

## Newsletter November 2014

This is the first in a series of monthly newsletters describing the means by which secularism and neopaganism has corrupted the Temporal Church through institutionalized churchianity, which we defined in last month's October 2014 Newsletter. In an earlier August 2012 newsletter, we discussed the tradition of baptism and in our July 2013 Newsletter we discussed the Lord's Supper in some detail. In this newsletter we shall more narrowly direct our attention to the abuse of both practices through sacramental ritualism, which is regularly taking place through institutionalized churchianity. In doing so, we shall utilize edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity* Book II, Chapter 13.2.

It is most unfortunate that the simple traditions of baptism and the Lord's Supper became the instruments of traditional formalized churchianity almost as soon as the apostles left the earthly scene. The true meaning of these practices were soon distorted and embellished through added formalism and pagan mysticism. Since that time, these rituals have been repeatedly abused from century to century ensuring the perpetuation of institutionalized churchianity over elemental first-century Christianity. The primary substance of this abuse is the insistence that these two rituals must be carried out exclusively within the religious framework of a temporal church surrounded by formally ordained clergy in a strictly prescribed manner. Through that means, they were subjugated by the temporal church and were viewed as its own exclusive property to define and to give out or withhold as it saw fit.

Theologians have always sought to find a single comprehensive word to express a complex doctrine in order to avoid becoming swamped in voluminous repetition such as the word "Trinity" when describing the complexity of the Godhead as we saw earlier in our January 2014 newsletter. In like manner, the rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper have often been reduced to a single word that purports to represent both. The word most commonly used over the centuries is "sacraments." The Latin word *sacrament* is not found in any English translation of the Bible and, like "Trinity," it is not a word used or coined by any of the New Testament writers. The primary meaning of *sacrament* is a "solemn pledge or oath." Both ritual baptism and the Lord's Supper can be viewed as God's solemn pledge and oath (or seal of ownership) given to his elect. In saying this, we must be very clear that it is not our promise or our oath given to God and most certainly not to a temporal church. It is we who receive the promises and God who graciously provides them for our benefit.

Unfortunately, the word *sacrament* carries with it additional baggage suggesting that it is "something regarded as possessing an intrinsically sacred character or mysterious significance." The Greek word *musterion* was translated *sacrament* in the *Latin Vulgate*, and that is the origin of the anglicized word that is in use today. In English texts, the Greek word *musterion* was directly translated as "secret," "mystery," or "hidden things." It is in the sense of mystery that the word "sacrament" begins to deviate from being an acceptable term. While there are many places in Scripture where the Greek word *musterion* is found, it is not found anywhere in connection with either ritual baptism or the Lord's Supper. (cf. Ep.1:9; 3:3; Col.1:26; 1Ti.3:16 etc.). Consequently, there is no Scriptural reason why either *musterion* or *sacrament* should be used in connection with either the tradition of ritual baptism or the Lord's Supper.

The Latin word *sacrament* was first applied to those ritual practices during the Roman Catholic Church era. Using words like "sacred," "mystery," or "hidden" tended to put a supernatural cloak of obscurity around ritual baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Roman church, such that it could only be penetrated by ordained priests. The laity could only engage in either practice indirectly as a third party through the bishops of the Roman church who alone "held the keys" to the supposed "mystery" (cf. Lu.11:52). That restriction in effect separated the believer from the body and blood of Christ by a wall of clergy. This "wall of clergy" most likely emulates the hated practice of the Nicolaitans that Jesus mentioned in two of his letters to the seven churches found in the book of the Revelation (cf. Re.2:6,15). We find this mysterious aspect of the word *sacrament* demonstrated in the Roman Catholic "celebration of the Mass" to this very day. The Roman Mass is a supposed reoccurrence of the sacrifice of Christ through the "Eucharist" (bread and wine), which has been mysteriously transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ (i.e. transubstantiation; cf. Book II, page 450).

