

HOLY COMMUNION:
ALTAR SACRAMENT FOR MAKING
A SACRIFICIAL SIN OFFERING,
OR TABLE SACRAMENT
FOR NOURISHING A LIFE OF SERVICE?

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The title spells out the alternative I would like the reader to consider: Is Holy Communion more appropriately considered the "table sacrament" or, as is more commonly accepted, the "altar sacrament"? I will make my preference clear. In Holy Communion, I believe Jesus Christ to be offering nourishment for a different way to live—namely, the way of freely chosen service to others, as opposed to violent domination over others. "Table sacrament" more appropriately conveys the sense of nourishment toward a new life. I will support this positive reasoning in favor of "table sacrament" through an appeal to Christian scripture. I will also suggest a negative reasoning against "altar sacrament," by questioning whether the very reference to "altar" betrays a link to violence, with its base in the blood of sacrifice. For this negative argument, the support will come primarily from the brilliant and far-reaching theories of René Girard regarding the relation between religion and violence.

I would like us to consider whether the most obvious point of the relation between religion and violence—namely, rituals of sacrifice—has been precariously intermingled with the church's practices and experiences of the "altar sacrament." Girard's theories force us to ask: Is not the altar of sacrifice essentially the site for a ritualized form of collective violence?

Girard contends that there are overwhelming cultural and anthropological forces that make it difficult for religions to free themselves from such violent underpinnings. He considers that all religions, in fact, are cultural manifestations of a generative mimetic scapegoating mechanism, a natural human/social mechanism which contains an all-against-all, community-wide violence by means of an all-against-one act of violence, i.e., a scapegoating. Religion is, according to this theory, the primary cultural institution that forms in the aftermath of what Robert Hamerton-Kelly summarily calls the "Generative Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism, or "GMSM" event (1994). Institutionalized religion fortifies the relative peace that the event has accomplished through a three-fold structure: (1) laws and prohibitions, established to prevent further outbreaks of mimetic violence; (2) mythical stories of the GMSM event, told from the perspective of the perpetrators as a means to justify their violence and disguise it behind the veil of the sacred; and (3) ritual reenactments of the GMSM event, most commonly in the form of blood sacrifice, that channel any continuing violent impulses into structured, contained releases. We must be bold to ask of each religion, then, the ways in which it manifests and perpetuates the GMSM. This includes Christianity. To the extent that Christians practice religion, we can expect to find effects of the GMSM in essential aspects of the church, such as its practice of the "altar sacrament."

Girardian support for my argument, however, does not end with this negative thesis regarding the "altar sacrament." Nor does Girardian criticism leave us with a wholly negative assessment of the Christian tradition. In fact, Girard himself experienced a conversion of sorts (see Golsan 129-30), as he began to see his basic premises and theories already revealed in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, especially the gospel narratives of Jesus Christ. He came to view the Christian faith—in spite of its susceptibility to the violent forces of religion—as unique in its core message of revealing the one true God. Contrary to the gods of mythology, the Christian message, through Jesus Christ, reveals the true God to be on the side of the GMSM's victims. As such, the Gospel of Jesus Christ stands in opposition to the three-fold structure of religion: (1) it frees people from the oppressive systems of laws and prohibitions;¹ (2) it demythologizes the mythical stories told from the perspective of the perpetrators;² and (3) it

¹ A theme of St. Paul and his criticism of the Law? (see Hamerton-Kelly 1992).

² A theme of St. John's emphasis on Jesus, the Lamb of God, as bearing witness to the Truth?

makes obsolete the need for rituals of sacrificial violence.³ The Gospel opens up the way for new life, and for rituals that nourish the new life, which we might be hesitant to label under the umbrella "religion."

I note with interest, as one who stands in the Lutheran tradition, that Girard, in using the term "gospel," resorts to the same term as did Luther, in trying to mark a difference between a core message of the Christian faith and the church's practice of religion. It may be beneficial for the church to make a distinction: that what was established by Jesus Christ and the Spirit of His Resurrection was not a new religion but a Gospel, a message of good news that brings with it a power to live in new ways (i.e., the "Kingdom of God"). I mention this connection to Luther with the thought that what I am suggesting here is nothing less than a refocused agenda for reforming the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Luther essentially began the Reformation by standing against the violence of the church in his time. I would contend that René Girard's theories help to crystallize our insight into violence and religion in ways that could help the church take the next giant step forward in furthering the Reformation. Girard's theories make clear the need for a Reformation, in the first place. The same significant cultural forces that sacrificed Christ on the cross are constantly working to sacrifice the Christian truth as well. They are constantly working to substitute religion for gospel.

