

The Four-Door Labyrinth

by Steve Hays

VI. Door 4

Are the sacraments a means of grace?

I. Yes! Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism, Lutheranism, Eastern Orthodoxy¹

II. No! Anabaptism

III. Yes and no! Covenant theology

An Amusing Confectionery Classification of the Eucharistic Schools

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| 1. Oreonian | An earthly sign of a heavenly filling (Impanation) |
| 2. Animal-Crackeresque | The doughy rhino represents the real pachyderm (Memorialism) |
| 3. Chocolate-chippy | The heavenly chips are mixed in, with and under the earthly ingredients (Consubstantiation). |
| 4. Carobean | Although the substance is really carob, the cookie retains its chocolatean accidents (Transubstantiation). |
| 5. Oatmealy | The heavenly nutrients are spiritually present in the earthly ingredients (Virtualism). More nutritious than the Anabaptist view (#2), but less ostentatious than the Catholic view (#4). |

A. Mediate Systems of Grace

1. Catholicism

How do you decide? That, again, depends in part on the other doors you pass through. If you answer “no” to freewill, then you must answer no to sacramental realism, for there is a conflict between sovereign grace and sacramental grace. For if grace is channeled through the sacraments, which are mediated by men

¹ In Byzantine theology, icons enjoy a sacramental significance as well.

and administered to the heavenbound and hellbound alike, then grace is general and resistible rather than particular and irresistible. But if you answer "no," to freewill, then particularly administered sovereign grace trumps sacramental grace.

If, in addition, you answer "yes" to sola Scriptura, then sacramental realism must pass Scriptural muster. And that brings us to the next point. It isn't enough that a sacramentalist must be right in principle. His position entails that he must also be right in practice, for if there are any impediments to the right reception or administration of the means of grace, then the outward sign is conferred without the inner grace.

We must also ask what would count as a proof text for sacramental realism. Putting this another way, we must ask if and how would the NT witness differ were the opposing position true?

The basic case for sacramental realism is that certain verses attribute saving grace to the sacraments. And that, at first glance, looks like a pretty straightforward deduction.

But what is the opposing position? The opposing position holds the sacraments to be *signs* of grace rather than *means* of grace. Now, if the sacraments were emblematic rather than efficacious, would we expect the NT to express itself in different terms? I don't see why, for the very nature of symbolic discourse involves the principle of substitution, in which A substitutes for B, so that whatever was said of B may be said of A. An example would be the way in which Paul talks about the Cross (e.g., Col 2:14). Because the Cross signifies the work of Christ, Paul can ascribe redemptive power to the Cross. But, of course, a piece of wood is singularly inefficacious—as Isaiah would be the first to say (Isa 44:19)!

So it would seem that sacramental realism has failed to take the measure of what the opposing position entails. Since, on the symbolic view, sign and significant are interchangeable, the putative evidence underdetermines sacramental realism—for the NT witness would be identical on either view.

Now, to deny that a given verse is a proof text doesn't convert it into a disproof. Sacramental realism could still be true. But if its traditional proof texts are really neutral, then there is no *prima facie* presumption in its favor, so that some additional and independent argument is needed to tilt the balance.

But in that regard, it is also striking to see where the sacramentalist must go for some of his proof texts. For example, he appeals to the Gospel of John, but instead of starting with narratives that directly address the practice of baptism (e.g., 1:19-34; 3:22-4:2) or communion (13:1-14), they turn to passages like 3:5 or the Bread of Life discourse (6:22-59) on the assumption that these rather

picturesque speeches are concerned with the sacraments. Why begin there? *Because a sacramentalist can't get what he wants from the historical narratives.*

It must be frustrating for the sacramentalist to find that John doesn't seem to share his intense interest in the sacraments. For John passes up natural opportunities to enlarge on that theme, had he deemed it a priority—and this from the most reflective of the Gospel writers.

