

Mission and Sacrament, Part II

by Abu Daoud

Principal of Sacramentality: The notion that all reality, both animate and inanimate, is potentially or in fact the bearer of God's presence and the instrument of God's saving activity on humanity's behalf.¹

Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace².

1. INTRODUCTION

In part one of this series I argued that there is much to be gained from adopting a sacramental approach to the church's mission to Muslims. I argued that there is a sacramental shape to the Christian life, lived both individually and as a community, proposing that the goal of our discipleship should be baptism precisely because that is the *kind* of confession of faith that Jesus and the Apostles asked for. They did not ask for people to send in an email (and nothing more) or for someone to raise their hand in a darkened room when only the speaker was looking around. The Kingdom of God was coming in great power; while the kingdom itself was invisible, the community that pointed to and, in some way, made present the Kingdom was not and is not invisible. When the Savior of the world came it was not in spirit only, but in the flesh; similarly, the confession indicated to enter his Kingdom is not in spirit only, but in the flesh: water baptism.

But language of sacrament makes some people very nervous. I listed some quotes from the Reformers in my previous article to indicate that a sacramental vision of Creation and human life and salvation is indeed part and parcel of Reformed Christianity. To be sacramental is not to be Roman Catholic, though to be Roman Catholic is necessarily to be sacramental; the same thing can be said for the Orthodox. The one who believes in transubstantiation is advancing one sacramental theory, one that the Reformers did not retain, while they did retain the overall sacramental understanding of religion, the human being, and indeed all of Creation.

2. WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

But what exactly do I mean by the word *sacrament*? Often, people will oppose the concept of sacrament and symbol, saying, "It is just a symbol." It is not my intent to go too deep into a general study of the theology of the sacraments, but I do want to propose that perhaps a symbol is in fact the deepest level of communication possible and that a sacrament is special, precisely because of the kind of symbol it is. The word *symbol* comes from Greek, meaning to throw two things together. In a symbol that is precisely what you have: in baptism it is the new birth and entrance into the community of that new life, and water. The two things are thrown together. In communion, a topic I will address further in this paper, it is bread and the flesh of Christ, wine and his blood. But this is what makes a sacrament different from an

¹ McBrien, Richard P., ed. *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1995), p. 1148.

² *Catechism of The Episcopal Church*, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Inc 1979) p. 857

ordinance (as some churches call them): the sacrament effectuates what it symbolizes. It makes real what it points to. The real question is this, in practical terms, when someone is baptized or takes communion - does anything happen? Is there any change in one's standing in the Kingdom of God? If one would like to answer *no*, they must deal with two difficulties:

One is that the universal witness of the primitive and early church, and medieval church, Western and Eastern, all the way up through Zwingli in 16th C that communion and baptism are indeed sacraments. If one is eager to discard the witness of the early church (and I am talking *early*, like 2nd and 3rd C.) on the grounds that it is not scriptural, then one must consider that these very sacramentalists were the ones who were, by God's divine guidance, determining which books in the New Testament would *go* into the New Testament. The common NT canon, which is used universally, was the result of the decision of the Council of Rome in 382. These church fathers are the same people who discerned by the Spirit that Hebrews and Revelation *were* inspired (many thought they were not), and that other works, though important and edifying (1 Clement and the Didache, for example) were *not* inspired. They were mostly active before Christianity became legal (Edict of Milan, issued in 313) and suffered for the faith, some with their very lives. This is not to say they were infallible but rather to make the point that if they were in error regarding the central rites of the new faith, they could well have been in error regarding its Scripture. In other words, we should adopt their theological point of view unless we have good reasons not to.

Another challenge to anti-sacramental Christianity is the question, then what happens? If we do not somehow participate in God's grace, in his love and salvation by means of physical, material things which he has chosen (again, that is the very principle underlying the incarnation—that the Son has already done this), then how *do* we participate in God's grace and salvation for us? I am not talking about charging up our grace as if it were a bank account or something like that—that is a most crude and absurd understanding of sacramentality. But the question remains, if there is nothing that happens in the Kingdom when we do these things, then nothing happens. It means that taking communion is just a reminder, a memorial. It does nothing at all that a text message or card in the mail could not.

