

Are Rites Right?

“From whence come wars and fightings among you?” (James 4:1). James’ rhetorical question, intended to point out depravity in the human heart, may well be applied in another sense to Christendom or the Christian Church as a whole in its outward manifestation. Is there any one element in particular which has distinguished itself through the centuries as the main bone of contention – a thing or practice that by far outstrips everything else for provoking wrangles?

Sundry items have often been brought up, declared to be trouble-makers, along with postulations of peace and harmony to be assured with their abolition. To name a few: denominations, their names, hierarchies, bishops, boards, doctrines, creeds, theology, seminaries, schools, church buildings, deacons, choirs, music, Sunday School, women’s auxiliaries, literature, mission boards, publishing houses, and many more. Some have dubious or no scriptural warrant. Others are mandated in the Bible and absolutely necessary. They are all occasions of trouble, but none come close to incubating the storms that rage around religious ritual.

Ordinances or Rituals?

Whereas the revelation of God under the Old Covenant was characterized by ritual in which New Covenant realities were prophesied in type and symbol, revelation under the New Covenant is characterized in the actual display and application of these realities. For the most part, the advent of the promised Seed, the Heir, the Messiah, Redeemer and King, the Lord Jesus Christ, marked the end of symbols and rituals and brought in the “day of the Lord”, the literal fulfilling of all that the ceremonies taught. But the Lord Himself left us two rituals to be enacted in the dispensation of the New Covenant: the Lord’s Supper (also called Holy Communion and the Eucharist) and water baptism. Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches add five more to these two, and call them all sacraments. Churches that descend from Catholics usually drop the five (except Episcopalians), but still call the remaining two sacraments. Sacrament (*sacramentum*) is the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery), which is erroneously imputed to the Lord’s Supper and water baptism. There is nothing mysterious about either, and they are intended to reveal, not hide, the gospel. Anabaptists and other outcasts of established religion have usually described these two rituals as “the ordinances”, since our Lord, together with His apostles, left us quite an array of commands that may be properly called ordinances. We may dislike the connotation of ritual, as it has become to mean something empty and worthless, but nevertheless, it is the proper word to describe these ceremonies. They are bits of drama enacted to symbolize spiritual truth, ritual that reminds us of, and gives testimony to, spiritual realities.

Divisions over these two rites are astounding, both for their number and their severity. All other causes of alienation among Christians cannot approach the estrangement that stems from views and claims for these two. They have not only brought brother against brother, but nation against nation. Nothing has been the cause of so much unchristian behaviour. Violence, murder, betrayal, torture, cruel persecution, with all the malignant hatred and rage of human depravity boils to the surface from this cauldron of controversy. The Reformers were bitterly divided over them. Even today, people who are in perfect agreement on the essentials of gospel truth are at each other’s throats over nothing more than water and grape juice.

Amazing!

The variations of views are legion. Here are a few of the major ones:

Sacramentalism

Sacramentalists believe that actual saving grace is imparted in what they call the sacraments. Catholics hold to transubstantiation in the Lord’s Supper. They teach that a real sacrifice of Christ is offered, and that the wafer becomes the actual body of the Lord Jesus when the priest pronounces the magical “this is my body”. Anglicans depart very little from this in the high church tradition, claiming that Anglican priests have the same power as Catholic ones. Lutherans profess consubstantiation. They deny that the bread is changed in any way, but insist that Christ Himself is present in it and along with it, so that the communicant actually receives the Lord Jesus in the Supper. Followers of Calvin, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and various Reformed Churches teach that the elements are no more than wine and bread, and that Christ is not received in them, but that nevertheless, Christian grace is received in them, since this is the *means* the Lord ordained.

These same Sacramentalists generally hold similar corresponding views on water baptism. Catholics and Anglicans believe actual saving grace is imparted in it, that baptism in water *is* baptism into Christ, and that no salvation is possible without it. Others stop somewhat short of that, but insist that grace is imparted in the water, and that it is in some way efficacious. Because of these views, these churches are all Paedobaptists. They baptize infants and include them in the church without requiring them to exercise justifying faith. Usually they do not immerse, but sprinkle or pour.

