

The Relation between Christ's Sacrifice and Priesthood and those of the Church; An Attempt at a Summary Statement

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One of the deepest differences of conviction in the Anglican Church at the present time, which has revived one of the sharpest conflicts of the Reformation, and is reproducing itself once more upon the ecumenical stage, concerns the issues of priesthood and sacrifice. In what sense are the ordained ministry (as distinct from Christians in general) priests? And in what sense is the Holy Communion (beyond being a feast upon the sacrifice Christ offered) the actual offering of a sacrifice, whether of his sacrifice, or of the spiritual sacrifices of Christians? In other words, how are Christ's sacrifice and priesthood related to those of the Church, and, within the Church, to the work of its ordained ministers? To understand this debate, one needs to trace the main stages of its development in the history of the Church, and the present essay is an attempt to do this in brief compass, beginning with the New Testament and ending at the present day.

1. **The New Testament.** Relevant New Testament teachings seem to be these:

(a) Christ's saving work, culminating in his death, is declared to be the true atoning sacrifice for sins (Jn. 1:29, 36; Rom. 8:3; Heb. 9-10; 1 Pet. 1:18f.; Rev. 5:6-10; 13:8).

(b) Christ is the great high priest, who is alone qualified to mediate with his Father on the basis of his atoning sacrifice (Epistle to the Hebrews, *passim*).

(c) Although the Epistle to the Hebrews stresses that Christ's priesthood is everlasting, it also stresses that his sacrifice was offered once for all (Heb. 7:27; 9:25-28; 10:10, 12, 14, 18); and in the second of these passages the epistle links this with the fact that his death took place once for all, a fact also stressed in Acts 13:34; Rom. 6:9; 1 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:18. After his death he was 'raised', to 'die no more'; and after offering his sacrifice he 'sat down', and there is 'no more offering for sin'. His everlasting priestly work is not his sacrifice but his intercession (Heb. 7:25; cp. Ps. 99:6; Joel 2:17).

(d) We are taught in 1 Peter that Christians offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet. 2:5), and elsewhere we hear of them offering spiritual worship (Jn. 4:23f.; Rom. 12:1; Phil. 3:3), which is spiritual primarily in being offered 'through the Spirit of God', like spiritual prayer (Rom. 8:26f.; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). The sacrifices that Christians offer are specified as themselves (Rom. 12:1; Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6; Rev. 6:9), their converts (Rom. 15:16f.), their faith (Phil. 2:17), their gifts to the support of missionaries (Phil. 4:18), their gifts to the relief of the poor (Heb. 13:16), praise or thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15) and prayer (Rev. 8:3f.). Thus, they are of many kinds, and need not be either material or cultic. No special connexion with the eucharist is either mentioned or, apparently, hinted at.

(e) Those who offer the spiritual sacrifices are spoken of as a priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5,9) and priests (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).¹ The same is implied in Rom. 15:17, where Paul, offering his

converts as a sacrifice, has his 'glorying in things pertaining to God' (cp. Heb. 2:17; 5:1). These priests, however, are made priests by the 'blood' shed for their 'sins' by Christ (Rev. 1:5f.; 5:10); they have no worthiness of their own, but are wholly dependent on the atoning sacrifice and priesthood of Christ. So, too, they offer their sacrifices 'through him' (Heb. 13:15); and their sacrifices are 'acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 2:5). Their sacrifices and priesthood are never spoken of as atoning, or as a participation in his atoning sacrifice and priesthood; how could they be, since atoning sacrifice and priesthood had to be unblemished by sin (Heb. 7:26f.; 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:18f.), and had already been perfectly supplied, once for all, by Christ? Rather, they seem to be spoken of as a different order of sacrifice and priesthood, non-atoning but already atoned for, brought into being as a result of the atoning work of Christ, and wholly dependent upon it. The parallel, in Old Testament terms, would not be with sin-offerings but with burnt offerings, where the emphasis was not upon atonement but upon the consecrating of the gift to God.