It also means something else: it means that salvation is entirely interior and spiritual. Perhaps this is a little of the Gnostic heresy left over? For the Gnostics held that salvation was primarily a matter of secret knowledge (*gnosis*), and as I look at American evangelicalism I feel I see a strong undercurrent of Gnosticism: there is secret knowledge, there is new knowledge. The hard work of virtue and the long obedience in one direction of the faith is not nearly as attractive as the assurance that there is coming (and is here!) the next big thing, the newest in evangelical *gnosis*. Maybe it's the Prayer of Jabez, WWJD?, the next big healing ministry coming to your town, the emerging church, the emergent church, Christians who don't call themselves Christians (Bono), or what have you. Bread and wine are not sexy, they have always been used in some form or another—even when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper he was not doing anything new, he was given new meaning to something that already was very ancient: Christ our Passover lamb is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast! (1 Cor 5:7)

Without a robust sense of *meaningful* ritual, ritual that changes people and touches the deepest aspects of our beings and bodies inscribing the Gospel of Hope on our very flesh and blood, then we have half a Gospel: we have a one-sided coin, we have a message that so easily tends towards fads and seeking after the next, big thing (*gnosis*) which will finally bring us up "to the next level" (profoundly Gnostic language).

3. RITUAL, ISLAM, AND SACRAMENT

And Muslims know this. Take a look at the pillars of Islam. While Muslims do not use the language of sacrament, they certainly have the concept, though in an incomplete manner. (For ultimately the fullness of the sacramentality of Creation cannot be grasped without the incarnation). Because the sacramental principle is distorted but present in Islam, one ends up with the rather crude and instrumentalist language regarding forgiveness of sins: that if one does this or that then certain sins will be forgiven. Forgiveness in Islam is not the reconciliation of mercy and justice as it is in Christianity: it tends more towards a sort of randomness and, some might say, capriciousness on the part of Allah. The two are related of course. Because there is no reconciliation of justice and mercy in a body—a human body which is “sacrificed for us” and “takes away the sins of the world”—there can be nothing higher than capriciousness which oscillates between mercy and justice without really dealing with either of them in a concrete way.

Nevertheless Islam is filled with rituals and there can be no doubt that through these concrete rituals—and much attention is given to form—mercy and forgiveness can be earned, though one is seldom assured that they have been imparted. To bring a person from Islam into Christianity is to bring them from one set of signs and symbols into another. This is true even if we are using the phraseology of the Kingdom of God and Islamic vocabulary. Islam already has a ritual washing which is performed by devout Muslims quite frequently. Baptism is an alternate ritual washing, performed once.

The community of the Kingdom of God has a ritual meal which is celebrated on a regular basis by those who have made the required confession of faith (in baptism). It is not a sacrifice of a living animal, as is the Islamic ritual sacrifice-meal (Eid al Adha); also, it is performed more often (in Acts daily, and until the 16th C. weekly). The Islamic sacrificial meal is a memorial of a grand sacrifice provided by Allah whereby Abraham’s son was spared: it and the meal celebrate and recall filial obedience. The ritual sacrifice-meal among the subjects of the Kingdom is similar, but not identical. For one, it is always a participation, a going-back-to and a reliving of *one* sacrifice that was made at a specific point in time (under Pontius Pilate) in a specific way (he was crucified, dead, and buried) on a given hill near Zion. There too is a theme of filial obedience. In the Quran the son of Abraham knows ahead of time that his father will kill him, unlike in the Genesis narrative. Yet he goes with him to meet this fate. In a more dramatic and lengthier narrative we have a similar story in the Gospels. But the ultimate end of the sacrifice is not only obedience for the sake of obedience, but obedience for the sake of reconciling all Creation to God. Another way to put it is this: to preserve the justice and mercy of God through the sacrament of Jesus’ body.

At this point I want to shift to a discussion of what to me is a very important paper entitled ‘Some Theological and Hermeneutical Developments of the Earliest Eucharist: Discerning a Case for Contextual Theology’, by Joseph D. Galgalo³. Dr. Galgalo makes several fascinating points, not all of which I will mention. In short, he posits that Paul’s theology of the Eucharist is itself an example of cultural contextualization among the pagan-background believers (PBB’s) he has evangelized. He proposes a discontinuity between the fellowship meal celebrated in the Jewish-Messianic congregations in Palestine and the (largely) PBB congregations in Europe and Asia Minor. This in itself is quite important because it would make of Christianity’s central ritual a contextualization in itself: “The Eucharist evolved from a social meal into a central meal into a central rite of their worship, fulfilling an essential role in their divine-human relationship. It successfully provided a ‘functional equivalent’ to the traditional [pagan] sacrifices” (Galgalo 3).