Sacramentalism also appears in Protestant churches that do not follow the high church tradition in any other respect. Followers of Alexander Campbell and the Churches of Christ insist that water baptism by immersion and the regular reception of the Lord’s Supper are essential for salvation. Sabellian Pentecostals teach that without water baptism by immersion together with the specific intonation of “in Jesus’ Name”, one is eternally lost, regardless of his faith in Christ.

Non-Sacramentalists, chiefly Anabaptists and their descendants, hold that water baptism and the Lord’s Supper impart no grace directly, but only secondarily by their instrumentality in reminding us of gospel truth. While strictly holding to their observance, they declare that saving and sanctifying grace is imparted only by the Holy Spirit applying the word of truth in spiritual life, and that these rites are nothing more than teaching and exhorting memorials.

But non-Sacramentalists are far from united on these rituals. They wrangle over authority in administration, grape juice or wine, unleavened bread, soda crackers or one unleavened loaf, one cup or individual cups. They disagree on frequency. They argue

about “alien immersion”, true local church authority, discipline and excommunication. Some will join other Christians in any activity or worship except the Lord’s Supper, and will regard no water immersion valid which they did not administer or authorize.

Small wonder, then, when some sensitive non-Sacramentalists, horrified at all this bloodshed, hostility, alienation, confusion and controversy, advocate the total abolition of these two rites, restricting their validity to only the “transitional” period of the church in which it was being weaned from Old Covenant Jewish ceremonialism.

Considering all this brings us to a puzzling question. Did the Lord intend for His Church to have these ceremonies as permanent rituals until He returns? And if so, is there any practical purpose, understandable to us, which justifies them in spite of what seems to be their terrible cost?

Abolitionism

The abolitionist is not without persuasive argument for his view. Ceremonialism belongs to the Old Covenant, not the new, he says. Those things prophesied in Old Covenant ritual are fulfilled in Christ. We now have the Substance, so what do we need with a symbol? It is true that some traditions of Judaism, such as circumcision and observation of feasts and holy days, purification rites, and others, were carried along for some time in the early years of the church because of the weak conscience of some Jewish believers. But these, belonging strictly to the old Hebrew theocracy, and having no place in the New Covenant, eventually disappeared altogether from the church, which is now composed of both Jew and Gentile. Multitudes of professing Christians, even when they are taught differently, take the observation of these rituals as either securing or helping their justification before God. They think that in some way these ceremonies put away their sins. In so doing, they fail to put their confidence wholly in Christ, and miss salvation altogether. Would it not be better to remove these rites, which become a potential object of faith, and take away a fatal stumbling block?

Scripturalism

All the above arguments, however, lack one crucial element. We have direct scriptural warrant from the lips of our Lord to observe these rites, and *none* anywhere to stop them. As far as the Bible is concerned, it is “*till He come*” (1 Corinthians 11:26), and “*baptizing them . . . teaching them whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*” (Matthew 28:19-20). Reason and logic can neither create Scripture or abrogate what is written. B. B. Warfield’s axiom, “the sense of Scripture is also Scripture”, is the camel’s nose that lets the whole odious beast of Protestant Church councils intrude into the sanctuary of scriptural authority. Nothing is Scripture except Scripture. If Warfield had said, “true spiritual meaning of Scripture is the Word of God”, he would have spoken truth. The Word of God is spirit (John 6:63, 2 Corinthians 3:6), not letter. But we may not spiritualize the letter of Scripture and call that Scripture also. And we must not let the logic or reason which we derive from Scripture create another Scripture to which we impute divine authority. That will lead us right back into popery.