(f) Not only are the sacrifices offered by Christians nowhere linked with the eucharist, but the eucharist itself is nowhere described as the offering of a sacrifice; rather, it is described as a feast upon a sacrifice already offered, like the passover-meal, which was probably the occasion of its institution. The present participles in the narratives of the Last Supper ('being given for you', 'being shed for you') refer, as is common in Greek and English usage, to what was then in the immediate future, though it is now in the past. Christ did not institute any symbol of his dying,² but only symbols of his body given and his blood shed, already distinct and separate as after death. Paul compares the Lord's Supper with the 'eating' (not the offering) of the Jewish sacrifices, and with the eating and drinking at the 'table' of idols (1 Cor. 10:18, 21): he only mentions the actual act of offering in a quotation from the Old Testament (v. 20), designed to remind the Corinthians that to eat and drink at an idol's table was to eat and drink at a demon's table. The idea that the eucharist is the offering of a sacrifice is completely absent from the New Testament, and though it occurs very early in the Fathers, some other source than the New Testament, or (probably) apostolic tradition, must account, wholly or partly, for its presence there. The only one of the instituted acts which the New Testament elsewhere calls sacrificial is thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15).

(g) Who is to officiate at the eucharist is a subject on which the New Testament is silent. At the passover-meal it was the head of the household, or of the passover company, who did so, such as Jesus himself; and it may have been left to be inferred that community-leaders, such as apostles or presbyter-bishops, would naturally follow suit. If so, it is noteworthy that the New Testament never describes apostles or presbyter-bishops as priests: the one passage where Paul, speaking of evangelism and not the eucharist, describes himself as a priest (Rom. 15:16f.) is, as we have already seen, quite on a par with the other passages about the priesthood and sacrifices common to all Christians. But if the officiants are never described as priests, this underlines the significance of the fact that the eucharist is never described as the offering of a sacrifice. And, in fact, the two conceptions did not arise together. The idea of the offering of a sacrifice comes first, in the Didache and 1 Clement, and the idea that the officiants are priests not until about a hundred years later, in Tertullian and Hippolytus. The former idea evidently needed time to establish itself first, and the latter then arose as a consequence.

2. The Fathers. As has already been mentioned, the idea that the eucharist is the offering of a sacrifice is first found in the Didache, one of the earliest post-apostolic works, perhaps written about 100 AD; though it is also hinted at, about the same period, in 1 Clement (c.96 AD). These two ancient and influential works, one from Syria or Palestine and the other from

Rome, go far to account for the way in which the idea spread in the early church, though the ancient practice of the offertory in kind also lent it support.

Didache 14 says:

And on the Lord's Day of the Lord gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, *that your sacrifice may be pure*. And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, *that your sacrifice may not be defiled*; for *this sacrifice* it is that was spoken of by the Lord, 'In every place and at every time *offer me a pure sacrifice*; for I am a great king, saith the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the gentiles' (Mal. 1:11, 14).

Mal. 1:11 was a very popular text in early Christian apologetic, because it was understood to say that God would reject Jewish worship and accept gentile, that is, that of the Christian church. In the circumstances in which Malachi wrote, it was natural for him to speak of worship as 'sacrifice', but the question that arose for Christians was to what part of Christian worship could this term most appropriately apply, and the Didache fixes upon the eucharist. This text, then, was one of the main reasons for calling the eucharist a 'sacrifice'. Malachi speaks, more precisely, of 'a pure sacrifice', and this is clearly the source of the phrases in the Didache 'that your sacrifice may be pure', 'that your sacrifice may not be defiled'. However, the statement that one of the things which could defile the sacrifice was being in dispute, and joining the assembly before being 'reconciled', suggests an additional possible source for sacrificial language, which is Matt. 5:23f. The Didache regularly uses St. Matthew's gospel, and the passage in question relates to the situation before the destruction of the Temple, when Jesus' Jewish followers were still 'offering gifts' there. If one applies this passage, without adaptation, to the situation after the destruction of the Temple, it involves looking for some other sort of Christian 'gift' or sacrifice; and it was natural for the author of the Didache, who had interpreted Mal. 1:11 in this way, to fix once more upon the eucharist.

It is one thing to explain why the Didache used this language, and another to say what meaning the writer attached to it. He may have thought of the elements as a visible token of thankfulness and prayer, as Justin Martyr (*Dialogue* 41, 117) and Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 4:17:5 to 4:18:6) do, when using sacrificial language later on in the second century. Both writers, like the author of the Didache, quote Mal. 1:11 in this connexion.