But the most basic failing, the principal weakness with the sacramental reading lies not in finding so much sacramental significance in the Johannine narratives, but so little. For the whole of the Fourth Gospel is a book of earthly signs of unseen truths. The miracles of feeding and healing, restoring life and sight, walking on water and turning water into fine wine, are no more or less sacramental than baptism and communion. And suffusing the whole is the miracle of the Incarnation. John has no account of the Transfiguration because he understood the Incarnate life of Christ as a daily transfiguration and living tabernacle of God's glory in flesh and blood.

Another proof text for the Real Presence is 1 Cor 11:27-29. But as Roger Beckwith remarks,

To understand such feasts, it is necessary to remember the Biblical attitude to meals in general...Meals were...used to inaugurate covenants...the animals to be eaten were first offered in sacrifice to God, with the result that he became the Host, inviting men to his table, and that the sins of men were taken away by the shedding of blood before they approached (Heb 9:16-22)...Those who neglected the annual Passover meal were rejected by God and became liable to the visitation of death (Exod 12:15,19; Num 9:13). Now, in 1 Cor 10:14-22, St. Paul compares such feasts with their pagan counterparts and with the Holy Communion, and he dwells upon the function of all of these in cementing *koinonia* (communion, fellowship, partnership) not just between worshiper and worshiper, but more especially between the worshippers and the deity (vv16f.,20).²

...the sin of "not distinguishing the body," and the physical judgments which it is liable to bring (1 Cor 11:29-31), can be paralleled from the corresponding judgments incurred by profaning the sacred feasts of the OT, in which no one imagines there to be a bodily presence of the Lord in the elements (Lev 7:20f.; 22:3).³

I would add that it is precisely because some believers affirm the Real Presence at the Last Supper that they deny it at the Lord's Supper—owing to its commemorative and eschatological character (1 Cor 11:24-26). For the Last

² Priesthood and Sacraments. Latimer Monographs 1 (Marchman Manor, 1964), 91.

³ The Service of Holy Communion and its Revision. Latimer Monographs 3 (Marchman Manor, 1972), 33.

Supper foreshadows the Lamb's supper (Lk 22:18; 13:22-29; cf. Isa 25:6-9; Rev 19:6-10).

Indeed, what the vicarious relation (Mt 26:28; cf. 20:28) implies is not that Christ is now *with us* (Real Presence), but that Christ has acted *for us* (penal substitution). He has acted on our behalf and in our stead—taking our place rather than taking his place beside us.

I would further add that sacramental realism is a position with practical consequences. Simply put, if the sacraments are a means of grace, where's the grace? When Judas was a communicant at the inaugural Eucharist, this augurs ill for the future of sacramental realism. How do we account for the widespread phenomenon of national apostasy in countries where almost everyone used to be baptized and most everyone received regular communion? If the divine design of the sacraments were to effect (in baptism) and sustain (in communion) a state of grace, how did we ever get from nearly unanimous participation to nearly unanimous defection? It rather looks like this is a paper theory that is falsified by a failure to make good on its promise.

As a rule, I don't think it's fair to judge a doctrine by experience. Yet some doctrines do, in the very nature of the case, come equipped with predictive values.

As with *sola Scriptura*, how you come down on the efficacy of the sacraments affects your polity and ecclesiology. If you believe the sacraments to be a means of grace, especially in the *ex opere operato* sense, then that generally commits you to a firm lay/clerical division and apostolic succession to help ensure the valid administration of the sacraments.

And that, in turn, weighs in the relative gravity of schism. If you believe that the sacraments are a means of grace, and the Church the appointed custodian and gatekeeper, then a break with the true church is a worst-case scenario. Unity is put at a premium.

If, on the other hand, you deny these assumptions, then there are worse things than schism. In that event you travel light and keep your bags packed (Acts 7; Heb 11).

Although the scandal of schism is often treated as the scarlet letter of the Protestant movement, less is said about the opposing scandal of catholicity. For if you identify the true Church with one visible communion, then no matter how corrupt the institutional Church becomes, you are committed to that system. It is like the old Roman punishment in which a murderer was chained to the rotting corpse of his victim.