I will not look at the whole panorama of the church in need of reformation, but will focus on its central practice, the sacrament of Holy Communion. Even focusing on just one sacrament is too broad a topic. My treatment of it attempts to remain anchored in an examination of its beginnings through the witness of the Christian scriptures. I also venture into two other eras that I feel are crucial: those of Constantine and of the Reformation. The conclusion we arrive at is that the table sacrament is offered as a vaccine against our disease, namely our enslavement to both mimetic rivalry and the sacrificial practices of the GSM. Yet the contagious power of the mechanism constantly threatens to use the vaccine as a stimulus for catching the disease. The sacrament, rather than being self-sacrificial or anti-sacrificial as intended, becomes just plain sacrificial. The insights of Girardian mimetic theory can provide more than an ounce of prevention against such an outcome.

³ Mark's framing of the passion story as standing opposite the Temple? (see Hamerton-Kelly 1994).

Mimetic servanthood as remedy to mimetic rivalry

I contend that the primary theme raised in connection with the table sacrament in the New Testament is that of *servanthood*. And, in light of mimetic theory, this proposed theme of the Eucharist might be said to be a remedy offered for mimetic rivalry. Such rivalry feeds the need to dominate the other, or to succumb and be dominated. A life nourished with the substance of Christ's servanthood, on the other hand, offers the possibility of a new way of living outside of mimetic rivalry. Girardian anthropology postulates that there is nothing more basic to human life than mimetic desire and the rivalry which results from it. It would be fitting, then, for this most basic Christian practice—as basic as eating a meal—to sustain the believer in a life freed from the rivalrous effects of mimetic desire. I will attempt to show that this is precisely the picture of the sacrament that the New Testament presents to us with its theme of servanthood.

The four gospel accounts of the "Last Supper" are among the passages that deal most directly with the institution of the table sacrament. Beginning with the synoptic versions of the Lord's Supper, Luke's version is the one that stands out as significantly different. Luke adds an insertion to Mark's narrative immediately after the instituting words: it is a parallel version of the "dispute about greatness." Whereas Mark's version comes near the middle of his story (10:41-45), Luke has placed it at the climax of his story as part of the passion narrative, *adjacent to the institution of the Lord's Supper*. This "dispute" is an obvious instance of mimetic rivalry⁴ that has broken out despite the fact that the disciples have just received a taste of its remedy. They will need to continue to "do this in remembrance" (22:19) of the one who offers it to them. Apparently, a regular feeding will be required. Jesus goes on to explain the point of such an unusual diet:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (22:25b-27)

⁴ "Dispute" is the NRSV translation of *φιλονεικία*; Walter Wink suggests that Luke 22:24-27 illustrates "just what Girard means by mimetic rivalry" (1992, 111).

In short, the disciples are to live in a way that subverts the normal order of things. In Luke's order of things, such an explanation immediately follows the meal they will need to nourish them for this subverted manner of living—a meal to continually feed them with the substance of the Lord who came to serve.

Luke's conjunction of the two passages causes one to wonder if the connection can also be traced to his synoptic partners, Matthew and Mark. A look at the context of the "Dispute about Greatness" shows some obvious sacramental language. When the Sons of Zebedee ask to be seated at Jesus' side when he comes into his glory, Jesus responds, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20:22). Mark goes one better by adding a reference to baptism: "or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Placing the "dispute" passage near the story's mid-point, with both a reference backwards to Jesus' baptism and ahead to the Lord's Supper and Passion, Mark has placed both sacraments under a banner of servanthood: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many" (10:45).

The evidence of a connection between the table sacrament and the theme of servanthood goes beyond the synoptic gospels. St. Paul places a version of the synoptic Words of Institution in the wider context of his scolding of the Corinthians for their abuses at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34). The abuses are quite specific: contrary to modern worries about including the wrong people,⁵ Paul claims that the Corinthians are wrongly excluding people from their meal—specifically, those of lesser material means. The more well-to-do members of the congregation are overdrinking and overeating, while poorer members go away hungry. We might conjecture that the wealthier members are caught up in a mimetic rivalry that results in their ignoring, or "sacrificing," the needy among them. Paul's remedy for mimetic rivalry is mimetic servanthood. He invokes the Words of Institution, emphasizing the phrase "Do this for the remembrance of me."⁶ I suggest his point is that a more fitting memorial for the crucified

⁵ Many church denominations have used Paul's words (11:28: "Examine yourselves") to require all manners of self-examination—thereby using the passage as an excuse for exclusion rather than as the exhortation for inclusion that I am suggesting.

⁶ Paul's version of the Words of Institution is the only of the four that repeats "Do this in remembrance of me" after both the bread and cup; Luke records the phrase after the bread, while Mark and Matthew lack it altogether. We might even wonder if *μνησκόμαι*, "to remember," and *μιμέομαι*, "to imitate," are etymologically related words.

one would be to practice the kind of servanthood that he himself lived when he gave up his body and poured out his blood for all people. In short, disciples are to imitate their Lord in serving.