The use of sacrificial language in 1 Clement comes in section 44, where Clement speaks of the expelled Corinthian presbyters as 'those who have offered the gifts of the bishop's office unblamably and holily'. Clement is writing from Rome, and if one may interpret what he says from another Roman text written just over a century later, the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, the 'gifts of the bishop's office' which the presbyter-bishops offered were the gifts in kind which Christians brought to the eucharist, and which the bishops presented or 'offered' to God with a prayer of thanksgiving. In Hippolytus, not only bread and wine are brought to the bishop for this purpose but also oil, cheese and olives (*Apostolic Tradition* 4:2, 11; 5:1; 6:1; cp. 20:10; 28:1f.). The offertory in kind was very widespread in the ancient church, but the way the bishop (or earlier the presbyter-bishop) presented or 'offered' it to God was not at all unlike the way the money-gifts on the almsdish are presented to God today. Another example of the use of the language of 'offering' in this same connexion is found in the third-century Syrian Didascalia, which tells Christians to bring to the bishop

gifts for the support of the ministry and the relief of the poor, and describes them as ‘oblations which are offered through the bishops to the Lord God’ (ch. 9).

Up to this point in history, the eucharistic sacrifice seems to be wholly concerned with the material bread and wine, and not with their sacramental significance. In Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, the bread and wine are said to be offered not as tokens of the body and blood of Christ but as tokens of our thankfulness and prayer. Similarly, in Hippolytus the bread and wine are closely linked with other material gifts which have no sacramental significance, but which are offered alongside them as further parts of the offertory in kind. The basis of all this thinking is clearly traceable in the spiritual sacrifices of the New Testament. There, as we saw, thanksgiving, prayer, gifts to the support of missionaries and gifts to the relief of the poor are all described as sacrifices. The only real difference is that in Hippolytus the gifts for the ministry and the poor are not given to them directly but are brought to the bishop for him to dedicate and distribute, the bread and wine for the sacrament being brought at the same time; and that in Justin and Irenaeus, thanksgiving and prayer acquire material tokens. Nevertheless, Justin fully admits that ‘prayers and giving of thanks, when offered by worthy men, are the only perfect and well-pleasing sacrifices to God’, and that these are what are really offered when he speaks of the tokens being offered (*Dialogue* 117).

It is not until Cyprian, in the middle of the third century, that we hear of the thing signified being offered, rather than the material elements. In *Epistle 62 (63) To Caecilius*, sect. 17, Cyprian says that ‘the Lord’s passion is the sacrifice which we offer’. Even here, it is not stated that his *body* and *blood* are offered, though in sect. 9 of the epistle Cyprian comes closer to this language; but its actual adoption apparently had to wait for the introduction of the language of conversion of the elements in the fourth century. Then, Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose both use the language of conversion, and both speak of Christ’s ‘body’ and ‘blood’ being offered, or of ‘Christ’ being offered, after the consecration and conversion of the elements (Cyril, *Fifth Mystagogic Catechesis*; Ambrose, *On Psalm 38*). Of course, the question still remains what this conversion means, for we are as yet centuries away from the propounding of transubstantiation in the ninth century by Paschasius Radbertus (if, indeed, even his controversial teaching went that far). Nevertheless, in Cyril and Ambrose a definite milestone seems to have been reached. Prior to this stage, Justin Martyr can speak in lofty fashion of the consecrated bread and wine being the body and blood of Christ (*First Apology* 66), but he never dreams that the body and blood are *offered*; so he is evidently still as clear as Irenaeus about the distinction between the ‘two things, the earthly and the heavenly’ (*Against Heresies* 4:18:5), the former of which is offered, as a token of our thanksgiving and prayer, but not the latter. It is only when the former starts being thought of as *changed* into the latter, so that the *latter* is what is offered, that transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass become a possibility. And when this happens, Christian bishops and presbyters, having already become ‘priests’, become priests of *Christ’s* sacrifice, rather than of the sacrifices proper to Christians. His once-for-all atoning sacrifice becomes merged with the non-atoning spiritual sacrifices offered at all seasons by Christians, Christian ministers start to think of themselves as offering the former as well as the latter, and one of the most serious confusions in the history of theology and worship has occurred.

