

MEET THE Friends

by Paul Anderson

FRIENDS AND SACRAMENTS

A common misconception among newcomers to Quakerism is the idea that Friends don't believe in the sacraments. This is far from the truth. Friends believe in the sacramental work of the Present Christ so strongly that they refuse to reduce it to an outward symbol or ceremony. Sacramental reality is incarnational, not formalistic, and this is a Christian testimony the world still needs to hear.

It may be helpful to consider first the meaning of the word *sacrament*. A sacrament may be defined as "an outward and visible sign of an invisible and spiritual reality." A sacrament is not that spiritual reality, but it points to it. Therefore, as Friends seek to live in the grace and power of the Present Christ, we ask the question, "What is the best physical means of representing the spiritual reality we know in Christ?" In this sense, Friends' understanding of sacraments is radical.

THE WORD *radical* means pertaining to the root of the matter, and their search was all the more necessary as a corrective to the way sacraments were abused in seventeenth-century England. While baptism should have signified

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all . . . be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.

George Fox

conversion to Christ and repentance from sin, it was more of a cultural ritual. People became members of a religious institution, but there was little sign of lives being changed. While the bread and wine were taken with regularity, there was little evidence that men and women were communing with Christ in transforming ways. To these inconsistencies Friends posed the radical notion that the spiritual reality *is* the priority, and that it can be experienced *without* the outward rites.

The medieval church observed at least thirty sacraments, and the Catholic Church reduced the number to seven. With the advent of the Reformation the number was reduced to the two that are most vivid in Scripture. Friends' interpretation, then, went the next step beyond that. They saw that the outward rites could be confused too easily with a magical or instrumental formula, and their testimony was clear that while these may be helpful for humans, they are *never* necessary for God's working. Further, they may detract from the focus on Christ's work, which is ever accessible by the response of faith to what God alone has done.

MEET THE FRIENDS SERIES

- ① Quaker Beginnings,
- ② Quaker Testimonies & Distinctives,
- ③ Friends and Worship,
- ④ Friends and Ministry,
- ⑤ Friends and Sacraments,
- ⑥ Friends as Peacemakers,
- ⑦ Friends and the Kingdom of God

FRIENDS believe that baptism is the only hope for living under the lordship of Jesus Christ. We don't believe that baptism requires a "hydraulic ceremony." John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water.... But after me will come one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." This spiritual reality is the "one baptism" described by Paul (Ephesians 4:5).

Baptism by fire depicts the spiritual change that happens within the life of one who abides in Christ and in whom Christ abides. The word *baptize* means to immerse, to saturate, to take on the characteristics of the substance in which something is immersed. So spiritual baptism is more of an abiding *immersion*. We abide in Christ, and He in us, and we immerse ourselves in His Spirit in an ongoing sense. Spiritual baptism is not a once-and-for-all induction. It is an *ongoing spiritual event* that purifies and transforms the individual, bringing conformity to Christ.

FRIENDS believe that spiritual communion is not limited to the swallowing of the wine and wafer. These may be helpful reminders of our Lord's body—broken for us—and His lifeblood—poured out for us—but they are not prerequisites for Him to be present. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). In every gathering of believers Christ is present, and every meal is potentially a sacramental experience. As often as we eat and drink, we call to the present the memory of our Lord's sacrifice for us. Our prayer then becomes, "as this nourishment is to our bodies, Lord, so are You to our souls."

Friends vary as to their practice of the ordinances. Some believe that any use of outward rites diminishes our testimony that the spiritual reality is sufficient alone. Elton Trueblood says, "If we have the reality, nothing else is required; if we do not have the reality, nothing else will suffice."* Other groups believe the main issue is the *meaningful* use of outward sacraments. These Friends still believe they are not necessary, but they allow "liberty of conscience" for those who may find them helpful.

Still, Friends believe that adding *anything* to the work of Christ may diminish that work. Indeed, not only do Friends testify against dead formalism, they caution against lively formalism, as well. Dependence on outward means detracts from the inward reality, and the only mediation necessary or effective is that which is accomplished through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus the Word became *flesh*, not a formal rite, and this is the heart of the New Covenant.

If sacraments are indeed a physical sign of a spiritual reality, Friends pose a radical and incarnational witness. The root of the matter involves identifying the most effective means of communicating the grace and power of the Present Christ. This can be nothing other than the *lives* of those in whom He abides and who seek to live under His lordship. For those who still desire tangible evidence of a spiritual reality, Friends affirm with Fox, "Let your lives preach." The most effective sign of His presence is the *changed and changing lives* of those who are humble learners in the school of Christ.

*Elton Trueblood, *An Introduction to Quakers*, Friends United Press, p. 12.