

Christ the Sacrament for the World

Autor(en): **Bieder, Werner**

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Christ the Sacrament for the World

Lecture given at the University of Ghana, Legon/Accra, 21 November, 1962.

a. There are chance events in Church History which find their explanation much later. Such a chance event happened in the earliest Latin-speaking Church, that of North Africa; the Latin word *sacramentum* was used there to translate the Greek word *μυστήριον*. This translation marked the beginning of the so-called sacramentalism in the Church. The term “sacramentum” meant originally a soldier’s oath or solemn promise, and Tertullian applied it to the baptismal vow. But afterwards sacraments were understood as holy observances, holy rites, especially those which were commanded in the New Testament. This has been a decisive change in understanding: no more a person in his solemn promise stands in the middle but holy rites which perhaps could automatically become effective in themselves.

b. The title of my lecture is as follows: “Christ the Sacrament for the World.” I have come to the decision that we are called up in the Churches of to-day to end the long age of sacramentalism and to come back to Christ himself as the Sacrament for the world, or in other words: that we are called back to the original meaning of the term “sacramentum”: “solemn promise”. We are bound to employ this original meaning of the term “sacramentum”, first for Christ, secondly for the Christians.

The Reformed Churches have reduced the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church to two: Baptism and the Holy Communion. The question arises whether we are allowed and authorized by the New Testament to speak of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as the two “sacraments” of the Lord. The Greek word *μυστήριον* which has been translated by the Latin word “sacramentum” is by no means used for the actions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. On the contrary: each passage in which *μυστήριον*

occurs contains a message which more or less directly announces *Jesus Christ standing on the barrier between the Church and the World* in readiness to go out as the missionary agent in his Spirit, and to call up his brotherly coworkers in the world, to go with him this way.

c. Before treating the most important texts of the New Testament, let us clarify the distinction between the sacrament or mystery of Christ and the Mystery Religions. There are many points which might be mentioned. Let me confine myself to one point: in the mystery religions there is a separation between the consecrated and the unconsecrated people. This separation is made clear by the commandment to the consecrated ones to be silent. In the circle of the consecrated people a "holy word" used to be heard but the holiness of this word was shown by the fact that only the consecrated people could and might hear it. An Attic orator of the 5th century B.C. denotes the transgression of this commandment to be silent as "sin". We have a closed circle of people who experience the cultic representation of a god who reveals himself in the holy drama, in the presentation of the holy symbols and formulas and who unites himself with all those who are consecrated. The purpose of this silent attitude was to shelter the "holy" actions of a god which could, so it was thought, suffer profanation (e.g. by an unauthorized imitation or by the aping of the holy celebration). Against that in the Christian belief it is not feared that the holy word of Christ could be damaged when it is spoken out however frankly and freely it is declared. Christ remained Christ even when he became flesh so that we could speak of the "holy profanation" of the Word of God. When therefore, as we shall see, barriers exist between the Church and the World (and they do exist), these barriers are given to the Church in order that they may be broken down by him who stands there: "For he is our peace who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2, 14). And when in the Christian Church the commandment to be silent has an ethical value—especially in the fight against the loquacity amongst the members of the Church and sometimes as a liturgical exercise—this silence can never become a prohibition to proclaim the mystery to the whole world. On the contrary: we shall see that even the mystery or sacrament of Christ itself tends to become a widely known reality because the whole world is and remains invited by Christ to use the free passage which has been created by Christ.

2.

