

Stephen R. Shaver

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A Sacramentality of Grace in George Herbert

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears.¹

George Herbert's poetry has led him to be counted among the English metaphysical school thanks to its extensive use of metaphor and its mystic sensibility. His manual *The Country Parson* reveals a side that is more practical and prosaic but equally oriented to the presence of God. In both Herbert displays a profoundly sacramental orientation toward the world that, in keeping with his Reformation identity, is grounded utterly in God's grace. For Herbert no material thing is holy in and of itself. Yet material things can indeed be the arena for the encounter with God when they are used as opportunities for praise. This happens in conventional sacramental arenas such as the eucharist, but it also happens in prayer, in preaching, and in the reading of holy scripture; and indeed the entire world is shot through with God's presence, so that entering a place of worship or even contemplating God's creation in nature can become a venue for adoration expressed in the highest priestly and sacrificial language.

When human beings are the sacramental elements in question, a further step is needed. For while finite material things are already in some sense inadequate to the sacramental task without God's grace, human beings are not only finite but also fallen. The blight of sin must be removed through God's forgiveness, through the sinner's incorporation into Jesus Christ. In Christ human beings can indeed become sacramental vessels capable of mediating God's

¹ From "The Altar," George Herbert, *The Country Parson; The Temple*, ed. John N. Wall (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 139. All references are to this edition. Chapter and page numbers will be given for citations from *The Country Parson*, titles and page numbers for citations from poems.

presence to one another. Thus Herbert is capable of an extraordinarily high language of the ordained priesthood that is consistently coupled with a deep sense of inadequacy and sin. It is God who must supply the righteousness for a sinful person to become a priest for God's people.

Herbert's image of the heart as a broken altar is a fitting invocation for *The Temple*.² For Herbert there is no sacramentality without brokenness: not in material symbols, and not in human beings. It is God's grace alone that can take a sinful, contrite human heart and make of it an altar. Yet God who is faithful and true will indeed do so. Thus even as he knows that he will continue to fall short—"if I chance to hold my peace"—Herbert can trust that God will make of his self-offering more than he himself can: "these stones to praise thee may not cease." It is God's faithfulness that supplies the lack and allows the material world—and the fallen humans who are part of it—to become trustworthy bearers of God's presence: "O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine, / And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine."

"Heaven in Ordinary": Sacramentality in the Material World

Herbert's eucharistic poetry is rich and fervent. He uses language of eating and drinking to convey the most intimate communion with Christ in terms not far from medieval devotion. Herbert has no qualms about identifying the elements of bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ in ways that seem to go far beyond the implied receptionist theology of the 1559 prayer book: "Whoever knows not Love, let him assay / And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike / Did set again abroad; . . . / Love is that liquor sweet and most divine, / Which my God feels as blood, but I, as wine."³ In "The Invitation" Herbert unambiguously suggests a presence of

² "The Altar" begins the main section of the work, entitled "The Church." It is preceded by two preparatory poems emphasizing moral self-examination, "Perirrhanterium" and "Superliminary," which together make up "The Church Porch."

³ "The Agony," 151.

Christ's blood in the cup prior to reception: "Weep what ye have drunk amiss, / And drink this, / Which before ye drink is blood."⁴ A similar view of presence in the bread may be implied in "The Banquet," where the fraction (a rite that does not actually appear in the 1559 liturgy!) is portrayed as God's self-offering. The "sweetness in the bread" is attributed to "God, who gives perfumes," and "flesh assumes." But this flesh becomes still more sweet by being broken: "But as Pomanders and wood / Still are good, / Yet being bruis'd are better scented: / God, to show how far his love / Could improve, / Here, as broken, is presented."⁵

But this exuberant language of eucharistic presence should not be taken to enlist Herbert as a late medieval transubstantiationist or a 20th-century Anglo-Catholic. While Herbert is clearly concerned to counter a radical Puritan view which would see idolatry in "old customs,"⁶ he also resists any understanding in which holiness is ascribed to material elements without qualification. His discussion of church furnishings in *The Country Parson* is full of adjectives that are decidedly restrained: things should be "decent," "befitting," "in good repair," "grave, and reverend," "fitting, and sightly," "handsome, and seemly," "strong and decent." The intent is "to keep the middle way between superstition, and slovenliness": not furnishing the church begrudgingly and "out of necessity," but also not doing so "as putting a holiness in the things."⁷

All this is simply to say, of course, that Herbert is a member of the Church of England and proud to be so. He is an early example of the self-conscious self-definition according to a "middle way" that would later become so characteristic of Anglicanism, and he even demonstrates a self-congratulatory streak with regard to that definition.⁸ But if his resistance to

⁴ 306.

⁵ 308.

⁶ *Country Parson* XXXV, 109.

⁷ XIII, 74.

