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The Theological Basis of the Teaching on the Lord's Supper in the North India Plan

R. H. S. BOYD

'Though the Lord's Supper has been a matter of great debate in inter-Church discussions, curiously enough, the section concerning it in the Plan of Church Union for North India and Pakistan has been spared from controversy.' So wrote a Baptist, the Rev. E. L. Wenger, in *Church Union News and Views* in August, 1957. Since then, however, the teaching of the Plan on the Lord's Supper has come under criticism from a number of quarters, on the grounds of its being ultra-Catholic, or rather near Roman in tendency, and of its not having sufficient Protestant, evangelical safeguards written into it.

The clauses which have been specially attacked may be listed as follows:

1. 'Shewing forth, and pleading before the Father, Christ's sacrifice once for all offered; invoking Christ's merits for the whole Church . . .' (Plan, Chapter VI, 16 (c)).

2. 'Presenting ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice to God' (VI, 16 (d)).

3. 'Confirmed by the Holy Spirit, they (i.e. believers) all have the rights and duties of a priesthood of believers, *offering to God in and with the Son* the sacrifice of themselves and all their powers' (VII, 1).

4. In addition, it has been objected that the Eucharistic Theology of the Plan is closely modelled on that of the Report of the Lambeth Conference of 1958, and that that, in turn, has no sound evangelical or Reformed basis. It is argued that, because the Plan does not expressly forbid certain 'Romanizing' practices, these practices will, in the coming United Church, be not only tolerated, but positively encouraged.

The question therefore arises, and it is indeed a very serious one, 'Is the teaching of the Plan on the Lord's Supper, particularly as formulated in the six "recommended elements" mentioned in Chapter VI, 16, consistent with Reformed teaching and practice?'

I believe that it can be shown, by reference to the works of the Reformers themselves, as well as later Reformed theologians,

that the eucharistic teaching here outlined is not only thoroughly Reformed, but that it follows a pattern which should in fact be found, explicitly or implicitly, in every true Reformed Communion Service.

Let us deal in turn with the various points at issue.

1. (a) '*Shewing forth, and pleading before the Father, Christ's sacrifice once for all offered*'

The expression 'pleading before the Father' has been criticized, on the grounds that this turning of the action towards the Father paves the way for a sacrificial theory of the eucharist. 'Why must the sacrifice be pleaded? Is the Father not satisfied?' it is asked.

In *A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland* (Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick, revised by Torrance and Selby Wright, 1960) we read, 'This it is which we plead; that Christ has died and that his Death prevails and has put away sin. *There is a pleading*; but there is no repetition, no continuing, of Christ's "sacrifice for sins"' (p. 31, italics mine). The same Manual (p. 40) quotes with approval the words of William Bright's well-known hymn, which expresses the need of turning to God as we commemorate the Death of Christ:

'... And having with us Him that pleads above,
We here present, we here spread forth to Thee
That only offering perfect in Thine eyes,
The one, true, pure, immortal sacrifice.'

(Revised Church Hymnary No. 320).

The idea of pleading is explicitly set forth in the *Order for the Celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* in the *Book of Common Order* of the Church of Scotland (published by authority of the General Assembly, 1940 and 1952):

'Wherefore, having in remembrance the work and passion of our Saviour Christ, and *pleading his eternal sacrifice*, we thy servants do set forth this memorial, which He has commanded us to make . . .'

(b) *Invoking Christ's merits for the whole Church*

It is argued that this phrase can be interpreted to mean the summoning of Christ's merits for the benefit of the dead as well as the living, since 'the whole Church' means the whole company in heaven and on earth.

The phrase is undoubtedly one which sounds somewhat unfamiliar, perhaps even ominous, in Reformed ears. Its background is the wording of the prayer after Communion in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer of 1662:

'We, thy humble servants, entirely desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise

and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching Thee to grant, that by the *merits* and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, *we and all thy whole Church* may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.'

That undoubtedly represents the meaning and intention of the phrase, and there is nothing unreformed about it. A similar prayer appears in the Church of Scotland *Book of Common Order* :

... 'and we beseech Thee mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, as, in fellowship with all the faithful in heaven and on earth, we pray Thee to fulfil in us, and in all men, the purpose of thy redeeming love.'

Presbyterians dislike the word 'merit', but surely not when it is used in its proper sense, of the merits of Christ. We can compare the hymn of Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769):

O Thou Fount of blessing,
Purify my spirit,
Trusting only in Thy merit.

(R.C.H. 234).

And, indeed, what is expressed or intended in this phrase other than the Shorter Catechism definition of a Sacrament? :

'A Sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein by sensible signs, *Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed and applied to believers.*'

2. *Presenting ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a living sacrifice to God*

No one can quarrel with the meaning of these words, which are taken from Romans 12:1. People are, however, troubled about the position in which such a prayer is to appear in the Communion Service.