If Luke and Paul still seem only to imply the connection between the table sacrament and servanthood, John makes it boldly explicit. John 13:1-17 takes the tradition of the Lord's Supper itself and substitutes for the traditional narrative (i.e., one containing the Words of Institution) a narrative whose entire focus is that of servanthood. The focus is not on the eating of bread and the sharing of the cup, but rather on the master's kneeling down as a servant and washing his disciples' feet. Jesus' explanation in verses 16-17—"Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."—bears resemblance to features we have noted in both Luke and Paul. The first line resembles Luke's discussion about who is greater. The second line carries Paul's emphasis on doing, turning it into a beatitude. Moreover, this entire episode of modeling servanthood might be considered an example of positive mimesis. Jesus is explicitly calling for imitation: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15). Disciples who imitate this master who serves have a greater chance of avoiding the pitfall of mimetic rivalry.

These passages—Luke 22:14-27 (and parallels), 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, John 13:1-17—present a strong case for servanthood as the theme that is most positively connected with the table sacrament in the New Testament.

Table sacrament becomes altar sacrament: servanthood becomes servitude

In an essay of this length, it is not possible to trace the effects of the GMSM on the Christian practice of the Eucharist through all of subsequent history. My working hypothesis, in light of the cultural theories that spring from mimetic theory, is that this anti-sacrificial, or self-sacrificial, ritual that Jesus instituted has been constantly under pressure from human culture to revert to a sacrificial ritual. I will focus primarily on the period in history with which I am most familiar out of my Lutheran tradition—namely, the Reformation. But first, I will speculate briefly on a most crucial lapse that has thwarted the Christian attempt to transform human cultures based on domination and the sacrificial spirit. My candidate for the most significant event—the one that interrupted the connection between Holy Communion

and servanthood—was the ascendancy of the Christian faith to imperial religion at the time of Constantine. It was then that the Christian faith became the religion of one whom Jesus warned his disciples not to become, one of those "kings of the Gentiles" who "lord it over them" (Mark 10:42-43 and parallels). If Holy Communion was to be an anti-sacrificial ritual that nourished believers for a life that subverts the normal order of things, it was greatly threatened by the fact that the Christian religion was now to be wedded with the normal order of things. The theme of servanthood could not help but begin to take a back seat within such a system of domination. And the Christian gospel would have a difficult struggle against becoming a religion of the GSM, against finding itself on the side of the persecutors rather than on the side of the victims. It would be made to serve the forces of violence. A number of studies have been done in this century (beginning with Harnack in 1905) that show that the stance of the early church was consistently nonviolent. After Constantine, by contrast, we find the first known Christian adaptations of "Just War Theory" (see Cahill 1994, chapter 4); and the history of the Christian religion and violence has been a bloody one ever since.

I propose that the practice of the table sacrament, and its crucial influence on the Christian faith, has often been inverted since that time. The Servant Church became the church-to-be-served—in the fashion of the Empire that it was now partners with—and unfaithful to the One who came not to be served but to serve. The identity was no longer that of the church serving in the world, but of people coming to serve the church, whose service occasionally spilled out into the world. And that service of the church became increasingly a coerced servitude under the threat of a God whose wrath demanded sacrifices, such as the appeasement of good works, or the payment of money. In the extreme, serving in the church became a way to escape the world, either in the present or at least in the afterlife, rather than a means of grace to serve *in* the world.

Even worse, the Eucharist may have entered the service of a violent empire that needs to continue justifying its violence. Post-Constantinian Christians need to ask themselves: To what extent did the Christian "religion" succumb to sacrificial language and ritual? Does the church run the risk of connections with violence, for example, if it makes a sacrificial reading of the cross as a means to atone a wrathful God? And would such a sacrificial reading of the faith manifest itself in the table sacrament being turned into an *altar* sacrament? In other words, rather than being a means of grace to feed disciples in the alternate life of servanthood, the "table

sacrament" becomes an "altar sacrament" whereby worshipers may bring their "sin offerings" (i.e., sacrifices) to appease an angry, vengeful God—whence, the subsequent emphasis on forgiveness of sins as befitting a "sin offering" piety. The sacrifice of the altar sacrament is thus in the form of the ultimate, substituted victim, Jesus Christ, sacrificed by God himself. Such violence within the Godhead must be propitiated by continued sacrifices. Moreover, continued violence against the empire's enemies can be justified by this violent God. The vaccine favors contraction of the disease.

But according to Girardian anthropology, it is essential to see that Christ is *not* the ultimate sacrifice in the sense that we are satisfying some need for vengeance in the Godhead. (Did St. Anselm's theory of the atonement make God the chief sacrificer, who demanded the sacrifice of God's own Son?). God does not require Christ's sacrifice; God is not violent. Girardian anthropology helps us to see that we are the ones who require sacrifice. It is our violence that puts Christ on the cross, not God's. We might summarize the Christian faith as being based on Jesus' faithfulness to God's nonviolent alternative to living in community, a faithfulness that the GSM could not abide and desperately tried to push out of this world and onto the cross. Through God's power of resurrection and new life, however, the GSM only succeeded in exposing its violence for all time. The GSM's sacrificial victim is God's Vindicated One. At the same time, God succeeds in offering believers Christ's very Spirit of faithfully living out an alternative to violence. Through means of grace, such as the table sacrament, disciples of Jesus are empowered to live with *agape-love*, which, from a Girardian point of view, might be said to be a non-rivalrous form of mimetic desire. *Agape-love*, issuing in acts of service, is the remedy for mimetic rivalry that issues in acts of violence and domination.