Since the word "sacrament" carries so much Roman Catholic baggage along with it, many Protestant churches choose to refer to both baptism and the Lord's Supper as "ordinances." This term effectively refutes the mysticism associated with the Roman Mass. Again however, we find that the word "ordinance," although

found in various places in Scripture, has no direct connection with either ritual baptism or the Lord's Supper. Some say that it is implied indirectly by the Apostle Paul's words in his first epistle to the Corinthians: "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you" (1Co.11:2). Nevertheless, there is no immediate context to support that view, as examining surrounding verses of this Scripture will make quite clear. The translation of this verse from the Greek should more properly render this word as "traditions" rather than "ordinances." It is used in the context of Paul providing the Corinthians a personal example for individual Christian conduct through his own life and teaching.

The English word "ordinance" implies "statute," "law," "command," or a "decree." It is something that must be obeyed to the letter and is backed up by force if ignored or disobeyed. The implication of the term "ordinance," is that we must initially receive saving grace through submission to baptism and the maintenance of our salvation by engaging in the Lord's Supper under the force of law. These simple practices then become a matter of useless ritualistic works (cf. Ep.2:8,9). The term, "ordinance," as it is ecclesiastically interpreted requires the believer to submit to the rules (laws or ordinances) of a particular Protestant denomination or temporal church in order to engage in fellowship with other believers. In many churches, baptism is required before being allowed to partake of the Lord's Table; ritual baptism is actually seen to separate the believer from the unbeliever. Those who have not received baptism in their church are in effect treated as unbelievers or at best uninitiated "seekers." Church membership is almost universally denied in today's churches unless the believer submits to the church's own rules regarding the time and mode of ritual baptism.

Either term, whether sacrament or ordinance, attempts to position a ritual between man and God in an attempt to block grace as a free unconditional gift bestowed directly by God according to his will alone – not through human agency. We must be very clear about the fact that there is now no more intervening substance, temple, temporal church, or ritual, between the believer and the grace of God; Jesus Christ has provided an open door to all that believe in Him (cf. Mt.27:51). Instead of the temporal church providing the opportunity to celebrate these wondrous prerogatives of grace in fellowship with other believers, many churches effectively deny it to them unless they become submitting members of their organized church. Although some churches today properly practice "open communion" – making it available to all who profess Christ in their hearts as a matter of conscience – baptism still remains closely tied to church membership as a mandatory initiation rite.

A word to be preferred over using either "sacrament" or "ordinance" is "privilege," since it is the God-given privilege of all Christians to engage in these two practices. They are not something that we must do in obedience to Christ to earn or maintain our salvation; nor are we ever commanded to perform them or surrender our redemption in Christ. They should not be made over into an initiation rite that we must submit to in order to join ourselves to or maintain our membership in a local church – lest in doing so we forfeit the liberty we have in Christ through his fulfillment of God's Law on our behalf (cf. Col. 2:14). In no way do either of these practices provide a means of salvation, but are merely symbolic of salvation previously received as a gift. In fact, to participate in these rituals before we receive salvation, would only serve to further condemn us (cf. 1Co.11:27). Our redemption rests solely upon the objective fact that Jesus offered Himself a living sacrifice for our sins. To believe in the efficacy of these rituals or the elements used in their practice in and of themselves is to give a foot-hold to evil men who work their way into the church hierarchy and use these very practices to place believers under both civil and legalistic religious bondage to a temporal church.