Let us look now into the *New Testament* in order to see the barriers and Jesus Christ as their conqueror.

a. In the parable chapter, Matth. 13, 11, Jesus Christ is seen as the parable-teller who reveals and veils the fact that God's Kingdom has come in his person and the messianic era has started in Him. Therefore Jesus stands on the barrier between knowing and unknown, *between understanding people and stubborn people*: «To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given.»

b. Especially Israel has become the people of stubbornness. Paul sees the existence of the *unbelieving Israel* as "a mystery" (Rom. 11, 25). He sees it because he believes in the Deliverer who will come from Zion to save all Israel (Rom. 11, 26): in his final history Christ removes the barrier which the unbelieving Israel represents and reveals the bright side of this mystery.

c. Israel possesses the Old Testament as its holy book. But it doesn't understand it because it is blind to the prophetic character of its holy book. It doesn't see that the Old Testament participates in the revelation in Jesus Christ and begins to speak in the missionary work amongst the pagans: so God stands on the *barrier between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible Old Testament*. The Old Testament becomes clear for those who wish to live obediently by his grace together with the pagans: "The revelation of the mystery, kept secret for long ages is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations according to the command of the eternal God to bring about obedience to the faith" (Rom. 16, 25f.).

d. Not only Israel and the Old Testament but also Jesus Christ himself on the cross and the message of this cross is named "mystery" by Paul (1 Cor. 2, 1). The *cross of Jesus* signifies the *stumbling-block* for Jews and Gentiles who, like Simon the magician and like Elymas the sorcerer, wouldn't know this mystery because they didn't love God (1 Cor. 2, 9). In distinction to the gnostics who made disorder in the Church, wanted to go beyond the message of the crucified Lord and gathered a circle of perfect ones around their leaders Paul declared the Gospel of Christ as a mystery which hidden in God has been revealed in the Church in order that the whole world may know this mystery.

e. The word about Christ's cross unfolds itself in single "mysteries" (1 Cor. 4, 1), and these mysteries are manifestations of love towards the brothers. He who is called to be a steward of God's mysteries removes the *barrier of unkindness* which (1 Cor. 13, 2) is castigated (mysteries without love), and in speaking he becomes a brother to his fellowmen. It is not the power of love itself which strengthens the Christian to this helping act towards the neighbour but Christ himself who in opening the heavenly treasure (Col. 2, 3) gives out all that what his believers need, especially the right word of announcement (Col. 4, 3) which will be a word of love and kindness, and indeed the Church is called to pray for this. The *mystery of lawlessness* (= unkindness) is overcome through the victory of the Gospel (2. Thess. 2, 7). So Christ doesn't only explain the Old Testament in the Church of the new covenant but he gives the word of proclamation to the Gentiles. He stands on the *barrier between the devastating power of unkindness and the power of the divine love* as the expected destroyer of the Antichrist (2. Thess. 2, 8).

f. This is more fully unfolded in the Letter to the Ephesians. According to this letter—which the older Paul may have written!—the *mystery* is the *godly will to unite Jews and Gentiles in the same body of Christ*. This mystery has been revealed to the apostle Paul and to his coworkers in order that the whole Church supported by the apostles and the prophets may proclaim Jesus Christ in the world which is seen as the battle-field against the powers and principalities (Eph. 6, 12). Christ the content of the mystery stands on the *barrier between Church and World* giving courage to his Church to call men to faith and to fight against the dark powers. This mystery must be revealed and understood, and the Church is called up to pray for understanding so that many people become able to remove the barrier of misunderstanding (Eph. 6, 18).

g. In the early Christian song of confession (1. Tim. 3, 16) the "*mystery of Christianity*" unfolds so that the way of salvation is the *mission of Jesus Christ*:

He was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Appeared to the angels,
Preached among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.

The Church confesses that God himself has removed the barriers: breaking through man's rebellion he was "manifested in the flesh", he broke down the barrier of death, he broke into the realm of the angels, he went into the regions of the Gentiles, into their unbelief and superstition, he broke up the shut hearts of the people setting free them for faith, and finally he passed through all heavens to reign with the Father from eternity to eternity. He is as the king the servant who serves to the fulfilment of God's purpose: the inviolability of God's promises which he has declared among all nations and which he has entrusted as a good news to his serving prophetic Church: this is the mystery according to Rev. 10, 7.