The beginning of a reformation

Let us focus on one moment in the long history of the church, when criticism of church practice and theology became explicit to the point of a movement we have come to call the Reformation.⁷ Martin Luther criticized

⁷ It would be a fruitful study, I think, to link the events of the Reformation with Cesáreo Bandera's recent theses concerning a turning point in the history of literature, which he dates at the same time of the Reformation. An interesting point of correlation is Bandera's hypothesis that the "sacred allergy" that developed in literature was brought on by "the increasing centrality of the crucifixion in the late medieval experience of the sacred" (245-8)

the Roman Catholic Church for the imperial practices of the papacy and called for thorough-going reform. He especially focused on St. Paul's critique of his own ancestral religion and generalized it to include the late medieval church (see Hamerton-Kelly 1992, 8-9). Most pertinent for our discussion here is the fact that Luther focused his criticisms of the church around its practice of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.

A primary example is his treatise "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," which comments on the Roman practice of each of the seven sacraments, under the banner of what he sees as an imperial enslavement, a "Babylonian Captivity." Luther begins with "the sacrament of the bread," devoting more than a third of the treatise to it. He specifies three points of captivity: (1) the exclusion of the laity from communing with the cup (132-43); (2) requiring the doctrine of transubstantiation as the only way to believe in Christ's presence in the sacrament (143-52); and (3) generating the belief "that the mass is a good work and a sacrifice." (152-78). The latter relates most directly to our discussion (though the first two points are essentially exclusionary rules that, from a Girardian standpoint, are clear signs of sacrificial practice). Luther calls this third captivity "by far the most wicked of all" because it is an abuse that "has brought an endless host of other abuses in its train, so that the faith of this sacrament has become utterly extinct and the holy sacrament has been turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business" (152). I believe that Luther had correctly named the problem here. He had a sense that the Roman church's emphasis on sacrifice was behind the many abuses he cites.

Yet, from a Girardian perspective, Luther might be considered as having been ahead of his time. He was able to identify correctly the stumbling block as related to the sacrificial spirit, but he did not yet have an adequate understanding of sacrifice. What follows, then, is the beginnings of a Girardian evaluation of Luther's theological response to the sacrificial church practices of his day. My working hypothesis is that Luther was right about the existence of sacrificial practices, but I believe his response to have been inadequate (hence, the continued presence of sacrificial tendencies in the church's practice of the Eucharist to this day).

After having postulated the connection between sacrifice and abuse of the table sacrament in "The Babylonian Captivity," Luther does little

and the fact that Luther is recognized by many as having proclaimed the most profound "theology of the cross" since St. Paul.

beyond that to shed further light on the nature of sacrifice and why it might lead to the kind of abuses he names. Rather, he simply contrasts it with his view of the sacrament, namely, that it is a new covenant, or "testament," that carries the promise of the forgiveness of sins (154-5). His most basic contrast is between the actions of making a promise and of making a sacrifice:

Therefore, just as disturbing a testament or accepting a promise differs diametrically from offering a sacrifice, so it is a contradiction in terms to call the mass a sacrifice, for the former is something that we receive and the latter is something we give. (172)

This correlates to the Lutheran opposition between faith/grace and works. Luther wants to emphasize what believers receive, not what they give. He sees the promise of forgiveness received by faith as opposed to the act of sacrifice as their gift to God. He claims that the Roman mass emphasized sacrifice to the point that the priests thought themselves to be resacrificing Christ every time they celebrated the mass (170). The emphasis was thus on what they were doing, rather than on what God is doing in promising worshipers the forgiveness of sins through the one-time sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The words of institution give them Jesus' last will and testament on the night before his death; with the promise made, Jesus' sacrificial death need not be repeated. The mass is not a repeat of the sacrifice; it is a proclamation of the promise, in order for each believer to claim the promise anew in faith. And so the mass has the character of promise rather than that of sacrifice.

But Luther makes another contrast as part of his argument: he also contrasts Christ's sacrifice with Mosaic sacrifices, the New Testament with the Old Testament. It warrants quoting at some length. After reciting the many promises of the Hebrew scriptures, Luther says:

And so it finally came to the most perfect promise of all, that of the new testament, in which, in plain words, life and salvation are freely promised, and actually granted to those who believe the promise. And [God] distinguishes this testament from the old one when [God] calls it the "new testament" (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25). For the old testament given through Moses was not a promise of the forgiveness of sins or of eternal things, but of temporal things, namely, of the land of Canaan, by which no

[one] was renewed in spirit to lay hold on the heavenly inheritance. Wherefore also it was necessary that, as a figure of Christ, a dumb beast should be slain, In whose blood the same testament might be confirmed, as the blood corresponded to the testament and the sacrifice corresponded to the promise. But here Christ says "the new testament in my blood" (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25), not somebody else's, but his own, by which grace is promised through the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, that we may obtain the inheritance. (157)

Luther comes very close to getting at the relevant differences. In fact, he even says it: the difference in Christ's testament is that he offered up his *own blood* rather than somebody else's. The Girardian anthropology makes it clear that the sacrificial institutions offer up somebody else's blood.

