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THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE HOLY SACRAMENTS

Within Protestant circles there is no area of Christian experience which is left more to ignorance and anemic appreciation than the phenomena of the Holy Sacraments. 'Sacramental' discussion usually revolves about whether or not the bread and wine are symbols or exact replicas or true manifestations of the body and blood, or whether complete immersion has greater validity than sprinkling, and the like. The level of discussion reveals, as no further critical comments need to, the weak conception which Protestants profess concerning the meaning of the Sacraments.

Now one would certainly ~~wanting~~ be making a bold and audacious assertion if he would claim to have something real on this subject which would lift it, from the point of view of man's understanding, out of the mire and into conscious appreciation. The writer makes no such audacious assertion. However, he regrets and laments the current situation enough that he is endeavoring to write a few words on the subject. Perhaps others reading this brief study will discover weak points in the writer's presentation. A pointing out of these weak points will aid the over-all project: that of setting forth a meaningful doctrine of the Holy Communion, in touch with reality, and relevant to today's view of the world around us.

We begin with the self, with our own 'selves'. We know that the self is comprised of two 'parts' which can never be detached from one another but which, for the purpose of discussion and critical examination, can be abstracted. These two 'parts' which comprise the self are the objective structure, the part of the self which appears to the other selves (the body, carcass, outer framework, etc.) and the inner being (that which is non-objectivisable, the personality, the ego, the self itself). The inner self never appears to another person. It cannot be objectivised, but can be known only analogically, for example, as one knows his own self he can by analogy create a picture of the other person's inner self. But the objective structure, the carcass part of the self, the outer structure, is the means of communication between the inner beings of two or more individuals. I, for example, see you cry. A bit of your inner being is known to me in this way, for, through the medium of your objective structure on which tears are laden, I can by analogy create a picture of your inner being, for I know what happens on the inside of me when tears can be seen on the outside, etc.

Now let us say, and this is possible, that as two people stand facing each other, that one has some sort of feeling toward the other. On the inside of him—in his inner being—there is present some attitude or approach or feeling or intention with respect to the other individual. But this intention or attitude, etc., is only on the inside. The other person never knows for he is never sure and does not possess knowledge of the intentions of the other person's inner being. The intention or attitude, etc., is lodged with the inner being, or the non-objectivisable self.

In order for the other person to have any consciousness of the exact attitude or intention which is lodged within the non-objectivisable self, there must be some kind of outer expression. This is self-evident: if the intention is non-objectivisably real, it can be real with respect to the other individual only if in some way it can be objectivised. If I, for example, have as an attitude toward you a genuine inner love for you, you will never^{know} about this love until I 'attach' this inner feeling to something on my outward objective structure so that it will be an objective fact for you. (You are not capable, except by analogy, of reading my inner being's intention concerning you!) If I love you, for example, you will know it only when I've expressed this inner attitude in a concrete way by telling you so, by giving you a squeeze, by devoting my life to you, and the like. In fewer words, an inner intention of the essential self can never be realized by him to whom the intention is directed (because of the nature of our make-up) until this intention takes a concrete form and appears in an objective way in terms the other person can experience concretely and objectively.

Let us apply this to God, or rather, to our feeble understanding of Him, as He is related to the Holy Sacraments. Now God, a personal God, has an intention or a will concerning man. God has an inner nature—"I am Who I am"—or an essence which is non-objectivisable. If this is all there were man would know nothing about God (except perhaps that which could be inferred analogically and weakly from man's understanding of himself). But man never knows God's intention or will concerning man until God expresses this inner will for man in a concrete way so that man can receive it in a concrete and objective form. In fewer words, God's inner nature or inner intention for man, God's Will, is manifested to man in a deed, or an act, or (the comprehensive term) in the Word. It is significant that in ~~trans~~ paraphrasing John 1:1—"In the beginning was the Word"—J. B. Phillips has it: "At the beginning God expressed Himself." In other words, the term "Word" might be an equation for the "Expression of God," the expression of God's real self which is in turn an expression of God's will concerning man.

This expression of God might be termed a 'will' or a 'testament' concerning man which would indicate a particular, expressed, divine intention concerning man. God expresses Himself toward man by manifesting His inner intention in the form of a promise or a will or a testament.

Abraham, for example, was told by God (as God expressed his inner intent concerning man) that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This was God's promise, God's expression of Himself, to Abraham. And as the New Testament relates, Abraham's reception of the promise was 'reckoned unto him for righteousness.' The receiving of the promise comprised the basis of Abraham's salvation.

But God's self expression is not objectivised only in terms of a statement of promise concerning the future blessing of the nations of the earth. God's self expression also comes in the form of a Gospel which is made objective and concrete by preaching or writing. In this sense the Bible is the Word of God, but only is it that Word if it brings to reality the inner nature, or God Himself, who uses the written word as a medium through which and by which He expresses Himself.

Christ Himself is the Word of God, the self-expression of God. He is the Word, the Living Word. He it is who reveals in a concrete, human, objective way God's intent concerning man, that God loves man so much that He sent His Son to die so that man might live (which is a living expression of the Gospel which is an expression of God's attitude concerning man which is an expression of God's inner nature which is an expression of God Himself).

God may express Himself in a variety of ways. But because God's self expression is based upon the eternal, immutable, unchangeable, and unwaveringly steady inner nature of God, the expression, though coming under many forms, always possesses the same content. The same inner nature is being expressed, but in various ways of objectivity.

The people of Jesus' day were able to experience objectively and concretely the very person of Jesus Christ, God's Word, or the Self-Expression of God. John states in the Epistle: "that which was from the beginning, that which our hands have handled, our eyes have seen," etc., indicating the objectivized way and personal way in which God was being expressed. But we today are in much the same situation as was Abraham. We must rely upon the very promise of God. We can't experience Jesus Christ, or the Word, in an objective physical way. Christ no longer walks the earth in bodily form. But we have been given the Promise, as Abraham received the Promise, and the Promise comprises the Gospel, and the Gospel concerns Christ, and all are a form in which God is expressing Himself toward man.

Now the Holy Communion and Baptism fit into this scheme. We talk of the Real Presence in Communion and of how Baptism really isn't Baptism unless the Word is connected with the water. The principle is the same. This same God Who in His inner nature has an intention concerning man expresses this intention in a concrete way through the medium of the bread and wine, and through the medium of the water. In truth, through the sacrament God Himself is truly present. God reveals Himself. God is there. The bread and wine are the instruments or the media God uses in order to express Himself to man. They are instruments, but they are also the very expression of God, God Himself: "This is my body; this is my blood! God's inner nature and attitude or will concerning man is expressed in this objective, concrete way in man's own experience.

But revelation is not the sole factor involved in this self-expression. In addition to receiving an expression of God, God Himself, man also is given the forgiveness of sins, the washing of regeneration, the very cleansing which is necessary for salvation.

This needs to be reworked and expanded. It is unfinished — just wanted to put my thoughts on paper.