³ The entire text is available from the Henry Martyn Center’s site at www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk [accessed by this author on July 5, 2008]

But my main interest in his paper, for our purposes here, is in terms of missiology and ritual. We should understand first of all that missionaries working out of the Reformation/evangelical tradition have already started with a tradition that, while not necessarily biblical, devalues ritual in general, and thus also Communion. “The legacy of the Reformation is that the ritual dimension of worship, which had intricately evolved around the offering of the Eucharist in the early church, was greatly undervalued...” (*ibid.*) He then goes on to explain that its value was reduced either to one of symbolism or testimony of a salvation already achieved, or a memorial of an historical event (and not *more* than that).

4. THE SACRIFICIAL MEAL, LINGUICITY, THE COMMUNITY

Galgalo is working (I believe) in Kenya, and his concern in terms of contemporary missiology is not Arab Muslims. But his next point is absolutely key in terms of his own community and the Arab Muslim world as well: many converts *do not find* a functional equivalency of their rituals in the Christian (or Messianic, semi-Islamic) faith they have adopted, so they revert to their original faith. Who can look at the way that evangelicals celebrate (if one can call it that) the Lord’s Supper and make the claim that it can in any way compare to the actual slaughtering of a living creature on Eid al Adha? Especially once it is explained that the Lord’s Supper is simply a symbol that in itself does not bear any unique divine activity. It is clear that our wine is vinegar, and is not preferable to the water they have been drinking for centuries. Our departure from the very human language of ritual “causes a confusion, which blurs an otherwise clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular” (*ibid.*).

In fact, the suppression of Communion *qua* sacrifice and the desire for a functional equivalent of sacrifice have in quite an obvious way resulted in the stealth-invention of a new sacrifice-ritual among evangelicals: the altar call. It is ironic that a central part of the controversy during the Reformation was to insist on calling it a “table” instead of an “altar”. The former denoted a fellowship meal and a sort of “intimacy” which has led to us calling Jesus simply Jesus, with no honorifics (something horrific to our Muslim friends). But the meagerness of our ritual language and our purgation of sacrificial imagery from the central sacrificial context of the Eucharist, instituted by our Lord himself, has led on the one hand to a sort of semi-Gnostic pilgrimage to the latest Christian fad, but also, because the ritual sacrifice is in our very marrow, to the invention of our own ritual—the altar call. So it is, in churches which have no altars and do not call the Eucharist a sacrifice of any kind, that people walk up to the altar (aka, stage) and offer themselves up to God, or ask for his grace to overcome some temptation or sickness or struggle, or ask for the grace of salvation, or what have you.

Is this not more appropriately done as *part* of the original call to the altar which is called Communion? Would that not be a more integral and, indeed, honest way of dealing with the topic? And would it not present us with a much more robust and meaningful beginning of a functional equivalent for our dear Muslim friends who know well the language and act of sacrifice? We *have* the one sacrifice that gives meaning to all others: behold our Passover is sacrificed for us! The concept of love is built around sacrifice. In fact, a willingness to sacrifice one’s own comfort or good for another *is* love (Jn 15:13). That is why Allah does not and, in fact, is metaphysically incapable of loving. Because he has nothing to sacrifice there is nothing he can give or anything that he can do that would subtract from his own greatness and self-sufficiency.

Because these things are true, followers of Jesus have been equipped with the most robust and meaningful language of sacrifice possible. It is memorial because it recalls the past; it is empowerment because through it we are empowered by God for the present; it is eschatological because through it we announce the return of the Messiah; it is individual because we offer up to God our own lives and efforts and thoughts, uniting our offering with Christ’s; it is communal because we all together are one body and one bride. It is receptive because God feeds us through it, both by physically feeding our bodies and by spiritually feeding our souls. It is donative because through it we give to God our “sacrifice of

thanksgiving and praise” and “a living sacrifice” of our own bodies, not to mention a humble offering of bread and wine.