But Luther never quite makes the connection between his experience of the Roman mass as sacrificial and a generalized understanding of sacrifice as a ritual representation of human domination and victim-making. Instead, the substance of the above stated distinctions are blurred. Moreover, Luther's distinction between old and new versions of the promise does not do justice to the Hebrew faith, which would see God's promises as bearing much more than simply the earthly claim to the land of Canaan. For one thing, Luther's "heavenly" gift of forgiveness of sins is promised to the Jews as well. In fact, one of the most common forms of Jewish sacrifices was the "sin offering," a sacrifice connected with God's promise of forgiveness. That is why I contend that, if Luther's version of a new covenant focuses only on forgiveness of sins, it really might not be so new after all. The crucial distinction is the one Luther glosses over and the one we have emphasized: being clear about the difference between our sacrifice of others and Christ's knowing sacrifice of himself to our human sacrificial cults. We now turn to a more elaborate critique of Luther's focus on "forgiveness of sins."

"Forgiveness of sins" vs. "justification by faith"

Is Luther's focus on "forgiveness of sins" as the promise contained in the Lord's Supper one that we find in scripture? The most frequently used version of 'the Words' in the liturgy includes the phrase "forgiveness of sins" in connection with the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my

blood, shed for you and for all people/*or the forgiveness of sin.*" But how many take it for granted that the reference to forgiveness is common to all four biblical versions of "the Words"? It is not. In fact, only Matthew

specifically includes the words "for the forgiveness of sins." If Luther wishes to narrow the theme of the table sacrament solely down to that of a promise for the forgiveness of sins, then the overall witness of scripture should support it. I maintain that our examination here of the most relevant passages simply does not add up to that kind of support.

We might even go beyond the matter of the table sacrament and ask: Does "forgiveness of sins" represent a central theme of the New Testament in the first place? I was rather shocked, in checking a concordance, to find that the actual phrase "forgiveness of sins" is used only fourteen times.⁸ There are ten occurrences of the phrase in the synoptic tradition, eight of those in Luke-Acts. We have mentioned Matthew's sole usage in the "Words of Institution"; Mark's lone occurrence describes John the Baptist's mission as one of "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Mark never uses the phrase in connection with Jesus' mission, nor to specifically name it as a gift of God's grace.

Mark does speak elsewhere of forgiving, but does not use "forgiveness of sins" as a catch-phrase. In the story of Jesus healing the paralytic (2:1-12), there is a distinction made between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness. The scribes want to make forgiving one's sins an activity of God alone, presumably after one has made the appropriate sin offering. Jesus is circumventing the sacrificial channels for forgiveness and scandalously claims it as a human activity of the "Son of Man." Another significant Markan discussion regarding forgiveness is appended to the "Lesson of the Withered Fig Tree" (11:20-25). Here, the emphasis is on the human need for mutual forgiveness, for the sake of peaceful life in community. Gil Bailie (audiotape 3) points out that having faith to "say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea'" (11:23) is not about the faith strong enough to move just any mountain—as it is generally quoted—but about the faith to dispense of "*this* mountain," i.e., the Temple mountain of sacrifice. Can human community peacefully exist without its sacrificial bloodletting? Mark is giving a mini-lesson about what it takes to live without this mount of sacrifice: faith, prayer, and forgiving one another's trespasses. The latter is essential for breaking the circle of vengeance that is otherwise broken through sacrifice. I heartily concur with this emphasis on our human need to forgive one another. What I question

⁸ In the Greek: ἀφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. The 14 occurrences are: Matt. 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77, 3:3, 24:47; Acts 2:38, 5:31, 10:43, 13:38, 26:18; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:22, 10:14.

is the *language* of forgiveness in the Christian Scriptures that emphasizes what *God* does for us in Jesus Christ. Modern Christians may meaningfully choose to use the word “forgiveness” for God’s redemptive activity, but they need not do so if they are aware that New Testament authors seemingly shied away from it—perhaps because of its connection with sacrificial practices.

The only New Testament writer who does seem to use the phrase as a significant theological catch-phrase is Luke. He begins by placing it in the prophetic song of Zechariah; he then repeats Mark’s usage in reference to John the Baptist’s mission. (Why did Matthew *not* repeat it?) Only Luke extends this mission of John the Baptist to be one for Christ and his followers as well. After not using the phrase throughout the rest of the Gospel, Luke does finish with the proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as commissioning words of the about-to-be-ascended Jesus (Luke 24:47). “Forgiveness of sins” then reappears five times in the preaching of Acts.