The Catholic sex scandal is a case in point. The problem was not only with sodomites in the priesthood and vile prelates who facilitated their crimes. The problem is that the good Catholic is just as complicit as the worst, for the good Catholic is more loyal to the lofty pretensions of his church than a cynical Magisterium, and his institutional allegiance to a rotten institution is just what enables a corrupt clergy and vicious hierarchy to stay in business. For the good Catholic, his church is the only church in town, and so his duty to defend Mother Church takes precedence over institutional reform inasmuch as the institution, if deemed to be divine, is beyond reform.

The problem with pretensions to a divine teaching office is that it leaves you exposed to the same mistakes as any other uninspired organization, but you're even worse off; on the one hand, you disdain conventional standards of investigation and verification; on the other hand, you don't dare admit error for fear of losing face. This has a cumulative effect as special pleading advances a new lie to cover up an old blunder. Otherwise innocent errors or petty mistakes, which are harmless enough if caught and corrected early in the process, instead supply the premise for further falsehoods in a downward spiral of systematic deceit. The Roman Church has a long history of this, viz., the False Decretals, the Galileo affair, the Sixtine Vulgate⁴.

2. Lutheranism

Lutheran theology grounds the assurance of salvation in the objectivity of grace. Grace is objectified in the sacraments. Since the sacraments are visible and tangible means of grace, the recipient can know himself to be in a state of grace. Conversely, Lutheran theology faults Anabaptism and covenant theology for robbing the Christian of assurance by grounding assurance in subjective factors.

I must confess that I've never understood how so many intelligent Lutherans can find this line of argument the least bit compelling. To begin with, it hinges on the valid administration of the sacraments. But even if we waive that imponderable, it also turns on a one-to-one correspondence between the object of the sacrament and the object of salvation. If everyone were saved who was baptized, then the assurance would be well-warranted. But since Lutheran theology admits the possibility and reality of nominal believers and open apostates, the inference is flagrantly invalid.

⁴ Editor's Note: More information on two lesser-known matters mentioned here can be found online. The scandalous affair of the Sixtine Vulgate is discussed at http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/vatican.exhibit/exhibit/a-vatican_lib/Vlib_extra.html#vlib32. A Catholic response to this charge is found at <http://www.utexas.edu/students/veritas/challenges.html>. Galileo is also briefly addressed. The False Decretals is a book published in the Middle Ages that is called forgery by Catholics (see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05773a.htm>) and Protestants alike. The difference is that it was widely accepted as a confirmation of and basis of canon law by Popes and other officials. See http://www.slider.com/enc/18000/False_Decretals.htm for a basic explanation and a more detailed look with bibliography at <http://www.catholicconcerns.com/Forged.html>.

In addition, Lutherans regard justification by faith as a fundamental doctrine. Yet faith is a subjective condition. To be sure, faith is the gift of God, but that only goes to show that God is the sovereign of our heart no less than of our outward circumstances, so that it is quite mistaken to equate subjectivity with uncertainty.

Now I realize Lutherans will say that the relation between various articles of faith is mysterious. But this plays into a dialectical double standard in Lutheran theology, for it is rationalistic in its offensive mode, but fideistic in its defensive mode. It employs logic to attack opposing positions, but when opposing positions use logic to attack Lutheran theology, the Lutheran exchanges logic for paralogsms. I could have some respect for one or the other, but the pragmatic alternation strikes me as evasive, opportunistic, unprincipled and duplicitous. Although that is not the intent, that is the effect.

B. Immediate Systems of Grace

1. Anabaptism

Anabaptism represents the discontinuous end of the spectrum. That, at least, is how it looks from the viewpoint of covenant theology.

However, Anabaptism needn't view its position as marking a substantive break with the Old Covenant. For Anabaptism would deny that presumptive election, justification or regeneration was ever the basis of infant circumcision. Hence, withholding baptism from infants does not signal an essential shift in God's redemptive policy. Rather, both sign and subject were symbolic; for Jewish man-children were circumcised to prefigure the Messianic seed of promise, and once the antitype had come, the type was retired.

