

# Peter J. Leithart on Trinity and Sacrament

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One of the characteristics that distinguished Van Til's theology was the unique manner in which he related various doctrines, the most striking example being Van Til's approach to the doctrines of God's sovereignty and man's freedom. The tendency is to hold these two doctrines in awkward tension: man is actually free in spite of the fact that God's sovereignty seems to make freedom impossible. Van Til, however, pointed out that apart from the doctrine of God's absolute will, man's freedom would be groundless. Freedom in a world of chance is at best the freedom of spastic convulsion. In contrast, God's decree of man's actions as freely willed creates the space in which man may meaningfully act. Thus, man is free because of God's decree. In this brilliant formulation, Van Til suggested, without attempting to fully expound, the logical link between these two doctrines. He relieved Reformed theology of the embarrassment of holding to what seems to be a plain contradiction, while also leading his readers to acknowledge and even enjoy the paradoxical nature of the truth.

In his discussion of sacramental theology, Peter Leithart wishes to follow in Van Til's footsteps by removing what seems to be an embarrassing tension, or at least a remarkable lacunae, in Reformed theology.<sup>1</sup> Reformed theology, following the tradition of the West as a whole, tends to have an underdeveloped Trinitarianism. In particular, the doctrine of the Trinity is not related to the doctrine of the sacraments, almost leaving the doctrine of baptism and the Lord's Supper as strange things that God has commanded in spite of who He is.

Benjamin B. Warfield provides classic example of a Reformed theologian who places the doctrine of the sacraments in tension with the doctrine of God and even soteriology. In his *The Plan of Salvation*, Warfield distinguished between those soteriologies in which God worked directly in man's soul from those in which God worked indirectly, and also between those which were universalistic and particularistic. Calvinism, the purest conception of salvation according to Warfield, teaches a doctrine of salvation in which God works directly in the individual human soul. On such a conception, not only are the sacraments apparently unnecessary additions, but also the preaching of the Word, the fellowship of the saints, and everything else that might be considered external or material. Thus, Leithart writes, "Warfield will affirm sacramental means of grace in spite of what we otherwise affirm about God."<sup>2</sup>

Leithart begins by reviewing the analyses of modernity by J. B. S. Uberoi, Henri du Lubac, and Colin Gunton, mentioning others in his brief historical sweep. Whether the malaise of the modern is to be blamed on Augustine, Berengar, or Zwingli, the fact remains that there are theological roots to the philosophical and practical problems of the modern world. Leithart argues that Gunton's reading of Augustine is not yet adequately demonstrated, but otherwise turns from the historical to the theological to investigate an approach to sacramental theology which would demonstrate that it is the inescapable expression of the Triune God. He writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Leithart, "'Framing' Sacramental Theology: Trinity and Symbol," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 62, no. 1, Spring, 2000, pp. 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> Leithart, p. 4.

“Yet, the very idea of a systematic theology suggests that there can and should be demonstrable consistency among various truths, in particular some consistency between the nature of God and how he makes himself known in the church. Therefore, there must be some way to show the consistency of theology proper and sacramental theology in order to develop a trinitarian theology of Christian symbols and rites. . . . Sacraments are not ‘exceptions’ to God’s typically ‘non-symbolic’ means of communicating and communing with creatures. Rather, the Creator, because he is Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, draws his people into fellowship with himself through symbols, of which the sacraments are a particular kind.”<sup>3</sup>

Reformed theologians have not addressed this issue, so Leithart builds his distinctively Reformed approach by critically interacting with two well-known Trinitarian theologians, the Roman Catholic Karl Rahner and Greek Orthodox John Zizioulas. Rahner argues for an essentially Trinitarian ontology of all creation insofar as he sees all unity in being as the unity of a unified plurality. Symbol is essential to this picture in that being comes to self-realization through symbolic expression. Leithart provides a detailed and helpful analysis of Rahner’s approach to creation, but it is in his doctrine of the Trinity as symbol that Rahner is most suggestive. Here, too, however, Leithart provides penetrating critique and a rich discussion of the Biblical doctrine, leading us to a more satisfying Trinitarian formulation. Rather than summarize the entire discussion, I quote only the last paragraph of Leithart’s conclusion.