There are several things to note about Luke’s usage, however. First, being rooted in John the Baptist’s mission, “forgiveness of sins” is connected most clearly with baptism, not communion. Secondly, it is usually paired with “repentance” (μετάνοια).⁹ The gift of forgiveness in Luke would seem to be part of a life-turning event. Finally, very significant from a Girardian standpoint is the fact that Luke twice narrates a prayer to God for forgiveness in the midst of a scapegoating event. Luke’s theme of forgiveness should be seen in the context of these unique narratives: Jesus’ dying request of forgiveness for his persecutors from the cross (Luke 23:34) and Stephen’s similar dying request under a barrage of stones (Acts 7:60). Here, *forgiveness means an end to vengeance*. It is the dying wish of two witnesses (Gr., μαρτύρος, transliterated as “martyrs”), Jesus and Stephen, to two truths about God: (1) God is on the side of those being scapegoated; and (2) God breaks the cycle of vengeance by responding with loving forgiveness instead of mimetic violence. Can we fully understand forgiveness from Luke’s perspective if we abstract it from his narrative contrast of forgiveness in the face of the GSM’s attempt to end vengeance through scapegoating?

⁹ Four of the first five occurrences of “forgiveness of sins” in Luke-Acts are coupled with repentance.

Perhaps the most surprising fact regarding "forgiveness of sins" in the New Testament is that the phrase is not recorded in even a single instance throughout the entire Johannine corpus, nor in a single letter attributed with certainty to St. Paul.¹⁰ The latter is especially puzzling, since the Reformation theme of "forgiveness of sin" was supposedly founded on the theology of Paul. The only times that Paul talks about forgiving at all (2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13) concern exhortations of our need to forgive one another—not to cite God's act of forgiveness. *St. Paul never uses the phrase "forgiveness of sins" to circumscribe a major theological theme.*

St. Paul does make liberation from the power of sin a central theme of his letters. Especially in Romans and Galatians, he uses the juridical language of the law, namely, that we, the persecutors, are declared righteous, or justified, by a gracious act of God in Jesus Christ. To use more common language of the court, all people are pronounced "Innocent!" And this courtroom language is more than symbolic or metaphorical of some heavenly courtroom. Rather, it is rooted in the earthly reality of the judgment chambers in which Jesus was declared "Guilty!" and sentenced to the Roman means of execution. We must be very clear about this courtroom picture. The "Anselmian" picture of atonement, that Luther seemingly accepted,¹¹ is of a heavenly courtroom in which humankind is pronounced "Guilty!", and Jesus atones by stepping in to take our sentence. But the courtroom scenes that matter the most in the gospels are the actual earthly courtrooms in which Jesus is pronounced "Guilty!" by human law. St. Paul came to see the human institutions of the Law as bound together with the powers of sin and death. The Pauline language of justification is thus a language of reversal. God's power of righteousness is seen to overturn the verdicts of human justice and to offer believers a new power under which to live their lives. Twentieth-century Christians must decide, then, how well our simple, common use of "forgiveness of sins" translates this complex Pauline idea of an imputed righteousness, or what is basically an acquittal.

The critical question regarding Luther's theological alternative is: Did he equivocate by changing Paul's language of justification into language

¹⁰ Paul comes closest in Romans 3:25, where he uses *πάρεσιν* rather than the more common *ἄφεσιν*, the only use of this verb in the entire N.T. His more complex phrase of *τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων* can be translated as "the passing over of sins previously committed."

¹¹ See Luther's so-called "Happy Exchange" in "The Freedom of a Christian" (286).

of forgiveness? And does that open the door to the same sacrificial readings he may have been trying to avoid? The crucial difference between "forgiveness" and "justification," I think, is this: "forgiveness of sins" is more vague and imprecise and so is more prone to be interpreted sacrificially in terms of a sin offering. We noted above that "forgiveness of sins" in Luke should not be abstracted from his narrative picture of God lovingly intervening into the violence of human vengeance with a message of forgiveness. Nor should Paul's "justification by grace through faith" become an abstracted notion of "forgiveness of sins." The latter can easily be made to service religious rituals of making sacrificial sin offerings, that is, rituals for the sake of justifying the persecutors; whereas "justification through the faith of Jesus Christ" must remain more clearly linked to God's having justified the Innocent Victim of human scapegoating. The language of justification, when it is joined inextricably to Christ the Victim, is the language of vindication. God's grace is thus the free gift of vindication for those who are united with the Innocent Victim through the baptismal sharing of both his scapegoated death on the cross and then his being raised from the dead, which is God's reversal of the sentence by human courts of law. Sharing in Christ's resurrection means sharing in God's act of vindication, even though believers do not share in Christ's innocence. Although in reality all people are on the side of the persecutors who cry "Guilty!", baptism into Christ's death and resurrection means that believers participate in God's reversal of the verdict, and they are relocated on the side of the Innocent Victim. That, it seems to me, is truly grace.