Anabaptism came by its name due to its belief in rebaptism. Most churches oppose this, although some Southern Presbyterians denied the validity of Roman Catholic baptism.⁵ And if Roman Catholic baptism is deemed to be invalid, then it would be easy to extend that logic to justify the rebaptism of converts from other apostate denominations.

Traditionally, opposition to rebaptism was due to the belief in baptismal regeneration, conveyed *ex opere operato*, which was held to confer an indelible mark on the soul. But if you don't subscribe to baptismal regeneration or the automatic efficacy of the sacraments, then, of course, there is no principled objection to rebaptism if the circumstances so warrant.

We need to keep in mind that both sides in this debate don't have the same investment in the outcome. If, on the one hand, a Baptist were right about the inefficacy of baptism, but wrong about its subjects, then a wrong turn would not

⁵ Cf. J. Thornwell, "The Validity of the Baptism of the Church of Rome," *Collected Writings* (Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:283-412.

be a fatal mistake. Indeed, he believes the opposing position to be more perilous because it offers the subject a false assurance of grace.

If, on the other hand, a sacramentalist were right about baptismal regeneration, then going through the wrong door could conduct the misguided soul straight down to the very pit of hell. So the sacramentalist has more at stake. The Baptist can afford to be wrong in some respects, for if the sacraments were never a means of grace, then their invalid administration doesn't deprive the subject of any essential blessing.

C. Intermediate Systems of Grace

1. Covenant Theology

Covenant theology presents a position apparently intermediate between Anabaptism and sacramental realism. According to covenant theology, the sacraments are efficacious for the elect or believers and their seed, but not for the reprobate. This argument is based in part on the parallel between infant circumcision and infant baptism. As such, it assumes the basic continuity of the Old Covenant with the New.

Such a position has the tactical advantage of being unfalsifiable, for if, say, a communicant were to fall away, then that would be consistent with saying that as a reprobate, the sacrament was never a means a grace for him; but if he remains in the faith, then that too is consistent with saying that. As one of the chosen, he was sealed by the grace of the sacrament.

But the same circularity renders the position unverifiable, for it is consistent with opposing results. I don't say this by way of criticism, for there is no particular reason why a given truth may not be circular. Truth is prior to proof. And a revealed truth needs no warrant beyond revelation itself.

But the incentive behind a mediating position lies in assuming that each of the opposing views offers some distinct advantage. Yet this compromise must draw on the same evidentiary base as sacramental realism; so that, if the case for sacramental realism is unsound, then neither is there any presumption in favor of splitting the difference. It is a solution in search of a problem.

Whether we deny the efficacy of the sacraments is in part dependent on how we construe any spiritual influence. If we regard a sacrament as an enacted allegory, then it would have the same edifying effect on the onlooker or adult subject as a fine sermon. As Charles Hodge has said,

Anything is said to be present when it operates duly on our perceiving faculties. A sensible object is present (*prae sensibus*) when it affects the

senses. A spiritual object is present when it is intellectually apprehended and when it acts upon the mind...God is present with his people when he controls their thoughts, operates on their hearts and fills them with the sense of his nearness and love. this presence is not imaginary, it is in the highest sense real and effective.⁶

At this level, there's not much material difference between Anabaptism and covenant theology—especially for adults.

But there is yet another sense in which covenant theology presents an intermediate system of grace. With its principle of federal headship, the federal head acquires a sacramental significance inasmuch as grace is channeled through the head to the junior parties to the covenant. And this operates in larger or smaller social units. The blessing is upon Abraham and his seed, but the blessing is also upon believers and their seed. And the latter supplies the warrant for infant circumcision and baptism.

Yet the sacramental relation is not efficacious across the board. Christ is a means of grace for all the elect, but Abraham and David and believing mothers and fathers are not gracious channels for all their seed.

VII. Out of the Labyrinth

By way of general summary, the relative range of choices turns on how you answer four basic questions. For some answers severely limit subsequent options. The shortest route out of the labyrinth is to opt for closed systems of action and revelation, immediate systems of grace and radically continuous or discontinuous systems of federalism.