By wielding the "sacraments" like a sword and declaring them to be the exclusive means of receiving God's grace, all people, even including powerful monarchs, were forced to yield to the demands of the powerful churchianity of the imperial Roman church of the middle ages. The "sacraments" were also used to obtain and retain political power by threatening to withhold spiritual grace from any nation that would disagree with the edicts of the Roman church hierarchy. Not only did the church threaten to withhold grace, they also often threatened and directed physical punishment up to and including death for infractions of various additional church edicts and ordinances. Today's Protestant churches have greatly moderated their hold on the lives of individuals in their congregations, but most still insist that baptism and the Lord's Supper must be exercised exclusively within the confines of a local institutionalized church. The common reason given for this insistence is that baptism and the Lord's Supper would be abused and demeaned if not properly supervised by clergy. However, within the Corinthian church so much error was prevalent in the ritual practice of the Lord's

Supper that the Apostle Paul had to rebuke them in the first letter he sent to them (cf. 1Co.11:17–34). Since Paul saw that elders were appointed wherever churches were founded, it would appear that laity held no singular claim on this kind of error (cf. Tit.1:5). Even today, well-supervised churches continue to introduce erroneous notions into those practices that tend to inject legalistic ritualism into the doctrine of salvation over a freely received redemption through grace alone.

We must certainly agree that reverence and guidance is not only reasonable and proper but is imperative any time or place that baptism is administered or the Lord's Supper is celebrated; it is not something ever to be taken lightly but to be approached with serious contemplation. If we arrogantly partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner – not discerning the body and blood of Christ – we eat and drink further condemnation to ourselves (cf. 1Co.11:27). Likewise to engage in baptism without truly knowing and having accepted Christ through a spiritual rebirth is a condemning act. The meeting of the local church should provide the ideal occasion for the exercise of these practices as long as they are properly supervised without dictating arbitrary rules and imposing unreasonable extra-biblical constraints upon believers. Nevertheless, to say that a church with an ordained clergy is the only way or place that those privileges can ever be exercised is entrapment of the same sort, if not the same magnitude, that the Roman church exercised them. In some foreign lands, families and small groups of believers huddle in home churches to worship with no formal church structure or ordained clergy to guide them. Should they be denied the privilege of participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper just because they have no accredited church hierarchy to authenticate them? As home churches necessarily increase in opposition to a progressively corrupt churchianity, as we approach the final apostasy of the last days, ritualism would not in any way serve to encourage and comfort the persecuted elect remnant as they await Christ's soon return.

Since our salvation is freely received and is totally secure apart from these practices, some may ask why we engage in them at all. The chief answer to this question is that ritual baptism and the Lord's Supper are both scriptural, reasonable, and comforting responses for a believing Christian as long as we view them as a privilege through which we can more intimately identify ourselves with the Holy Spirit in our new birth through baptism, and with Christ in his death through participation in the Lord's Supper. They are something that God has given us to provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to aid us in confirming our faith in Christ. Although they are not in themselves a conveyance of saving grace, they are a means by which we can subjectively confirm the grace of God, which we have already received in the spirit, in a tangible way through our physical senses. They are a great privilege that we may exercise to serve our faith before God and to provide a testimony before men as God Himself makes provision for the fleshly weaknesses of our minds.

In conclusion, we have seen that the two simple rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper can lead to superstition, suspicion and division among believers as well as becoming the basis for a form of tyranny when exercised by temporal church leaders through institutionalized churchianity. Both rituals began as uncomplicated expressions of faith using the very simplest of elements; there is nothing mysterious about water, juice, and bread. We know that water, juice of the grape, and bread were readily available staples to every believer as they washed and set down to eat their meals in their own homes in the early days of the Church, not consecrated elements made available only through clergy within a church building (cf. Ac.2:46). If these rituals were to have been administered only under strict ecclesiastical control, surely such simple and available elements would not have been chosen. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were never meant to be restricted to “super saints” sitting in the pews of a highly organized church, but were to be made readily available to all who believed in Jesus Christ without added conditions in order that the greater body of believers would be encouraged, strengthened, and continue to grow in numbers. The two rituals began as quite simple observances that have been unnecessarily complicated, restricted, and controlled by institutionalized church organizations to promote their own ecclesiastical authority through ritualism. In doing so they achieve sectarian control over their subjects through the further expansion of churchianity over simple profound Christianity in which Christ alone is recognized as the authoritative head of his Church. © Arthur J. Smith November 2014