My concern, then, is that the common use of the phrase "forgiveness of sins" does not adequately express the New Testament picture of salvation. The relative sparsity of usage would seem to indicate that New Testament writers found other ways to talk about God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul's portrait of liberation from sin's power is couched in terms of nothing less than the radical baptismal imagery of being put to death and rising again to new life (Rom. 6). The New Testament speaks first and foremost of repentance, a reversal of lifestyle to go along with God's reversal of the human powers of justice. Repentance involves the emergence of a new life, a life "in the Spirit." That new life is marked by having the same mind of Christ who, though he was equal to God, did not take that as an opportunity for rivalry, but instead took the form of a servant (Phil. 2). In Girardian terms, it is a life freed from mimetic rivalry in favor of a new life based on a "good mimesis" of imitating Christ. And if disciples are to live that new life, then they must be nurtured in it: they virtually are

offered the body and blood of Christ for that nourishment. I believe that being fed by the substance of Christ's servanthood, for the disciple's own life of service, is more to the point of the table sacrament than "forgiveness of sins."

Sacrifice, the table sacrament, and John 6

My basic criticism of Luther has been that he named the problem as "sacrifice" but did not understand it well enough to avoid opening the door to different versions of sacrifice. What is needed is a more fully developed anthropology. What is needed is the mimetic theory of René Girard.

Christian theology begins with the premise that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. Thus, Christ presumably reveals not only who God truly is, but also who we truly are as human beings. Theology and anthropology are wedded in the doctrine of the incarnation. The advantage I see in the work of René Girard for theology is that he provides an anthropology that actually sheds more light on matters of theology. One of his crucial premises is that ritual sacrifice, common to all religions, is a uniquely and completely *human* enterprise. It has nothing to do with the true God—presuming that God exists—and has everything to do with the gods we invent mythologically in order to support the sanctioned violence of our human cultural institutions, including religion. Girard happens to believe that the true God does exist and has been revealing the true Godself to humankind through the victims of the GSM. God's revelation has been particularly true of an oppressed group of people called the Jews, and then of one of their own, one whom Christians have come to call Jesus Christ. The Judeo-Christian scriptures testify to this self-revealing of God, though it is a gradual process that is completed only in the Christ event. But God's self-revelation also must reveal to us who we truly are. For, in order to see who God truly is, we must see that we are creatures who rely on sacrifice to contain our own violence; then we convince ourselves that sacrificial violence is some god's idea, not ours. We create gods to cover our own violence. If we do not understand this about ourselves, we will get our gods confused. We will be unable to identify a true God from a false god. Girardian theory dictates that revealed theology, if there is such a thing, must go hand-in-hand with revealed anthropology.

Girard's mimetic theory is able to do, then, what Luther was not able to do—namely, to understand that the logic of sacrifice goes to the heart of human culture in the GSM. Girard also believes that disciples of Christ should have special insight into this truth, since Christ came to expose

these sacrificial powers. More than expose them, in fact, Christ came to transform them through his ultimate act of service, his self-sacrifice to the sacrificial powers (see Girard 1987, 235-7). Disciples must be clear that Jesus' self-sacrifice is distinct from sacrifice in general. The gospel stories all clearly bear witness to the fact that Jesus entered into this sacrifice fully knowing that he would be an innocent victim. Today the term "self-sacrifice"—and even "sacrifice" as a short-hand way of meaning "self-sacrifice"—has come to mean giving of one's self. But with Christ his followers must see that it also means "sacrifice" in the original sense, at the same time. There was an old-fashioned sacrifice going on with the crucifixion. Someone else's blood was being spilled to save others (see Girard's passage on John 11:50 [1986, 112-24]). If Christ's confrontation with the powers of sacrifice is allowed to go underground, then self-sacrifice as the sole theme can be twisted by the sacrificial institutions into a means of getting well-meaning Christians to religiously *cooperate* with their sacrificing. They may be heard to say something like, "Step right up and sacrifice yourself. It's the Christ-like thing to do." If Christ's self-sacrifice is not seen to be a showdown with the sacrificial institutions, then the theme of self-sacrifice becomes a justification for creating more powerless victims.

Isn't this precisely what has happened throughout Christian history? Christian women, tragically, have been frequent victims of this ruse. They are encouraged to follow in Christ-like self-sacrifice for the sake of their families, which is often more simply a sacrifice on the altars of male-dominated society (see Bondi 1994). Monks and Christian ascetics have fallen prey to this miscomprehension through the ages. Modern pastors and others in the helping professions are also vulnerable to it. This is not to say that Christ-like self-sacrifice can never be a positive thing. My point is that it is a dangerous choice if it is made without the Christ-like knowledge of the sacrificial institutions that are always looking for willing victims.

I have suggested *servanthood* as a positive theme for the table sacrament. Might *sacrifice* be considered as a negative theme for the table sacrament? Even as worshipers are fed for a new life of servanthood, the traditional words of institution make it clear that they are fed by the body and blood of the one who was sacrificed on the cross. They might be squeamish about such cannibalistic language. But perhaps that is the point. Does Jesus Christ come not only to feed his followers, but also to confront them with the deadly reality of human sacrifice?