John Bunyan wisely writes:

First, to take notice; that touching shadowish or figurative ordinances, I believe that Christ hath ordained but two in His church, viz., water baptism and the Supper of the Lord; both of which are of excellent use to the church in this world; they being to us representations of the death and resurrection of Christ; and are, as God shall make them, helps to our faith therein. But I count them not the fundamentals of our Christianity, nor the grounds or rule to communion with saints: servants they are, and our mystical ministers to teach and instruct us in the most weighty matters of the kingdom of God. I therefore here declare my reverent esteem of them; yet dare not remove them, as some do, from the place and end where by God they are set appointed; or ascribe unto them more than they were ordered to have in their first and primitive institution.

If we are, then, to conclude that these are permanent ordinances of Christ, our minds, though carnal they be to make such an inquiry, may still seek to be able to appreciate the primary purpose they serve. Some of us may be quite satisfied with the purpose given for the Old Covenant memorials, as in Exodus 12:26: “*And it shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service?*” That is, a provocation of interest in our children in the redemptive work of God. Also Exodus 13:8, “*And thou shalt shew thy son in that day.*” And Exodus 13:14, “*And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to com, saying what is this?*” But these Old Covenant memorials were also prophecies of our coming Christ; and they did not foster the division among the people of God as do the New Covenant memorials.

Although they do provoke attention and provide opportunity to teach truth, we can hardly believe that alone to be their main end. The plain preaching of the word of God, made effectual by the now diffused Holy Spirit, is fully sufficient to apply the grace of God in quickening and enlightenment, both in justification and in sanctification. The small measure in which the ordinances add to that efficacious testimony of God seems hardly to justify the pain, division and evil fostered by their presence and practice.

Possibilities

One of two possibilities may be considered. The first is that these rituals are so absolutely vital in their observances as to make the terrible price paid by their maintenance worth their end. The second is that the very division they provoke is part of their intended end.

If the first be true, then the strictest Sacramentalists are right. Saving grace is conferred in the sacrament and only in the sacrament. Without holy baptism and holy communion administered at the hand of a priest who pronounces certain incantations, there can be no salvation. The Church is also justified in hunting down, persecuting and putting to death all who dissent from this view, all who preach salvation by grace through faith apart from any works or ritual performed by man. There is no such thing as justification by faith. The Bible is not only a lie, but utterly unnecessary. Putting it into the hands of common people is a wicked crime, damning millions to hell, who by it are persuaded to put their faith in Christ apart from any ecclesiastical ritual. Preaching is indeed foolishness, since no one needs to believe anything or be informed of anything. They need only be passive recipients of the magical grace imparted through mysterious mutterings and gesticulations of certain holy men. God is unnecessary. Man is his own saviour.

So much for that possibility! Observances of New Covenant ritual cannot be that vital. The integrity of the whole of divine revelation revolts against it. And if the *strict* Sacramentalists are wrong, how much more their daughters! When Jesus said, "This is my body" (Luke 22:19), He either meant that the bread as *literally* His body, or that it *represented* His body. By no stretch of imagination can we think He said, "My body is with this", or "You must do this to receive Me". Our Lord said nothing like that. Those words were put in His mouth by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and other Protestant theologians. If these worthies erred so, how careful ought we to be lest we do worse!

Deliberate Division

The idea that God has deliberately set something among His people for the express purpose of causing division and strife is not alien to the Scriptures. "*Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you: and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no*" (Exodus 16:4). The Lord deliberately sent much more manna than they needed; then warned them to gather *no more* than they needed and to gather *none* on the Sabbath. This He did as a test of their faith, "*whether they will walk in my law, or no.*" He could have spared all this sin had He only sent what they could lawfully gather, but their unbelief would have gone unexposed.