- If you deny open revelation, then you don't have to sift through multiple sources of dogma.
- If you deny freewill, then you don't have to decide how fine to slice the gradations of human merit.
- If you deny sacramental grace, then you don't have to winnow the valid from the invalid instances.
- If you affirm the radical continuity or discontinuity of the covenants, then you don't have to draw a lot of fine distinctions.

Of course, the shortest route is not necessarily the right route. It may be a dead-end. But for critics who see *sola Scriptura* as Pandora's box or a Penelopean web, and seek refuge in Mother Church, it is important for them to realize that questions of comparative simplicity cannot be answered in isolation, and that their favored escape route is at least as circuitous as the Protestant position, and may even be a cul-de-sac.

⁶ Systematic Theology (Eerdmans, 1982), 3:637-38

We also need to avoid the danger of imposing overly abstract categories of analysis and thereby fostering artificial difficulties or disjunctions. Going back to the question of the covenants, if the NT has already hashed out some basic distinctions, such as the discontinuance of the ceremonial law, then that simplifies the operation because we have a presorted category to work with. We will still need to labor over how that yardstick applies in borderline cases, but it isn't the same as taking the measure of a position with no benchmark whatsoever. Again, the distance between memorialism and virtualism is less, even vanishingly slight, compared with the distance between either baptismal regeneration or some robust form of the Real Presence.

VIII. For Further Reading

1. Bibliology

Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction

_____, Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties

Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels

_____, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels

Bruce, The Canon of Scripture

Comfort, The Origin of the Bible

Ellis, The Making of the New Testament Documents (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Guthrie, Introduction to the New Testament

Helm, The Divine Revelation

Poythress, God-Centered Biblical Interpretation

Stonehouse, Origins of the Synoptic Gospels

Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible

2. Theology (biblical)

Clowney, The Unfolding Mystery

Kaiser, The Messiah in the Old Testament

Poythress, The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses

Robertson, The Israel of God

Sailhammer, The Pentateuch as Narrative

VanGemeren, The Progress of Redemption

Vos, Biblical Theology

_____, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews

3. Theology (systematic)

Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics

Calvin, Institutes

Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life

Hoeksema, Reformed Dogmatics

Lloyd-Jones, Great Doctrines of the Bible

Packer, Concise Theology

Turretin, Institutes

4. Theology (proper)

Frame, Doctrine of God

Helm, Eternal God

Piper, Beyond the Bounds

Ware, God's Lesser Glory

Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," Biblical and Theological Studies

Young, The Way Everlasting

5. Predestination:

Warfield, "Predestination," Biblical and Theological Studies

_____, The Plan of Salvation

6. Providence

Helm, The Providence of God

7. Soteriology

Coppes, Are Five Points Enough?

Engelsma, Hyper-Calvinism & the Call of the Gospel

Frame, Introduction to the Reformed Faith

_____, The Doctrine of God

Hoekema, Saved by Grace

Jewett, Election and Predestination

Koch, The Strife of Tongues

Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied

Nicole, Our Sovereign Savior

Piper, The Justification of God

Schreiner, Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ

_____, Still Sovereign

Vos, "The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God," Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation.

8. Sacramentology

Beckwith, "Eucharist," New Dictionary of Theology, 236-38

_____, New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 1:143-61

Murray, Christian Baptism

Warfield, "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," Studies in Theology

Welty, A Critical Evaluation of Paedobaptism

9. Eschatology:

Bock, Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond

Habermas, Beyond Death

Helm, The Last Things

Hoekema, The Bible and The Future

Poythress, *The Returning King*

Vos, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament*

Warfield,, "The Prophecies of St. Paul," *Biblical and Theological Studies*.

13. Comparative Religion

Armstrong, *Roman Catholicism*

Beckwith, *See the Gods Fall*

_____, *The New Mormon Challenge*

Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome*

Chaudhuri, *Hinduism: A Way of Life*

Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*

Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*

Kidd, *The Roman Primacy to AD 461*

Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*

Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*

Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* (1953), 10:65-85.

Spencer, *Islam Unveiled*

Von Döllinger, *The Pope and the Council*

Wills, *Papal Sin*