This brings us back to John's different strategy for passing on the tradition of the table sacrament. I propose that John can provide a model for us, a way of avoiding the sacrificial traps of miscomprehension. He was able to more clearly present both the negative and positive aspects of the table sacrament by developing them in separate narratives. The positive aspect we have already taken up in our discussion of John 13, where the evangelist models the new way of life through the footwashing episode, in the context of the traditionally sacramental setting of the Last Supper. I would also propose, then, that the negative aspect of the table sacrament is developed by John in chapter 6, which is an extended narrative on the occasion of the "Feeding of the Five Thousand." The latter is one of the few non-passion stories that John shares with the synoptic evangelists, but, as is his style, it is one that he elaborates into a lengthy theological discourse. The sacrificial language becomes so gross in this passage that the vast majority of commentators are offended and actively work to gloss over the sacrificial nature of the text. They choose instead to see it through their pre-interpretive lens of spiritualized eucharistic language.¹² I contend that such interpretations miss the point. It is John's strategy in chapter 6 to present his audience with the negative aspect of the table sacrament, i.e., to confront them with the offensive nature of sacrifice.

John is a precise theologian in making this separation; but he is also a master story-teller. To see John 6 as a development of the negative side of the Eucharist helps the reader to appreciate the ironical, almost comical, nature of this story. At the center of the story are words of great irony. Jesus tells the crowd, "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (verse 37). Yet this story is essentially about the great shrinking of a crowd which is apparently driven away because Jesus goes to great lengths to offend them. It begins with a crowd of hungry thousands who perceive a great power in Jesus through his miraculous feeding. Jesus tells them that they come to him only to get their fill of bread (6:26). But there is an even deeper issue to confront them with: they consistently misperceive the true nature of his power. They look for signs of kingship, of being able to follow a great leader into the hallowed halls of human power; they want to force him to lead their sacrificial institutions as king (verse 15). Jesus, by contrast, wants to show them the grotesque nature of their sacrificial

¹² David McCracken (162) reaches a similar conclusion regarding modern interpreters and cites Raymond Brown as an example (284-5).

institutions. The crowd remains resistant to seeing his point, so he gets very plain with them. In fact, he gets so blatant and offensive with them that verses 53-58 have notoriously offended hearers of every age. Jesus uses the most “primitive” sacrificial language of all, that of cannibalism. And John’s storytelling goes from irony to satire, when he suddenly changes his choice of words for “eat.” Having previously used the more common Greek word φαγεῖν, he switches to a much cruder form, τρώγειν, a word originally reserved for animals to describe things like cattle “munching” (audibly) on their cuds (Brown 283). The image of people “munching on” Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood ought to be adequate for driving most crowds away, should it not?

Jesus’ Jewish audience is understandably offended. After all, their ancestors had given up such “primitive” sacrificial practices centuries ago. But that is precisely the point. They had become comfortable with their own “civilized” sacrificial practices; they had ceased being offended by them. So Jesus revives just such “primitive” language in describing his own sacrifice on their altars of justice, in order to jolt them into seeing that the entire business of sacrifice is offensive. But none of them have come to Jesus for who he really is—the victim of sacrifice, rather than a victim-making king—so they are driven away. Even “many of his disciples” are left scratching their heads, remarking, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” (6:60). Jesus’ reply—“Does this offend (σκανδαλίζει) you?”—reveals most truly who he is: the stumbling block (McCracken 163). The drama at the end of the story is whether or not listeners will continue to follow Jesus. Will they be offended and leave, or will they respond with faith and follow? At story’s end, only the twelve disciples remain of an original crowd of over five thousand—and, in the story’s final note of irony, we are told that even one of those twelve is of the devil (6:70-71).

Conclusion

I propose, then, that the Church is waiting for a new time of reformation, or for the first one to be revitalized and moved forward. And I believe that the insights provided by René Girard’s theory of sacrifice can play a vital role in the continued call for reform in the church. What I have attempted to bring forward here is the crucial difference between the violent sacrificial tendencies of human institutions (most especially “religion” as distinguished from “gospel”) and the knowing self-sacrifice of Christ on the cross. When the church uses the word “sacrifice,” it must

be absolutely clear about these differences; René Girard's theories help to do that. The benefits of such clarity are no more evident, I think, than in the church's theologizing about, and practicing of, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We have attempted to present the table sacrament as a possible vaccine against the GSM. Its positive theme of mimetic servanthood can be a remedy against mimetic rivalry; its negative theme of sacrifice can bring a constant disclosure of the deadly nature of the GSM's sacrificial practices. Yet vaccines carry the danger of passing on the disease, and it seems that the table sacrament has succumbed at times to the contagious power of the GSM, resulting in the sacrificial practices it intends to ward off. I believe that the insights of Girardian mimetic theory into the workings of these mechanisms can provide more than an ounce of prevention against such an outcome.

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