Another example is found in Deuteronomy 13:1-4. God sends prophets among His people who teach them to forsake Jehovah and follow false gods, and whose visions and prophesies come to pass. Thus many Israelites are led astray, seduced by supernatural powers of these men. Had God not permitted these men in their midst, or had He exposed them by not permitting their prophesies come to pass, they would not have caused the apostasy of much of Israel. But then the false foundation of these fickle professors, ready to forsake the Lord for a false god, would have gone unexposed. The Lord sent these "*to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*"

Still another example is left for us in Judges 2:22. The Lord would not drive out any more of the nations of Canaan, "*That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not.*" We could well understand why our great God, Who could have long ago put the devil and all his demons in the pit and locked them up, has left them to try us, well knowing the bloody battles, sorrow and heartache they would cause. But how else should our faith be tried, false professors exposed, and our Lord's power to save be demonstrated?

Our Lord Jesus Christ boldly asserts Himself to be the Author of division, and that among the dearest of friends and loved ones (Luke 12:51-53). John frankly records: "*There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings*" (John 12:19). It is not without great significance that the Lord's teaching on what the high church calls "the Eucharist" occasioned the first and sharpest division among *His Own followers* (John 6:50-71). Surely He could not have missed that. It would have been quite simple for Him to stop and explain the symbolism of His metaphor. The fact that He did not, leads us inescapably to the conclusion that He intended for it to be the stumbling block it has become.

This is perfect harmony with the Scriptures which prophesy of His coming. "*And he shall be for a sanctuary: but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken*" (Isaiah 8:14-15). Paul reminds us of this in Romans 9:33, and Peter again in 1 Peter 2:8.

The preaching of the gospel itself has this offensive "stumbling stone" character that tries, proves, tests and separates men, some being deceived, some being repulsed, some being won to Christ. "*For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?*" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Propositional and practical rationale is given for all this in 1 Corinthians 11:19: "*For there must also be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.*" Again, it is highly significant that this remark is made just as the apostle is about to reprove and instruct them about the observance of the Lord's Supper. The wrangling and disorder had already begun. It seems that this would have been an excellent point at which to abrogate the practice, had the Lord intended it for only the transitional period in which the Jews were being weaned from ritualism. This was a Gentile church. The doctrine of grace through faith was already well established. But the apostle does nothing like that. He simply teaches and exhorts them in the purpose and significance of the observance, while rebuking and warning them for their disorder.

Objections and Considerations

One of the leading objections to the rituals (a danger that is often warned against by non-Sacramentalists) is that people will tend to put their hopes of salvation and good standing with God in their proper observance of them. *But this very characteristic is what makes them imminently suitable to "prove" the professors of Christianity, and expose that which is false.* The same unbelief that compelled the Israelites to gather more manna than God allowed, lest there be none on the morrow, will incite those who do not wholly trust in Christ to add some ritual to their faith, making their salvation secure by their works. The same unsanctified hankering for the supernatural, a fickle faith that forsakes the living God and follows men of power, as did those who followed the miracle-working false prophet, will compel men to put their trust in the "holy man" who can perform the sacred ritual on their behalf, even though he is teaching a lie.

But the true Christian will have none of it. You cannot persuade him who has found safe refuge in the bosom of the Saviour to put any confidence in water and wine. He will faithfully obey all the Lord's commands, but put not one whit of confidence in either his obedience or the efficacy of his deeds. Christ has finished the work. Rituals are memorials are what He has done. Whether they are observed or not cannot change what is finished and past. Old Covenant ritual expressed a hope of that which was to come. New Covenant ritual joyfully celebrates that which is completed and sealed.

It can certainly be argued that without these rituals there would be more peace and harmony in Christendom. This might present a sweeter face to the unbelieving world, but it would hide more hypocrisy and ugliness under the guise of Christianity than can

be imagined. The church is purer for the division, and better able to perform its task without the corrupting influence of superstitious idolaters.

Nearly twenty centuries of church history can tell us something of no little worth. A few observations: Those movements that have opted to abandon the rituals, principally Friends (Quakers) and the Salvation Army, have also downplayed doctrine in the interest of unity. Both of these have retreated from Christian doctrine to the point that they have no defined gospel at all, and are merely social-action and self-improvement organizations.

