what has to be considered consistent and abundant evidence, it would seem that the world is waiting quite impatiently for the Catholic Church to drop her teaching against birth control. Indeed, what the world seems to be unable to understand

at all is how and why the Church has not long since dropped this teaching. It is a teaching that is almost universally now thought to be retrograde, irrational, and even superstitious. Practically everybody in the world has come to recognize that there is not only "nothing wrong" with birth control, but that modern methods of practicing it count among the great benefits of the technological revolution of modern times. In this perspective, the Church's teaching cannot pretend to stand; most people agree that it has simply got to go.

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