h. Jesus Christ is therefore the *Lord of Mission* who has taken over the main responsibility for the missionary appointment for the Church. Therefore he "holds the seven stars in his right hand" (Rev. 2, 1) which are "the mystery" (1, 20): though the Church is called to shine as a lampstand in the world (1, 20) already through her being she is especially appointed in her prophetic existence through special messengers to call humanity back to its Creator and Redeemer (14, 6f.; 10, 7). The prophetic existence of Jesus Christ is reflected by the acts of obedience in which the Church undertakes special errands in connection with the service of the angels (Rev. 14, 6f., cp. Hebr. 1, 14 and 13, 2). Christ connecting the service "at home" and the service "abroad" joins the "lampstands" and the "stars", the Church in her existence and the Church in her special missionary activity. So he is the living mystery, the sacrament for the world.

i. Moreover we are bound to see that a dark shadow follows this sacrament of Christ, and this is *the mystery of the Antichrist, of the beast or of Babylon* (Rev. 17, 5. 7. 8). This mystery "was and is not... and it goes to perdition": the Antichristian mystery means past without significance for the present (past without the continuing God), means secondly a kind of existence without real being in the presence, means thirdly a dubious or perilous future (a future without the consummating God). This is an evil mystery at the opposite side of the living God who *was* in order to conserve, who *is* in order to give life and who *will be* in order to reveal the victory of his Kingdom.

j. Christ the Sacrament for the world is a reality also in very practical situations of the daily life. Let me give two examples from

the New Testament. The first one is from the letter to the Ephesians where *matrimony* is named a *mystery* (Eph. 5, 32). The sexual intercourse in matrimony is named a mystery because the always renewed love between husband and wife reflects the love between Christ and his Church. Love will be expected and be shown. It belongs to the sacramental life of Jesus Christ himself that he renews the covenant with his people in presenting his love to his Church.

k. The second example is from 1 Tim. 3, 8. 9. The deacons of the Church are called to live amongst the people serving them. But not loquacity, debauchery and covetousness are commanded to them so that they become the servants of men and the slaves of sin, forgetting their commission. Within the daily life amongst the people they have to realize that they stand on a barrier: not they in their activity are able to open the people for the gospel but only God in his Holy Spirit. The deacons live in a situation in which "*the mystery of the faith*" appears as a religion amongst other religions. Who is able to persuade the people of the incomparability of the Christian religion? They stand on a barrier which they can't remove. But they are not alone on this barrier. God stands with them on this barrier. They know that. Their conscience is clear because they are convinced together with God (συν-είδησις!) that *God alone opens the understanding for the unique revelation of his grace*. He uses the channel of the Christian religion to come to his right in the obedient faith of the people.

l. But in the personal relationship between Christ and his believer also the reality of Christ's mystery can be seen. 1 Cor. 14, 2 deals with the personal relationship of such a member of the Church to his God who speaks in tongues. Even this personal relationship must be respected. But the personal belief may not become a private one. It must be made known to the whole congregation by one who is gifted as an interpreter. Christ stands as the head of his body and of all members of his body on the *barrier between the mysterious personal relationship between a Christian individuality to his God and the people who have a right for intelligible words of prophecy*.

m. 1 Cor. 15, 51. 52 Paul speaks about the last especially *eschatological mystery*. It is the *mystery of transformation and resurrection*. It can be asked if this last mystery is not foreshadowed in the transition which the converted people make from paganism to

Christianity. There is also a barrier on which Christ stands. He commands to push off all dead pagan objects as well as to hand over to him all that can be used within the new Christian life. Many pagan materials can be changed and made useful to become fit for the testimony of Christ in this world. Christ's judgment must be heard in order that the Church may know what will be accepted and what will be rejected, what will be transformed and what will be resurrected.