As the sacramental churches decline, there is a remarkable *increase in the importance put upon the ritual, even as they apostatize from orthodox Christian doctrine and practice*. Ecumenical proponents go so far as to say that nothing matters except the Eucharist, saying that as long as we all come to the same table, it does not really matter what else we do or do not do, or what we believe or do not believe.

On the other hand, it seems unavoidable to observe that the churches which survive sounder and longer are those which have no confidence whatsoever in any efficacy of the ritual, yet faithfully and joyfully observe it in unquestioned obedience to our Lord's direct command. Among them are they who were derisively called Anabaptists, and who were tortured and murdered for observing water baptism, when they well knew that not one whit of saving grace was in the ritual. They died, not only to deny that ecclesiastical ritual bestowed any grace upon unbelievers, but to preserve intact a command of our Lord and pass it on down to succeeding generations. They passed the test. Their faith was proven. No Sacramentalists that I know of ever died at the hands of non-Sacramentalists over ritual. We will not impose our views on others by violence, and we will not deny fellowship with those who are in Christ, but have a wrong form of ritual. But we will seal our faith in the Lord we trust by simple obedience to all His commands, including the rituals.

Addendum

Now, it appears that I have presented my case for the observance of rituals as a means of "manifesting those which are approved" somewhat too severely. Because the rituals, by the idolizing or despising of them, exclude some whose faith is false or defective, I must quickly and unmistakably assert that proper observance of them is not a test of a true believer. To leave that conclusion, even implied, would defeat the whole purpose of this paper, which is to plead for Christian unity among true believers. If we demand that every person have perfect concord with what we perceive to be our own infallible belief as a condition of communion, we shall walk alone. A person might have right views of the rituals and be wrong on far more vital doctrine. He might have the right practice of these and have no grace at all. And he may be a true brother in Christ and have neither clear and correct views nor practice of ritual.

Once again, the writings of John Bunyan (who in the matter of water baptism endured much hostility, for his belief and practice of believer's immersion, from the Anglican Church on one side, and his Strict Baptist brethren on the other side, who took him to task for receiving Anglican baptism or unbaptized people into fellowship), can help us on this matter.

Again; if water baptism, as the circumstances with which the church were pestered of old, trouble their peace wound the consciences of the godly, dismember and break their fellowship, it is, although an ordinance, for the present to be prudently shunned; for the edification of the church, as I shall show anon, is to be preferred before it. (Ephesians 4:1-6) One Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (not of water, for by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body), one God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all. This is a sufficient rule for us to hold communion by, and also to endeavour the maintaining of that communion, and to keep it in unity, with the bond of peace against all attempts whatsoever. I am bold therefore to have communion with such, because they also have the doctrine of baptisms: [By doctrine, Bunyan means the true Substance of what water baptism represents.] I say the doctrine of them, for here you must note, I distinguish between the doctrine and practice of water baptism; the doctrine being that which by the outward sign is presented to us, or which by the outward circumstance of the act is preached to the believer: namely, The Death of Christ; my death with Christ; also His resurrection from the dead, and mine with Him to newness of life. This is the doctrine which baptism preacheth, or which by the outward action is signified to the believing receiver. Now I say, he that believeth in Jesus Christ hath richer and better than that (of baptism in water), namely, is dead to sin, and that lives to God by Him, he hath the Heart, Power and Doctrine of baptism: all then that he wanteth, is but the sign, the shadow, or the outward circumstance thereof; nor yet is that despised but forborne for want of light. The best of baptisms he hath (emphasis mine). He is baptized by that one Spirit; He hath the heart of water baptism, he wanteth only the outward show, which if he had, would not prove him a truly visible saint; it would not tell me he had grace in his heart.

Prayerful consideration and meditation on these words of exhortation may bring us to conclude that the ritual controversies may further purify the church by teaching us to have Christian forbearance and unrestrained communion with those whose views do not coincide with ours on non-essentials. It seems to me the loving brother is to be more approved than the knowing one (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend. (1 Corinthians 8:1, 11-13).