We thus generate symbols not in spite of who God is, but because of who he is, and this leads us to expect that in communicating his life to us, he will also employ symbols. Thus, we move from a trinitarian (and semiotic) anthropology to sacramental theology proper. Rahner builds a bridge from a trinitarian theology of symbol to sacramental theology by positing that the church is a continuation of the incarnation or the “sacrament” of Christ. Unfortunately, this bridge lacks adequate support. Both of Rahner’s ecclesiological conceptions are problematic. If the church is a continuation of the incarnation, the NT’s distinction between head and body is blurred; instead of submitting to her head, the church, or some sector of it, is competitive with it. As Miroslav Volf notes, the notion that the church is the sacrament of Christ leaves unanswered the question of the nature of a “sacrament”: “is the church an instrument in God’s hands in such a way that Christ remains the sole subject of saving grace, or not?” By contrast to Rahner, I do not wish to build a bridge with the materials of Christology but with the materials of anthropology, and that will require rather different engineering. Still, if Rahner does not take us to a satisfying trinitarian sacramental theology, his efforts toward a semiotic anthropology bring us several steps closer to our goal.<sup>4</sup>

Zizioulas offers an exceptionally helpful discussion of the Trinity in Greek theology, though it is unfortunately marred in fundamental respects. As Leithart points out, Zizioulas leaves us with subordinationism in his doctrine of the Trinity and suggests that our situatedness in creation is itself a condition from which we need to be saved, as if the fundamental human problem were metaphysical. Zizioulas, however, does shed light on the history of the doctrine of the Trinity and the profound contrast between the typical thought of ancient Greece and that of

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<sup>3</sup> Leithart, pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Leithart, p.10.

the Church fathers. Ancient Greek philosophers could not imagine an absolute or ultimate person and therefore never adequately conceived of the human person because they were monists in their view of reality. Whatever god might exist could climb no higher than the top of a chain of being that constituted a deterministic system. Furthermore, since reality was conceived of as ultimately one, relationship could only be an expression of the subordinate multiplicity of the world, an epiphenomenon. By contrast, the Greek fathers confessed faith in Father, Son, and Spirit who were ultimate persons in relation. Apart from their relationships, the persons of the Trinity have no existence, which is to say that the Father as Father is who and what He is only in relation to the Son. He does not have some prior existence to which relationship to the Son is later added. The Son is eternally the Son because of His relationship to the Father.

Leithart applies Zizioulas' insights to the doctrine of the sacraments. First, man is like God, constituted by his relationships. There is no "ghost in the machine," no underlying true self that stands behind all our relationships, though it is true that our relationship to God constitutes our most inner self. Second, since we are what we are in relation, then the ceremonies which bring us into new relationships are constitutive. Virtually everyone agrees that by baptism we become members of the Church. But this must also mean that God treats us differently after our baptism as well. Thus, if a man is what he is by virtue of his relationships and if his relationships both to God and man are decisively changed in baptism, then baptism reconstitutes one's identity. As Leithart emphasizes, this is a doctrine of baptismal efficacy without sacerdotal or magical overtones. Third, baptism and the Lord's Supper are community ceremonies, rites which define the people of God and the individual as a member of that new community. Just as the persons of the Trinity do not exist out of relationship to one another, the individual Christian does not exist as an independent self or even in relationship to God apart from the whole worshipping community of the baptized.

Leithart, then, brings Rahner and Zizioulas together in his conclusion.

Once the soteriological necessity of the church is made clear, Rahner's theology of symbol can be brought back into the discussion. For Rahner, semiosis is primordially human, and it is only in and through symbols that knowledge of and fellowship with others can exist. Human beings are external to each other, and the doctrine of the Trinity implies that this differentiation is basic and will never be dissolved into an undifferentiated unity. Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity also implies that we are made for communion. Rahner's argument suggests that the only way for a human to communicate what he thinks, feels, hopes and desires is through external means. If people are to be united in community, therefore, there must be common symbols. It follows that if there is to be a church, there must be sacraments. And since the triune nature of God implies the necessity of the church, the triune nature of God also implies, at a second remove, the necessity of sacraments.

In summary: God is triune, three persons in interpersonal communion and love. Made in God's image, we are made for communion. Sin violates community, and redemption necessarily involves God's gathering of a people, the restoration not only of individuals in their unique integrity, but of relationships and the institutional structures that give form to relationships. These relationships among men and between God and men can exist only through the use and exchange of symbols.

### *Peter J. Leithart on Trinity and Sacrament*

Therefore, because God is triune, sacraments are necessary to the achievement of salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Leithart concludes the entire article by linking it to a chain of thought beginning in Augustine and refined by Aquinas, a scholastic thinker for whom Calvin expressed his respect.

