

SERMON AND SACRAMENT: SEEKING THE VITAL BALANCE

by Cecil Albright

Flagler Memorial Presbyterian Church, St. Augustine, Florida

It has concerned me for a long time that Presbyterians do not celebrate the Lord's Supper with greater frequency, more obvious confidence in the powerful presence of the Spirit, and in that mood of joyous gratitude which marks those who are glad to be alive together. It has been my experience that we often seem to resist or ignore the Lord's Supper altogether, as if at a loss to know what to do with it. I suppose our history leads us to feel justified in this; but I am no longer certain our theology does. The sacrament ought to be every bit as important to us as the sermon. This is finally because the sacrament is also a sermon, just as the sermon is also a sacrament. The Calvinist vein of our tradition has, from the first, insisted upon a close link between the two. For a long time I did not appreciate why; but now I am beginning to see—and agree.

I

In the Reformed tradition, sermon and sacrament stand together as the *conditio sine qua non* of the church in society—at least in principle. Calvin brings this to classical expression for us:

Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's own institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.¹

This remains a reliable standard by which to recognize the church amid the currently competing claims of civil religion, cultism, and the so-called electronic church.

In search of a convenient abbreviation of this, I turned to the field of psychiatry. In a remarkable study of human behavior, Karl Menninger describes the "vital balance" essential to life and health.² I have no space to rehearse his theory here, though it is well worth greater attention. The term "vital balance," however, helps us to think about an old problem in a fresh way, for it helps emphasize sermon and sacrament alike as "means of grace" in the ordinary course of congregational life.

Calvin's own failure at Geneva to achieve a practical, vital balance between sermon and sacrament is, undoubtedly, rooted in the reactionary spirit of the times and in the need to overstate the importance of the sermon in the face of widespread sacramental abuse and homiletical neglect. But the principle of balance is established nonetheless, even if rejected in practice by the Genevan fathers—a fact curiously overlooked in subsequent Calvinist

preoccupations.

Calvin, who advocates alongside a high doctrine of preaching the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, suffers further modification at the hands of his interpreters. Calvinistic scholasticism, for example, in its zeal to codify certain systematic gains of the Reformer, all but ignores the doctrine of the church and sacraments of "the Cyprian of the sixteenth century."³ Whatever the operative motives here, the practical result for congregational life is the same: Calvin's vision of the worshiping community is grossly distorted in an unfortunate exaggeration of the case for sermon over sacrament. Given Calvin's own relatively high doctrine of the sacrament, I suspect the baby was tossed out with the bath.

The tradition that continues to bear his name stays frustrated at this point. We have gone from one extreme to another, not by redressing the balance (as should have been done), but in reacting to the imbalance of sacramentalism by imposing—and perpetuating—an opposite imbalance of sermonism. This seems especially true where Calvin's work is adapted to Zwinglian or Anabaptist views that ultimately reduce or eliminate his original concern for a balance of sermon and sacrament that "marks" the congregation's *leitourgia* as a way of being the *Christian* community; that is, a local expression of the "one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church."

Where the significance of the sermon continues to be stressed—if not exalted—at the expense of trivialization of the sacrament, there is an ironic inversion of the medieval sacramental system that merits the same prophetic iconoclasm which characterized sixteenth century Reformation criticism of Roman excesses. To the extent that Calvin's dictum has become normative for Reformed congregations through doctrine and discipline, it cannot admit of a duplicity of theory and practice. If the ethos of our tradition is still prompted by the rule of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, then we must apply the standard self-critically to "see clearly" (Luke 6:42) what is truly at stake here.

Here Menninger's paradigm helps. We are the church, an organism on all fronts pressed in a life-or-death struggle for integrity and wholeness. To keep our "balance" means continual self-correction and constant focusing: that is, the church must brave the throes of cultural change in terms of what is integral to itself, if it is to maintain identity and relevancy at the same time. For me, at the level of the living community of faith, the struggle lies in the problem of the relation between sermon and sacrament. This cannot really be otherwise, if "congregational worship in which the preaching of the Word is conjoined with the celebration of the Lord's Supper is the constitutive and representative service of the community of apostolic faith."⁴

A comparison of the frequency and quality of preaching with the frequency and quality of the administration of the sacrament can provide data useful to the search for integrity and balance. For if the congregation's experience of the "full gospel" of sermon *and* sacrament is inhibited, the communal appropriation of the reality of "the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; [and] the forgiveness of sins" is jeopardized. "It is inconceivable," laments one continental theologian, "that a Church which is faithful to its title deeds and obedient to the Word of God could minimize the vital importance of

the eucharist or thrust it aside from the centre of its preoccupations. [It is] part of the *normal* life of the Church".⁵

The Gospel is given to the church "in both kinds" that it may be offered to the world in the same way. Sermon without sacrament is not enough.