3. Modern Theology and Liturgy. When we discuss these matters today, of course, we have the Middle Ages as part of our history, and also the Reformation, which made such efforts to confront the church with the deviations of the Middle Ages from the New Testament and the early Fathers. This means that another part of our history is the Counter-Reformation and the

Council of Trent, which for the first time defined the eucharistic sacrifice as a dogma of the church, and in the following terms:

In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and sacrificed in an unbloody manner, who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross . . . The victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different . . . If anyone says that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving . . . but not a propitiatory sacrifice . . . let him be anathema.

(Session 22, ch.2 & canon 3).

It will be noted that Trent did not stop short of using language which implies the repetition of Christ's sacrifice. Nor should its words 'by the ministry of priests' be overlooked, for where such theology is adopted, and priests are given this crucial rôle in it, the celebrating of the eucharist inevitably comes to be regarded as the priest's chief task. The contrast with the New Testament, where the celebration of the eucharist is not even mentioned as one of the tasks of presbyter-bishops, but the whole concentration is on their tasks of teaching and pastoral oversight (Acts 20:28, 31; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5; 5:17; Tit. 1:9; Jam. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:2f.), could hardly be more sharp. If they are to be the celebrants of the eucharist, it was pointed out earlier, this is simply left by the New Testament to be inferred; and it did not at once become an invariable rule, without permitted exceptions (Didache 10; Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 8; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 10:1f.; Tertullian, *Exhortation to Chastity* 7).

In the last hundred years or so, strenuous efforts have been made by thinkers both from the Church of Rome and from the Anglo-Catholic school of thought to restate the Counter-Reformation teaching about the priesthood and the eucharist, though without basically departing from it. Roman Catholics have often taken the lead in this rethinking, but since they are committed to the Council of Trent, greater constraints have lain upon them than upon sympathizers among Anglicans. Unfortunately, none of the attempts made can be said to be successful, if judged by New Testament and early patristic teaching. Moberly³ has tried to explain the absence of priestly language in the New Testament by suggesting that ministerial priesthood is a special (and exclusive!) form of the priesthood of all Christians. Gayford and Hicks, following the lead of Thalhofer,⁴ have tried to avoid the objection of the once-for-all character of Christ's sacrifice by transferring attention almost entirely from his death to his heavenly intercession. Dix and Mascall, following the lead of Casel, Vonier and Masure,⁵ have tried to meet the same objection by an arbitrary claim that the sacramental world is a world of its own, in which what was historically a once-for-all event can be 'made present again' without being repeated. The same writers, this time following the lead of Mersch,⁶ have argued that when Christians offer themselves to God, Christ is offering himself, since the church is Christ's mystical body. The last of these arguments is the most persuasive, but if it is theologically correct to say that Christ offers himself in our self-offering, it remains historically distinct from his self-offering on the cross, and we have no reason to suppose that it makes atonement; so the consideration, though true, is irrelevant. It would only furnish a basis for a thoroughly reformed doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice, which clearly distinguished Christ's finished work from his continuing work, and viewed the self-offering of the church as part of the *continuing* work of Christ, *in* his people (his work of justification and sanctification), and not as part of his *finished* work, *for* them (his work of atonement).

It would be presumptuous to dismiss the Tridentine tradition of thinking as worthless. It had drawn the allegiance of many powerful minds and devout hearts. Through the Ecumenical

Movement it has spread its influence far outside Roman and Anglican boundaries, has left its mark on many inter-denominational consensus-documents, and has achieved a widespread, though necessarily fragile, agreement to recast the eucharistic liturgy on sacrificial lines of a question-begging sort.⁷ But it is based, one is bound to say, upon a misconception. It is foreign to the earliest patristic traditions, and contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. It is inconsistent with the Reformation standpoint of the Church of England. And even in the Church of Rome there are some signs that its days may now be numbered.

