

Christ Our Quintessential Sacrament

Thinking Theologically (and thus Sacramentally) About All of Life

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I. Thinking Sacramentally About the Sacraments

According to Augustine's famous description, a sacrament is "a visible form of God's invisible grace."

Our Anglican Catechism expands on this description, stating, "A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. God gives us the sign as a means by which we receive that grace and as a tangible assurance that we do in fact receive it." ~*To Be A Christian*, 55-56.

The Catechism goes on to state that the sacraments are received the same way that Christ is received: by faith. And that obedience to Christ is necessary for the benefits of sacraments to bear fruit in our lives. ~*To Be A Christian*, 56.

This should strike us as manifestly true if, in fact, "Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him." ~John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

In other words, in the sacraments we do not receive more, less, or other than Christ. Rather, we receive Christ himself, who is our salvation.

In Baptism we are united with Christ, crucified and raised in newness of life. And in the Eucharist we are nourished and fortified with Christ's glorious new humanity, ascended and seated at the Father's right hand.

The sacraments should bring home to us with considerable force that God delights in using that which is physical and material to communicate salvation to humanity. For Jesus Christ is himself the source, substance, and goal of the sacraments; and he is the Word made flesh,



the true meeting place of God and humanity, of Spirit and matter. Indeed, Jesus is the quintessential sacrament: the visible form of the invisible grace of God, the body and blood fulfillment of all God's gracious promises, which in him are "Yes!" and "Amen!" (2 Cor. 1:20-21; Col. 1:15).

II. Thinking Sacramentally About the World and All of Life

The renowned Anglican preacher, Charles Simeon, said that the great skill of the Christian life is learning to enjoy Christ in all things, and all things in Christ. Of course, we can only do that if how we receive the sacraments informs how we receive all things: as given by Christ for our fellowship with Christ, informed by the gospel, and received in faith and obedience to Christ.

Discerning the difference between a naturalistic and a sacramental view of the world might well be helped by this. Echoing the apostle Paul, Karl Barth notes, "when man has tried to read the truth from sun, moon and stars or from himself, the result has been an idol. But when God has been known and then known again in the world, so that the result was a joyful praise of God in creation, that is because he is to be sought and found by us in Jesus Christ." ~Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*.

God's transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty open up in the world through Christ. All things hold together in him who is preeminent in everything, who is healing this fractured world as the glorious firstfruits of fully uniting heaven and earth in himself (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:17-20).

In other words, ***Jesus brings heaven to bear upon earth to penetrate and permeate earth with heaven***, to usher his church on earth into a participatory connection—a holy communion—with heaven that is even now profoundly real (Eph. 1:3; 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1).

Knowing Christ as the ground and goal of creation frees us to ***duly value and truly enjoy earthly realities***. Not as ends in themselves, but as means of drawing us ever deeper into the one *Christ-reality*. Earthly realities are thus God-given gifts whose God-intended aim is, as Alexander Schmemmann says, "that knowledge which is communion, and...that communion which fulfills itself as true knowledge: knowledge of God and therefore knowledge of the world." ~Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*.

Schmemmann's point is, in fact, the same as Barth's: God is known in the world but not from the world, because God in Christ grants true knowledge of the world, not the other way around. *To affirm otherwise inverts the order of knowing we find in the gospel, and thus cannot but undermine a truly sacramental approach to the world.* Humans do not arrive at true knowledge of God because they observe in creation the marks of his majesty (though the finger prints of God are all over his handiwork). ***Rather, we rightly understand the marks of God's majesty in creation because we obtain true knowledge of God on other grounds. When God is sought and found in Christ, creation is revealed for what it truly is: the theatre where all things great and small, extraordinary and mundane, reflect God's glory!***



To contemplate the world in Christ is *to gain true knowledge of both God and the world*, but to contemplate the world apart from Christ is *to forfeit true knowledge of both God and the world*. Only communion with the reality of the God-man amidst the reality of the world reveals itself in true knowledge of God and the world—in true knowledge of the one *Christ-reality*.

III. Matter Matters

Our Christian faith is about the divine Word being fully human, about his reconciliation of heaven and earth being shown as spiritual realities are known physically and materially (sacramentally) in the body of the church.

Matter matters—precisely because *the Creator and Redeemer of matter is revealed and received in matter*. Jesus Christ reveals the meaning of matter, the reality of the cosmos, as he unites in his body God and humanity, heaven and earth, spiritual and material—indeed, as he reveals himself to be the quintessential sacrament: the visible image of the invisible grace of God (Col. 1:15).

Therefore, Gnosticism and naturalism are not progressive but regressive, not on the right side of history but flat wrong about reality! Spirit and matter are not contradictory; they are complementary, which means neither may be despised or totalized.

Knowledge of the world in Christ safeguards us from *the tandem temptation to devalue earthly realities as trivial or idolize them as ultimate*. Further, this knowledge *exposes modern secularism as a peculiar and pernicious sort of flat earth society*. For it has a pathological desire to rip earth from heaven, then flatten the vertical dimension of earth—to reduce a God-ordered, God-enchanted creation to mere nature, then view nature as a malleable, self-enclosed plaything to objectify, deconstruct, and redefine at whim.