The ritual language of worship, whose apogee is Communion—at least for Christians—has other significant roles. It reminds us of who we are and our place in a community. This is another aspect of Eastern life that rubs against the egalitarianism of Westerners today. But it was that way in 1st C. Palestine, just like it is that way in 21st C. Middle East today. The regimentation of society and the awareness that some roles are limited to certain kinds of people are unpopular in the West. Because of this you have gay marriage and women serving as pastors, priests, and bishops. Western society—and evangelicalism is profoundly Western, even in places like Jordan and Egypt and Nigeria—has always been very puzzled by the Levitical food laws. One of the main principles in those laws is that animals that do not clearly belong to one and only one category are unclean. The identification of categories of persons is also an important function of our ritual language. And let me here repeat that one cannot *avoid* ritual language. You have it because we are human beings and because ritual is part of the fabric of what it means to be human. You can either try to cultivate a ritual that balances the heritage of Christianity with the local culture, or you can ignore ritual and thereby (probably) end up with a bad ritual.

Ritual has places for different people doing different things: not just anyone can bless the bread or hand it out; not just anyone can preach the sermon. Traditionally—and this is a tradition which is very reasonable in my view—only an elder or an elder with oversight (bishop) can bless the bread and wine; a deacon can not. On the other hand, any ordained minister can baptize; that does include deacons. In exceptional circumstances, any person can be the baptizer. Another example: only a bishop can lay his hands on a man and recognize and affirm for the Church his calling to be a deacon or an elder/priest. If this all seems very petrified and legalistic, we should remember the reason these rules came into being - accountability. If just anyone can preach, ordain, break the bread or baptize, then do you have any capability whatsoever for accountability among followers of Jesus?

Accountability seems like it was a very important principal to our Lord as we find in Matthew 18, which is one of the two verses in the Synoptic Gospels where we have Jesus saying the word *ekklesia*. Moreover, a community that did not have the kind of structure that allowed for accountability and discipline could in no way have produced the New Testament Canon. Rather, today we would have simply what we had in, say, the 2nd. Century. Some churches had and used Hebrews, others did not; same with 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation, and so on. Without some kind of accountability and unity that reaches beyond congregationalism in an institutional way there is, to put it simply, no New Testament. Everyone would judge on his or her own which books he or she felt were Apostolic and inspired, and that would be his or her Bible. The New Testament Canon developed in the same milieu where these rules about who could do what developed, and for similar reasons.

Our ritual language can and should speak of our commitment to accountability by identifying who is doing what. The elders of the church have a position that others do not have. There is a hierarchy, with Christ at its top. It is not a hierarchy of value or holiness, though one would hope that ministers would be increasingly mature and devout disciples. It reflects an ordering of society that is very much at home in the Arab world. It is structured, but accountable. It is local, but connected to the catholic, pan-ethnic fabric of the Body. It is contextualized, but the essence is preserved. Without the language of ritual it is not possible to maintain these things in balance over the long term because “faith that lacks a ritual dimension is only a step far from secularism” (Galgal 3).

5. CONCLUSION

I have, in this second paper in this series on Mission and Sacrament in the Muslim world, proposed that evangelicalism, while—Praise be to God!—having the energy to engage in this rather difficult part of the mission field, is ill-suited when it comes to communicating the Gospel in terms of the language of ritual which is part of the very marrow of Islam. I have proposed that evangelism, even if one includes C5 folks, must sooner or later address questions of ritual, specifically that of the ritual washing and the sacrificial meal. I have argued, using Galgalo's paper, that ritual is indispensable and that to fully evangelize *is to sacramentalize*. Without the sacramental and ritual impartation of an awareness of the new reality of the Kingdom of God, evangelism is incomplete.

I have suggested that the early church provides us with some guidelines in terms of a framework of how this reality looks in terms of hierarchy—something that will be particularly offensive to many Westerners. I have also mentioned the well-known principle that the ritual language must at once be local and catholic, contextualized and universal.

But what I have *not* done is answer the question posed by Galgalo (p.3): How best can the 'Eucharistic sacrifice' be interpreted 'contextually' in a way that it may provide a 'functional equivalent' for communities who, on accepting Christianity, are leaving behind a 'ritual key' into the understanding of the world? That is a project with which I hope to engage in a future issue.