As to the necessity of such an element in the Communion Service, let us hear Calvin:

'Under the other kind of sacrifice, which we have called eucharistic, are included all the offices of charity . . . in fine, all our prayers, praises, thanksgivings, and every act of worship which we perform to God. All these depend on *the greater sacrifice, with which we dedicate ourselves, soul and body, to be a holy temple to the Lord* . . . This is so necessary to the Church that it cannot be dispensed with' (Inst. IV, xviii, 13, 16).

With regard to the position of this prayer in the service, we should remember that practice varies, and the Plan is silent. The

Anglican Prayer Book of 1662 places the prayer after the Communion (the position favoured by 'Evangelicals'), whereas in the *Book of Common Order* of the Church of Scotland it appears as part of the prayer of Consecration, in the very position to which the critics object. The Plan merely suggests that this element should be included, and to this suggestion, following Calvin, Presbyterians should gladly agree. It is in fact more than likely that in any form of service evolved in North India the practice of the Church of South India will be followed here. That Church's order places the prayer *after* Communion in the position preferred by the defenders of Protestantism.

3. '*... offering to God in and with the Son the offering of themselves and all their powers*'

Commenting on this clause from Chapter VII of the Plan ('The Priesthood of all Believers'), an opponent writes: 'An underlying idea appears to be that as the presbyter or priest offers the eucharistic sacrifice so the people offer to God "in and *with the Son*" the sacrifice of themselves and all their powers.' This is a spurious comparison, whose first member, 'as the presbyter or priest offers the eucharistic sacrifice', would appear to be a misrepresentation of the Plan. The word 'priest' is not used at all in the Plan, except of Christ, and of the Priesthood of all believers, nor is the word 'offer' in the sense of a presbyter 'offering' a sacrifice. In this criticism a piece of Roman doctrine has been taken and inserted into the Plan where it has no business to be.

The second member of the comparison does, however, merit attention. Is it legitimate to say, as the Plan does, that the people 'offer to God in and *with the Son* the sacrifice of themselves and all their powers'?

I believe that the Reformed answer to this question is an unequivocal 'Yes'. Romans 12:1 gives us our scriptural warrant for offering ourselves to God. Calvin also, as we have seen above, stresses the necessity of our self-offering. Further light on the question is shed by D. M. Baillie's book, *The Theology of the Sacraments*.

'And so', he writes, 'in our Church of Scotland *Book of Common Order* in the Prayer of Consecration, after we have asked God to sanctify the bread and wine to be the communion of the body and blood of Christ, and have offered to God our sacrifice of thanksgiving, we go on to *offer ourselves*: "And here we offer and present to Thee . . ."' (p. 115).

That brings us to the phrase '*in and with the Son*'. Prof. Baillie writes:

'Let us remember that we could not do this at all but for Christ: that we can only make an offering in union with Christ's eternal sacrifice. Our prayers are unworthy, *we* are unworthy, our praises are unworthy.'

How then can we offer ourselves, our prayers and praises to God? We can do it only through Christ' (p. 116).

And here is Calvin:

'For we do not appear in the presence of God with our oblations without an intercessor. Christ is our Mediator *through whom we offer ourselves* and all that we have to the Father. He is our High Priest, who, having entered into the celestial sanctuary, opens the way of access for us. He is our altar, upon which we place our oblations, that whatever we venture we may venture *in Him*' (Inst. IV, 18, 17).

We may compare also Calvin's answer, in his Catechism (Q. 43) to the question, 'What is the purpose of his (Christ's) priestly office?'

'... through him there is opened up for us a way to the Father, so that with boldness we may come into his presence, and *ourselves also offer in sacrifice to him ourselves* and all we have. And in this way *he makes us his colleagues in the priesthood*' (Heb. 7, 8, 9, 10, 13).

Barth's comment on this is as follows:

'Just as we can fight against and suffer anything because Christ is King, so we are able *to be* before God, to be reconciled with him, and to offer ourselves in sacrifice, because Christ is priest. We have become 'acceptable', which we were not in ourselves. And, *in Christ, we are in the state of offering something that God can accept from our hand*' (Barth, *The Faith of the Church*, Fontana Books, p. 58).

4. Finally we come to the identification of the theology of the Plan with that of the Lambeth Report, which incidentally was drafted *after* the publication of the Plan. 'Here it is claimed', writes a critic, quoting from the Lambeth Report, 'that the partakers participate in the one sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifice is once for all, but though it cannot be repeated *it is not merely a past fact, but the revelation of eternal truth*. In communion we offer our praises and thanksgiving for Christ's sacrifice for us "and, so *present it again* and ourselves *in Him* before the Father".'