The sermon may fail. The hymns may fail. But the Sacrament silently proclaims the facts of the Christian church. . . . The sacraments are indeed silent ministries and proclaim a full and complete Gospel of redemption.⁶

To be the church of Jesus Christ in the world, the sacrament is also required as "the one thing which does have a place alongside the human word of the preacher, not to displace it, but *together with it* to constitute the Word of God" [emphasis mine].⁷

I find in Calvin's fervent desire to see the Supper "set before the church very often, and at least once a week",⁸ the mark of a friendly soul, catholic in spirit. He would, not doubt, approve of the attempt to tip the Reformed scales into "vital balance," and *away from the isolating individualism of a society whose dominant social values of competition and consumption tempt the church to prostitute itself in the very act of its proclamation*. I believe this is one way to avoid cultural captivity, and so meet the desacralizing threat of a post-Enlightenment technocracy that

shows itself very destructive of worn-out symbols and yet an avid consumer of living symbols which link this new world to the deepest roots of one's being, and which restore the sacred to its imperial position.⁹

We must ask whether our resistance to the sacrament represents a kind of idolatizing or even demonization of the sermon today. There is a law against that. In this sense, Tillich is right to warn us that "the problem of the sacraments is a decisive one if Protestantism is to come to its full realization."¹⁰ *Abusus non tollit usus*.

II.

The sacrament is "a proper part of, and not an addition to" not only worship, but also life. And the Christian life is essentially an act of submission to God, a *leitourgia* at once corporate and "visible." It asks an allegiance of us that is difficult, calling into radical question the real motives of our words and deeds. For faith rests neither in the ears nor in the eyes, but in the hidden treasury of the heart. And that is at last the domain of the Spirit, in whose strength alone even pastors must confide.

The season of Pentecost is a good time to reflect upon the true meaning of covenant life, and whether the recovery of eucharistic worship is proper to it. I think it is, for it "makes a stand against life's inward and outward oppressions," and it does so "in the name of the crucified and risen Christ."¹¹ David Willis says it well:

The whole life which is proclamatory includes those rites which are ways

by which people are recalled to their true identity and engage in that active remembrance of the reconciling initiative of God on which that identity is founded.¹²

The implications of this are profound, posing for us today “as serious a challenge to the ‘Protestant’ traditions of worship as was the challenge made in the sixteenth century to the Roman mass.”¹³

Yet regardless of our deepest fears and fondest hopes, the fact remains with or without us: the “earthen vessels” of sermon and sacrament are the primary “means of grace” given to the church, and through the church, to the world. They deserve better from us. So if they stand together in their “recital of the promises” and their “declaration of the mystery” of Christ,¹⁴ then let preaching perform its task according to its form, and let the sacrament be allowed to do the same. We need to do them both, well and often.

¹ John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (LCC), vols. XX and XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), XXI:1023.

² Karl Menninger, with Martin Mayman and Paul Pruyser, *The Vital Balance: The Life Process in Mental Health and Illness* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

³ J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1963), p. 129.

⁴ *In Quest of A Church of Christ Uniting: An Emerging Theological Consensus* (Princeton: Consultation on Church Union, 1980), p. 30.

⁵ J.-Ph. Ramseyer, “Lord’s Supper,” in J.-J. Von Allmen, ed., *A Companion to the Bible*, P.J. Allcock, et. al., trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 242.

⁶ Hugh Thomson Kerr, *The Christian Sacraments: A Source Book for Ministers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 146.

⁷ Barth, *Dogmatics*, loc. cit.

⁸ LCC, XXI:1421.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 70.

¹⁰ Tillich, op. cit., p. 94.

¹¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, Pubs., 1977), p. 274.

¹² David Willis, “Sacraments as Visible Words,” *Theology Today* XXXVII (January 1981):449.

¹³ J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 286.

¹⁴ LCC, XXI:1416.