

**Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Autumn 2000 No. 78**

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

## **THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES**

### **A FAITH FOR TODAY (10) ARTICLES 25 & 27: THE SACRAMENTS: BAPTISM**

Donald Allister

#### **A double battle**

The battle for a biblical view of the sacraments had to be fought on two main fronts. In the 16th century, when the Thirty-nine Articles were written, this was seen very clearly. The battle was intense. It cost many lives. But it was absolutely necessary. One of the major errors put salvation itself at risk by denying the great biblical truth of salvation by grace through faith. The other impoverished the Christian life by denying the sacraments as an effective means of grace. The Articles reflect that double battle.

But this is not just a matter of history. One of the tragedies of today is that the battle is still going on. Even though the moderate Reformers in the mid 1500s gave right biblical teaching and by their arguments clearly defeated both main errors, their victory has not been fully understood or accepted, so the heresies continue to be taught and to do great damage even in the so-called Protestant or Reformed churches like our own. The battle continues and is every bit as critical as when men had to die for the truth. The Articles help us to see the biblical teaching and warn us against the two main errors.

In this chapter we see how the biblical teaching on sacraments was laid out against its opponents, and how that works out in the case of baptism. Article 25 begins by tackling the extreme Protestant heresy on sacraments, then describes what sacraments are and a brief final paragraph demolishes the Roman view of them.

#### **Effectual signs**

The view of extreme Protestants (sometimes called the Radical Reformers) was that sacraments were important because commanded by Christ, but of no value in themselves. They were simply outward signs: baptism a reminder that Christ's death cleanses from sin and gives new life, Communion a reminder that Christ died for us. No benefit was gained by receiving the sacraments, except that what Christ had done was brought to mind.

This was an understandable reaction to the Roman teaching but it was an over-reaction, in effect throwing the baby out with the bath water. The Article insists that sacraments are effectual signs of God's grace, not empty ones. 'Through them he works invisibly within us'. This language is right and reflects the high view of sacraments in the Bible, where both Baptism and Communion are described as bringing benefits to their recipients. But note carefully: the benefits do not include creating faith or bringing it about: baptism does not make you a Christian. Sacraments may 'bring to life' a faith that is already present and they are effective in 'strengthening and confirming' faith. Jesus commanded two of these outward signs with inner power. The Roman church developed five others (and still insists on seven) but the Article rejects them. Not that marriage, for example, is frowned upon or of no inner value but it does not have an outward sign commanded by Christ. It is the outward sign and the inner working which define a sacrament. A humanly invented outward sign, such as a wedding ring in our culture, does not count. (This is why the Church of England accepts as valid a civil marriage performed by a Registrar: although church weddings are good, there is no biblical rule that churches or ministers should be involved.)

## **Right reception**

The traditional Roman view, only fully developed in the Middle Ages, was that each of the seven sacraments had to be performed by a priest to be valid and that the priest's actions and words actually brought about a miraculous transformation. In marriage man and woman were made one, in Communion bread and wine were made into Christ's body and blood, in baptism a non-Christian was made into a Christian. This led to serious abuses, especially in Communion where the bread and wine came to be venerated or even worshipped.

In these Articles the Roman Catholic practice of venerating the bread and wine merits no serious treatment, but only a few scornful words. 'The sacraments were not commanded by Christ to be gazed at or carried about but to be used properly'. Yet still we find consecrated bread and wine set aside in church buildings, the place denoted by a special candle or light and all good 'catholics' turning in that direction to acknowledge the presence of the Lord. Still we find Roman and Anglo-Catholics celebrating the dreadful rite of benediction, where the displaying of consecrated bread and wine are said to confer a blessing on the congregation. Still we find 'Corpus Christ' (body of Christ) processions and celebrations going on. This is not Christianity but superstition.

Article 25 deals simply and biblically with the idea that sacraments convey some automatic blessing, reminding us of Paul's warning that those who eat the bread and drink the wine unworthily eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). This clearly shows that the sacraments do not bring blessing automatically, but that the attitude of the recipient must be right. Simply being baptised or receiving communion is of no value, and can even bring harm. Proper preparation will include confession of sin, humility of heart, and trust in Christ's death alone as the way to forgiveness.

## **A sign of new birth**

So we come to the first sacrament, baptism, treated in Article 27. This Article repeats the previous emphasis, against extreme Protestants, that sacraments are effectual. It insists that baptism is 'not only a sign of profession' and spells out in some detail the benefits we should expect from this sacrament. It uses the analogy of a legal document, such as the deeds to a house or a marriage certificate. Clearly such things can be forged or come into the wrong hands. In such a case they are worthless and to use them is a serious offence. But in the right hands they are of real value, not only signifying but also actually ratifying or confirming the truths they declare. They are not just a reminder of a truth, but a powerful statement, acceptable in the highest court, serving as proof rather than opinion. My baptism, if I am entitled to it, does not just remind me that forgiveness is possible: it assures me that I am actually forgiven.

The phrase 'if I am entitled to it' is vital. The Article states that 'those who receive baptism in the right manner are grafted into the church' and goes on to spell out the other benefits. All depends on right reception. We saw this in Article 25 as a principle applying to both sacraments; much more is made of it in Articles 28 and 29 with reference to Holy Communion. Article 26 (which we dealt with under the heading of The Ministry) insists, against the Roman teaching, that it is not the minister's worthiness that counts but the recipient's.

This understanding will change long-cherished views. First, the sacraments are God's gifts to us rather than rituals we do or undergo or offer. It is not so much my duty to receive communion as God's delight to give it to me. It is not so much the new Christian's responsibility to seek baptism as God's pleasure to offer it to him or her.

Second, the efficacy of sacraments does not depend on the goodness of the minister or the soundness of the church or the closeness of the fellowship, but on the recipient's heart being right with God. If I am right with God I can receive baptism or communion, and benefit from them, even

if minister, church and fellowship all have major problems (naturally this is not an ideal situation, and in other respects, particularly with regard to Christian teaching, I may well suffer, but God's gift of the sacrament is unaffected).

Third, although baptism and Holy Communion are not automatic in their effects, they are much more than just outward signs. They do not make you into a Christian, but they do convey God's blessing. They do not give grace, but because of the necessary preparation and the attitude of humble receptiveness they demand, they do act as a means or channel of grace.

### **Infant baptism**

The assumption behind this teaching is that adult baptism is the norm. When we consider preparation and right reception, when we think of baptism as a sign or seal of faith that is already there, it is obvious that the primary intention is for baptism to be administered to believing adults. Theologically we must hold on to that; our defence of infant baptism must never make it appear as a normal state of affairs. Much harm has arisen from that view, not least when people think that the main way of church growth is by producing children in Christian families. This is introverted and narrow religion, so similar to the perversion we see described (but not commended) in the Old Testament; it is not the missionary faith of Christ. The church is to grow primarily by the conversion of non-Christians to Christ. Baptism should be seen first as God's touch, his visible word of assurance and promise to new adult Christians.

But infant baptism is most certainly allowed, and encouraged in Christian families. This is possible because like the adult version it majors on God's promise rather than our response.