Though I have relied here on two modern theologians, the argument is not a modern, much less a modernist, one. On the contrary, I mean to challenge the modern tendency to disrupt symbol and reality and to collapse the Trinity into unity. And I take encouragement from the fact that this argument is anticipated in a compressed form in one of what Calvin considered the more sober scholastics, Thomas Aquinas. Sacraments are necessary for salvation, Aquinas argues, because, given the nature of God and of man, it is fitting that God makes use of sacramental signs and rites in redemption. In developing his argument, Thomas first quotes Augustine's statement (from *Contra Faustum* 19.11) that it is impossible to unite men in a religious association without the use of symbols or sacraments. Since it is necessary for salvation for men to be bound in one true religion, Thomas argues, sacraments are essential to the achievement of salvation. While the Reformers rightly rejected many aspects of the mechanistic medieval sacramental system, Thomas's insight is compatible with a Reformed anthropology and soteriology, and points toward the best of Reformed sacramental theology. And it provides support for the "framing" of sacramental theology offered here.<sup>6</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Peter Leithart's critique and interaction with Rahner and Zizioulas remind us that Reformed theologians need to read and consider theologians from other traditions. What Leithart proposes is foundational for integrating covenant theology, for though he does not refer to the covenant in this particular article, it is clear that God's symbolic expression in the world and man's basic symbolizing as God's image finds its most profound example in the oath of the covenant. In our conclusion, we wish to add the covenantal links that went unexpressed in Leithart's presentation.

First, God is One God who is three persons in covenantal relation. The very words Father and Son point to the covenant insofar as family relationship in the Bible is inescapably covenantal, but there is a broader Biblical basis for this assertion built on the pervasive covenantal depiction of the personal relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Second, when God created the physical material world, He created it as a symbol of Himself in covenant relationship to Himself under His viceregent man. The world around us is not neutral territory. It is created to reveal God to us, but not merely in the way of giving us information. The world reveals the covenantal God to us in order to draw us near to Him in covenantal fellowship. God's revelation invites and attracts, warns, commands, instructs or even, for the sinful man,

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<sup>5</sup> Leithart, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See the essay: "James Jordan's Trinitarianism" for a fuller statement.

repels. It is from this generally symbolic and covenantal world that God has ordained the special symbols of the covenant because man is part of and in a covenant relationship with the physical world that symbolizes God. A form of worship that excludes symbols from the physical world would be a form of worship that implicitly denies that the creation is a covenantal revelation of God and that man is in covenant with the world because of his covenant with God. At least such a form of worship would imply that man's dominion over the world and the world's symbolic revelation of God are somehow separated from man's covenant with God, a strange view at best, though perhaps not uncommon in our day when "spiritual" worship is often preferred to the physical sacraments. The point is that the theology of the sacraments must be part of a larger covenantal view of creation. The sacraments constitute a special and intensified form of what is true of the whole world as God's covenant symbol. We eat the world, use it for our work and play, and refashion it into our symbols as lords who have covenantal responsibilities. Indeed, every act by which we relate to the world has covenantal resonance. In that comprehensively covenantal context, we grasp the awesome character of the special acts of worship by which we draw near to God and renew our covenant with Him.

Sacraments are covenantal in another sense also. The symbols of the covenant have been chosen because they are especially appropriate as oath-making symbols. By receiving the physical symbol of the covenant one is receiving God's sworn promise and, in turn, is taking an oath as well. Baptism, for example, is an oath-making ceremony in which God, through His representatives, places His oath and promise upon us and we, by receiving the covenant sign, take an oath to be faithful to Him. The significance of an oath is profound for an oath brings a man into a new relationship, obviously redefining the man, as we see in the marriage oath. When a man is married, he becomes one with a woman. At the moment the oath is pronounced, each of them is objectively changed. They are no longer what they were before, having been redefined though their new covenantal relationship. In a deeper and more profound sense, baptism redefines us and makes us new, for it brings us into God's church. We are redefined in our relationship with Christ.

The Lord's Supper is a covenantal renewal ceremony in which God through His representatives gives us the covenantal symbols of His Son, bread and wine, reaffirming His covenant love to us. By receiving the covenant signs in eating the covenantally represented body and blood of Christ, we renew our covenant oath. Just as physical bread in our everyday meals gives life to our bodies not by magic, but by God's blessing, so also the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper give life to those who eat because a covenantal God gives life to us through the symbols of the covenant. Communion constitutes a covenantal fellowship of love, for God gives Himself to us and we receive Him as those who offer themselves unto Him to live for His kingdom. The oath of the Eucharistic covenant expresses the mutual love of God and the Christian, though God takes the initiative by inviting us to worship Him and giving us the covenant signs. We merely receive in grateful faith.

The covenantal aspect of the sacramental symbolism fills out the Trinitarian view of the sacraments developed in Leithart's important essay but the full essay contains a deeper exposition of the issues than this brief introduction. Though the phrase is overused, I cannot think of anything better than to say Leithart's essay is *must* reading for those seeking to understand the full implications of a truly Reformed theology.