Let me make it quite clear that these sentences have nothing whatever to do with the Plan, which must be judged on its own merits. My concern is to defend the sacramental teaching of the Plan, not that of the Lambeth Conference. But behind this line of argument there is the dangerous and unscriptural presupposition that good Presbyterians cannot possibly unite with people who hold doctrines approved by Lambeth. And this is simply

not so. Even in this particular case, which has no doubt been chosen to terrify us, the Lambeth statements can quite easily be paralleled from Reformed sources, despite all efforts to show them in a Romanized light. Consider the following:

(a) *On the eternal sacrifice:*

'May we not say something like this: that in the sacrament, Christ Himself being truly present, He unites us by faith with his eternal sacrifice, that we may plead and receive its benefits and offer ourselves in prayer and praise to God' (Baillie, op. cit., p. 118).

'What now, we may ask, is the doctrine of sacrifice in the Eucharist? This is not mentioned in our standards, but is implicit in the words of the consecration prayer contained in the *Book of Common Order*. The determinative words are "pleading his eternal sacrifice, we thy servants do set forth this memorial". The Scottish rite lays emphasis not upon "the oblation once offered", though this, of course, is there in recollection and theology, but specifically upon *the eternal quality of our Lord's sacrifice*: it happened once for all in time, but it belongs to eternity where He continually presents Himself before the Father. Similarly, the Eucharist is of eternity, and when we plead "His eternal sacrifice", we desire Him to *unite our offering and prayers with His*, which is eternal, and "this memorial" in time and space is a part of that eternal memorial. His sacrifice is *not repeatable*, but is *continually renewed*' (W. D. Maxwell in *Ways of Worship*, Lund Conference, 1952, p. 115).

Maxwell compares the well-known words of Paraphrase 35:

My broken body thus I give
For you, for all; take, eat, and live;
And oft the sacred rite renew
Which brings my wondrous love to view.

(b) *On 'presenting' Christ's unique sacrifice*

We have already had occasion to quote Bright's hymn:

We here *present*, we here spread forth to Thee
That only offering perfect in thine eyes,
The one, true, pure, immortal sacrifice.

D. M. Baillie quotes a sentence from an Eastern Orthodox theologian, Nicolas Arseniev:

'Our eucharist is the true *representation* of His true and continuous sacrifice, once for all time offered on the earth, on Golgotha, and perpetually *presented* to the Father on our behalf in eternity.' 'Is there a great

gulf', asks Baillie, 'between that and what we Presbyterians can say when we speak of making our oblations of worship of God and offering ourselves to Him in the sacrament, showing forth Christ's eternal sacrifice and pleading his benefits?' (op. cit., p. 119).

'Presentation' or 'representation' (=re-presentation, making present again) are not expressions which Presbyterians are usually inclined to use. But let us be quite clear that they are completely different in meaning from the Roman idea of 'repetition' of the sacrifice of Christ, or of the 're-immolation' of Christ. Their implication is the 'showing forth', the 'making present' of the sacrifice once offered. A Reformed theologian from Holland, G. van der Leeuw, has written:

'The idea of re-presentation as it is advocated in many circles nowadays, Roman Catholic as well as Anglican and Lutheran, seems to present some perspectives for a future development of sacramental theology for the Reformed Churches also' (*Ways of Worship*, p. 229).

In these concluding paragraphs I have attempted to show that the ecumenical debate, of which the North India Plan is a living part, is a process of growth in mutual understanding, based on a deep study of the Bible and of the theological issues involved. To use D. M. Baillie's words once more:

'I want to suggest that apart from the Church of Rome, which remains entirely outside the World Council of Churches, the difference between the Churches on the question of eucharistic sacrifice may not be so extreme as is often supposed' (op. cit., p. 108).

(And do not let us forget that the words 'eucharistic sacrifice' have Calvin's *Imprimatur* as we have seen). Theology cannot be static if we wish the Church to remain *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Men of the Reformed tradition take their stand on the Scriptures, and should not be afraid to join hands with others who demonstrate that their understanding of Scripture is not repugnant to their own.

The primary purpose of this article, however, has been to demonstrate that the sacramental teaching outlined in the six points of Chapter VI, paragraph 16, of the Plan of Union, is fully consistent with Reformed teaching on the sacraments. There are undoubted difficulties in the Plan for those of the Reformed tradition, but they concern the unification of the Ministry rather than the Sacramental teaching of the Plan. It seems to me that the six points stated in the Plan, confirmed as they are by liturgies of such different provenance as the Scottish *Book of Common Order* and the new Prayer Book of the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, are a valuable guide for the development of sacramental theology and practice in the coming Church of North India, and thoroughly 'Reformed' in the truest sense of the word.