Let us summarize what we have found in the passages of the New Testament. We have found many barriers: the human non-understanding of the Gospel, the stubborn Israel, the veil over the Old Testament and its prophetic character, the message of the cross as a scandal for mankind, the hatred which separates as man from his neighbour, the barrier between Church and world, the unbelief and the superstition of the Gentiles, the forgetfulness of the deacons in view of their testimony in their visits in the congregations, the shadow of the Antichristian power in its imitating action (imitativeness). But we have also found that Christ is ready to remove these barriers as the Lord of the Mission. Therefore we are authorized to call Christ "the Sacrament for the world".

3.

Considering the fact that the original meaning of the Latin word "sacramentum" is "solemn promise", are we not allowed to think of Jesus Christ as the highpriest who gave "a solemn promise" to the Father that he would bring back the lost creation to the Creator? It is true: the term "sacrament" or "mystery" is not used literally to signify this *action of dedication* in which the Son gave and gives himself to the Father. But the fact is given as we can see it in St. John's Gospel chapter 17.

It is the secrecy between the Father and the Son which is hinted at here. We conclude therefore: Christ stands on these barriers which we have mentioned as the *faithful son* who is resolved to remove them and to hand over the redeemed world to the Father. But even as the sacrament for the world he does not want to stay and to walk alone. He searches for coworkers. And in this connection it is very significant that Tertullian used the term "sacramentum" for "baptismal" vow. In any case it is one aspect and a very

important one of Christian Baptism (according to the New Testament texts but not according to the later Christian doctrine of baptism) that he who had resolved to be baptised came to the act of baptism in the readiness to go into the world with Christ. It is true that the signification of baptism lies also in the fact that the baptised person enters into the Church taking over the responsibility as her member. But even this Church into which he enters is the missionary body of Christ and therefore each new-comer is called to participate in Christ's Mission. In taking the step of Baptism the Christian reflects Christ's will to remove all barriers and to invite the whole world to come back to the Father. He echoes the "solemn promise" of Jesus Christ himself to bring back the lost creation to his Father. Therefore we are authorised to call the Baptism a "sacrament" when we are able to see and to practice the act of Baptism in the light of the Sacrament of Christ.

Concerning the Lord's Supper we can think on the same lines: we are authorized to call the Holy Communion a "sacrament" (in a derived meaning) when we agree that the Lord's Supper is a refreshment for pilgrims who have begun to travel to the Heavenly Jerusalem which will come down and who therefore stand under the obligation to celebration the Lord's Supper in *openness towards the world* ("you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes", 1 Cor. 11, 26). The Church celebrating the Lord's Supper declares herself responsible for the world to give it the joy which she has received. She cannot celebrate it without this "solemn promise". She cannot live in the private atmosphere of those Corinthian egoists who liked to get personal profit from the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11, 21. 27). She can't live as a separated and isolated club like those libertinists (Jude 12: "your love feasts as they boldly carouse together") but all private wishes and all desires of the world are overcome by their holy will to serve the world with the Gospel.

We began our lecture with the sentence that chance events in Church History would find their explanation much later. The translation-event in North Africa has been such a chance event. By God's Providence it happened so in order that much later the Church of Christ could find a hint to go back to the *original signification of the mystery or sacrament of Christ* and to detect the *eschatological and missionary signification of Baptism and of the Lord's Supper*. Because Jesus Christ is the Sacrament for the world we are autho-

rized (as those who are willing to follow him into the world) to speak of Baptism and of the Lord's Supper as of the "two sacraments" of the Church.

But a question remains: whether the sacramental communion with Christ is not too wide and large to be contained in the two actions of the Church which we name "Baptism" and "Holy Communion". As Christ's Kingdom is greater and more comprehensive than Christ's Church, we are not allowed to bind the sacramental life of Jesus Christ to the Church and her acts of confession, promise and fellowship. Jesus Christ has his own secret ways of opening the stony hearts of the pagans for the light of his coming Kingdom. This makes the Church in her baptismal and communal life humble. She knows that she may be united with her Lord; she keeps guard to see where her Lord has fulfilled his "solemn promise" to bring back a piece of his creation to the Father. Christ as the Sacrament for the world is greater than his Church.

Werner Bieder, Basel