If it goes, what is to take its place? What indeed, but the teaching of the New Testament, which is also the historic teaching of the reformed Church of England? In the Prayer Book services for the Consecration of Bishops and the Ordering of Priests, all the emphasis, as in the New Testament, is on their tasks of teaching and pastoral oversight. The administration of the sacraments is of course mentioned, but in general terms, with no more attention drawn to the eucharist than to baptism, except that the old disciplinary rule is tacitly maintained that the celebration of the eucharist is their prerogative. No suggestion is made that they are ordained to offer sacrifice (as Leo XIII, in his 1896 condemnation of Anglican orders, was to complain), and this is amply confirmed when one looks at the Prayer Book service of Holy Communion, especially in its 1552 or 1662 form. The only apparently sacrificial expression retained (except references to the spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, of ourselves and of alms) is the term 'priest', and it is on record that this was only retained as a short form of 'presbyter', which is what it etymologically is: see Jewel, *Works* (Parker Society), vol. 4, p.911f.; Whitgift, *Works* (Parker Society), vol. 3, p.350f.; Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity* 5:78:2f. Moreover, the attitude of Article 31 to the sacrifice of the mass is notorious. It is of course true that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, distinguished Anglican divines cautiously revived in their writings the sacrificial language of the Fathers, some of them interpreting it in a figurative sense, and some as denoting a material sacrifice of bread and wine. They were all careful, however, to make it clear that they did not interpret it as denoting the sacrifice of the mass; they viewed it as a response to the sacrifice of Calvary, not as a participation in it, and the more circumspect of their attempts at liturgical revision (for example, in the 1637 Scottish Prayer Book and the 1789 American) make this very plain. The attempt to domesticate the sacrifice of the mass among Anglicans was a much later development, and the facts adduced in this paper seem to show that it was also a regrettable development.

To sum up: The church's sacrifice consists of the manifold spiritual sacrifices of its members, offered either individually or corporately. It has no special connexion with the eucharist, and extends far outside the eucharist. Its relationship with the sacrifice of Christ is not any sort of identity, but a total dependence on his sacrifice for acceptance. In expressing it in the eucharistic liturgy, the most cautious examples (for example that of the 1662 Prayer Book) are the wisest. What applies to the church's sacrifice also applies to the church's priesthood: this too is related to the priesthood of Christ by way of dependence, not identification. The question of the rôle of the presbyter or bishop in the eucharist is really a distinct matter, which has to be resolved on the basis of other considerations, unrelated to priesthood and sacrifice, and more primitive (in this connexion) than either—namely, the considerations of pastoral oversight, church discipline, and the link between the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments. The presbyter (or bishop) does have a proper place in the eucharist, but it is essentially a presbyteral place, not a sacerdotal.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The plural 'priests' should be noted, because it is so often asserted today that the church's priestliness is purely corporate, and does not make its individual members priests. Certainly, it does not make them ordained ministers, but it does make them priests.
- 2) The breaking of the bread was early interpreted as symbolizing Christ dying, as is shown by the Textus Receptus of 1 Cor. 11:24, but the original significance of the fraction was the unity of Christians, all partaking of one and the same bread (1 Cor. 10:16f).
- 3) R.C. Moberly, *Ministerial Priesthood* (London, 1907; first edition 1897).
- 4) S.C. Gayford, *Sacrifice and Priesthood, Jewish and Christian* (London, 1924); F.C.N. Hicks, *The Fulness of Sacrifice* (London, 1930); Valentin Thalhoffer, *Das Opfer des alten und des neuen Bundes* (Regensburg, 1870), extensively discussed in A.G. Mortimer, *The Eucharistic Sacrifice* (London, 1901).
- 5) Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1947; first edition 1945), pp. 161f., 245f., 254; E.L. Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church* (London, 1946), chapters 9-11; *Corpus Christi* (London, 1955; first edition 1953), pp. 94, 103; Odo Casel, 'The Mystery of Christian Worship' (English translation, London 1962); Anscar Vonier, *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (London, 1925); Eugène Masure, *Le sacrifice du corps mystique* (Paris, 1950).
- 6) Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, pp.246-8; Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, chapters 9, 11; *Church Quarterly Review*, vol. 162 (1961), pp.286f., 289f.; Emile Mersch, *The Whole Christ* (English translation, London, 1949).
- 7) One thinks of the section on the Eucharist in the World Council of Churches' Lima document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*; the eucharistic prayers of Holy Communion Rite A and Rite B in the *Alternative Service Book* (apart from the 'Order following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer'); the eucharistic prayers of the 1979 American Prayer Book and the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, etc.

Christ our High Priest has made one sacrifice for sin for all time (Hebrews 10:12), and there is no more sacrifice for sin that can be made (Hebrews 10:26). But as priests once offered other kinds of sacrifices in the temple, so it is clear from 1 Peter 2:5,9 that God has chosen Christians "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:5-9 speaks of two aspects of the priesthood of the believer. The first is that believers are privileged. To be chosen by God to be a priest was a privilege. All believers have been chosen by God: a "chosen gen