

**Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology**  
**John E. Colwell, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) ISBN 1842274147**

Works on sacramental theology written from a Protestant perspective have been the opposite of plentiful in the period since the release of D.M. Baillie's *The Theology of the Sacraments* (1957). If one were to ask for something written on the subject from a broadly evangelical perspective, the supply of titles would not appreciably increase. One thinks of I.H. Marshall's exegetically-informed *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (1981) and the similar approach seen in C.K. Barrett's *Church Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament* (1985). In the North American context, two recent titles, both leaning more to the side of theological reflection are Leonard Vander Zee's *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (2004) and Gordon T. Smith's *A Holy Meal* (2005). John Colwell's welcome *Promise and Presence* deserves to be seen in connection with the two latter titles, not because of any observable overlap or dependency, but because the works are all responsive to and symptomatic of recent evangelical engagement in what could be called the 'ecumenical theology' project.

In the U.K. setting in which Colwell has written (Spurgeon's College and the Baptist Union of England and Wales) this ecumenical context has been provided both by the inter-confessional structure of theological study established in the university faculties of theology and by his own denomination's involvement in the 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry' project of the World Council of Churches since its inception in 1982. It is the latter influence which, even more than the former, goes some considerable distance to explain the tendency being worked out across the pages of *Promise and Presence* (hereafter *P&P*). I will term this the tendency to sell short one's own particular denominational theological heritage (irrespective of whether that heritage is Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal or Presbyterian) in the hope of appropriating some wider, wiser, more 'catholic' theological expression bearing the stamp of antiquity and permanence. In this respect, John Colwell's wrestling with his subject is a timely case-study of what can become of an evangelical theology (in his case, in the Baptist tradition) when it is

reduced to being just another voice in the ecumenical theological discussion. The remarks which follow are not a plea against that theological discussion, but only against the reduction in it of evangelical theology to a mere 'variant'.

The author of *P&P* insists (p.253) that he has not provided us with a detailed theology of the sacraments in this book. I think him too self-effacing. He has provided us with a stimulating sacramental theology: the question is: 'of which kind?' Given this reviewer's concern (expressed above) about the tendency of B.E.M. to mute the distinctive theological contribution of various theological traditions, the reader might expect that there will now follow a charge that Colwell is on the road to Rome or Antioch. What one finds instead in *P&P* is that, in interaction with Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Methodism and the other voices represented in B.E.M., Colwell has constructed a thoroughly eclectic approach to the sacraments which while it incorporates a wide range of insights and sympathies drawn from across the ecumenical spectrum, really conforms to the views of no single communion – his own included.

Working out the principle that God is known in this world through mediated action (Jesus Christ, the mediator, being the epitome of this action), Colwell lays out an interesting argument that evangelicalism in its various expressions has generally prized the idea that God is known (in Christ) by immediate, that is direct, divine action. Such an emphasis on immediate knowledge of God as standard can regularly seem to render not only baptism and the Lord's Supper, but also the church and ministry (to give but a few examples) peripheral and even superfluous to the life of the modern Christian; he contends further that Christian life lived out on the principle that knowledge of God is gained immediately entails the taking of a subjectivistic and perilous road. To his credit, this concern for mediated knowledge of God (commended as offered to us not only through baptism and the Lord's Supper but also through Church, Word, Confirmation, Cleansing, Healing, Confirmation, Ministry, and Marriage – each added 'sacrament' receiving a chapter) does *not* lead him to embrace the Roman Catholic error that God's working in the world is 'imprisoned' in these forms of mediation, such that the mere

administration of them binds God. Yet, about this interesting proposal, several concerns can be registered.

The first is a biblical concern. To its credit, Colwell's treatment is regularly informed by appeal to biblical and particularly New Testament passages. However, at a deeper level, Colwell has not shown either that our Scriptures contain even a latent theology of the sacraments *taken collectively*, let alone that his quite elaborate scheme of multi-channeled mediation of knowledge of God is scripturally authentic. As for the first, the only New Testament scripture which even mentions baptism and the Lord's Supper in conjunction with one another is 1 Corinthians 10; a sober reading of this passage would not lead one to believe that Paul was himself there and then building an elaborate theology of the sacraments. This being so, if scriptural warrant is critical, and the biblical material is in short supply, simplicity has much to commend it in sacramental theology. There is a greater Scriptural burden of proof on John Colwell than he seems to have acknowledged in this matter of multiplying rites, calling them sacraments, and building up a theology of mediation. It is not enough to speak of the 'implicit ordaining of each of these ecclesial rites by Jesus' (p.5). This theology lacks a substantive biblical foundation-laying.

Secondly, the concomitant of Colwell's insistence that in this world, God is known only by mediated means (hence the need for multiplied rites) seems to have the unintended effect of rendering God *less* accessible under his scheme than the one he aims to displace. If God is, in this world, *only* available to us, in connection with the gospel, by the media Colwell specifies, then the heavens are relatively closed under this scheme compared to another, which Colwell has rejected from his past exposure to evangelicalism and the charismatic movement. Here there are two considerations which concern me. For one, it follows from his view that exceptional biblical cases aside (the penitent thief of Luke 23.43; Paul on the Damascus road in Acts 9), the believers of the New Testament era either had experience of God through these media, or not at all. I cannot see that Christian experiential knowledge of God in the New

Testament is so confined to these media as is proposed. Does the account of Lydia's conversion conform to it (Acts 16), or that of the Galatians – who were reminded by Paul that they had received the Spirit by 'hearing with faith' (3.2) or that of the Ephesians, for whom Paul prayed that Christ might 'dwell in their hearts by faith' (3.17)? The emphasis here is not so much on the media employed by the Spirit in reaching the believer as on there being a divine action which engages and engenders faith. It is significant that Protestant theology has long emphasized that divine regeneration, when narrowly conceived, is *itself* an immediate act of the Spirit. While he has avoided 'imprisoning' the Spirit in the *ex opere operato* sense, it is not clear that that he has avoided the error entirely. (This is not a plea for the opposite error of an utterly casual relationship between Word, sacrament and divine action). For another, there are the numerous and persistent reports from the Arab world of sincere men and women who encounter Jesus in dream and vision; Jesus is reported to advise them of a person who will soon speak to them or soon offer them a book. So, unmediated knowledge of God has *not* vanished from this world. The categories are too tight. Colwell is riding a pendulum, which he hopes will deliver from subjectivism; but at the end of this pendulum swing stands ritualism.

Third, there lingers the difficult question of the relationship of the Word to the sacraments. Historically, Protestant theology has seen the two sacraments, baptism and the Supper, as auxiliary to the preaching of the Word. The grace offered in one is offered in the other, yet the two sacraments stand in a position of dependency on the Word for their meaning and for their proper administration. They are the word of the Gospel made visible. In Colwell, this relationship is under new management. The Word is numbered *among* his multiplied sacraments, but is – in the end – only ranked *with* them. There is no primacy reserved for the Word, written and preached. Knowledge of God can be gained as truly through the sacrament of healing, or confirmation – apparently – as through the Word. Whatever this is, this is not theological advance. J.I. Packer, describing Thomas Cranmer's sacramental theology in 1964, wisely cautioned against any view 'that awarded more efficacy to the sacraments than to the

preaching of the Word'. Colwell ranks all his multiplied sacraments equally, and the danger of doing so seems identical to the one against which Packer cautioned.

Here is an engaging, thought-provoking book based on very wide reading and deep reflection; it is an interesting example of what evangelical theology can absorb (and sadly, jettison) through ecumenical dialogue. That it in some respects disappoints should provide no one who is eager to advance in understanding sacramental theology with an excuse for shunning it.

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