⁸ See "The British Church," 229.

the radical Puritan sensibility is clear,⁹ so is his basically Reformed theological understanding. He is a strong proponent of preaching: “the pulpit is [the parson’s] joy and his throne,” and it is notable that his model prayers for the parson are titled “Before Sermon” and “After Sermon” rather than Before and After Prayer or Before and After Communion.¹⁰ He is perfectly happy to adopt the conventional understanding of the papacy as Babylon and Antichrist: “As new and old *Rome* did one Empire twist; / So both together are one Antichrist. . . . Thus Sin triumphs in western *Babylon*; Yet not as Sin, but as Religion.”¹¹ And, in a poem written from a more philosophical stance, he toys with ubiquity, annihilation, and impanation before eventually opting for a fervent understanding that remains agnostic about a fleshly reception but insists on the centrality of a spiritual one. Here he is reminiscent of Richard Hooker: “Flesh (though exalted) keeps his grass / And cannot turn to soul. / . . . This gift of all gifts is the best, / Thy Flesh the least that I request. / Thou took’st that pledge from me: / Give me not that I had before, / Or give me that, so I have more: / My God, give me all Thee.”¹²

The sacramental language with which Herbert treats the eucharist needs to be seen in the context of his use of similar language to describe a wide range of encounters with God. Thus—despite Herbert’s insistence that church furnishings have no “holiness in the things”—he recommends that the parson should enter the church building “humbly adoring, and worshipping

⁹ As in his polemic against those who refuse to keep Lent: “Lent,” 204.

¹⁰ “The Parson Preaching,” VII, 62; prayers, 113-15. Although he does say that devoutly leading prayers moves people more than sermons (VI, 60), Herbert displays none of the ambivalence about preaching that will later mark Jeremy Taylor’s writing after twenty more years of harsh contention. See “Holy Living,” in *Selected Works*, ed. Thomas K. Carroll (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 455–58.

¹¹ “The Church Militant,” 323.

¹² “The Holy Communion,” 327-28. Cf. Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* LXVII.13, in which he offers a similarly irenic treatment of Lutheran and Roman Catholic understandings while clearly preferring a receptionist position himself, and closes with a similar devotional fervor: “What these elements are in themselves it skilleth not . . . why should any cogitation possess the mind of a faithful communicant but this, ‘O my God thou art true, O my Soul thou art happy!’”

the invisible majesty, and presence of Almighty God.”¹³ Herbert uses language of sacrifice to describe the “reasonable service” of prayer. In a passage that is oriented not specifically toward the eucharist but toward public worship in general, he describes the parson’s role in terms that would be at home in any manual of medieval eucharistic devotion: he “presents himself; yet not as himself alone, but as presenting with himself the whole Congregation, whose sins he then bears, and brings with his own to the heavenly altar to be bathed, and washed in the sacred Laver of Christ’s blood.”¹⁴ In his poetry, Herbert describes prayer in terms of eating and drinking: “Prayer the Church’s banquet . . . / Exalted Manna, gladness of the best, / Heaven in ordinary, Man well drest, / . . . Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood, / The land of spices; something understood.”¹⁵ Scripture receives similar treatment: “Oh Book! infinite sweetness! let my heart / Suck every letter, and a honey gain.”¹⁶

The use of sacramental language is perhaps at its broadest in Herbert’s poem “Providence,” which enumerates a wide array of created things for which God is to be praised: beasts, birds, trees, fish, bees, flowers, clouds, herbs, metals, the sea, frogs, crocodiles, elephants, and even poisons and their antidotes—all called upon as witnesses to God’s loving care. Here again Herbert explicitly uses sacrificial terminology to describe humanity’s vocation: “Of all the creatures both in sea and land / Only to Man thou hast made known thy ways, / And put the pen alone into his hand, / And made him Secretary of thy Praise. / . . . Man is the world’s high Priest: he doth present / The sacrifice for all.”¹⁷ In identifying the human priestly vocation with the unique capacity for language, Herbert creates a close connection between sacramentality and the

¹³ VIII, 65. For “holiness in the things,” see note 7 above.

¹⁴ VI, 60; for “reasonable service,” see 61.

¹⁵ 166.

¹⁶ “The Holy Scriptures (I),” 173. Here Herbert draws on Ps. 119:103, Ezek. 3:3, and Rev. 10:9-10.

¹⁷ 238.

Word—a connection that would be recognized by Luther, and indeed one which has found new favor even in Roman Catholic and Eastern circles in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁸

Herbert thus uses exuberant sacramental language with great freedom to describe not only the eucharist but also a wide range of human encounters with God in prayer, scripture, the church building, and the creation. The common thread among all these encounters is the priority of *God's* action: it is not material things in themselves which mediate God's presence but rather the fact that God has graciously chosen to be made known through them. This strong sense of reliance on God allows Herbert to use highly realistic and even sacrificial language to describe such encounters: the human movement toward God is grounded always in God's prior movement towards humans. Here, already, a prevenient grace is powerfully at work. Yet if humans are to take up their priestly vocation—and particularly if some of them are to do so as ordained priests for others—an even further movement of grace is needed.

“In Him I Am Well Drest”: Sacramentality in Human Priests

Herbert's high language of priesthood is at least as noteworthy as his language of the eucharist. To be sure, his clerical emphasis on the ordained pastor as “the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of Man to the Obedience of God” is not unusual among sixteenth-century Christian traditions.¹⁹ Puritans were equally focused on the centrality of clergy.²⁰ But Herbert's comfort with the word “priest” and the terminology of spiritual fatherhood already parts ways with

¹⁸ See, for example, Karl Rahner, “What Is a Sacrament?,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 135–148; Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); M. Daniel Findikyan, “The Unfailing Word in Eastern Christian Sacramental Prayer,” in *Studia Liturgica Diversa: Studies in Church Music and Liturgy: Essays in Honor of Paul F. Bradshaw*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson and L. Edward Phillips (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004), 179–189.

¹⁹ *Country Parson*, I, 55.

²⁰ See Edward Dering, “A Sermon Preached Before the Queen's Majesty the 25th Day of February 1569/70,” in Leonard J. Trinterud, ed., *Elizabethan Puritanism*, A Library of Protestant Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 138–161; William Fulke, “A Brief and Plain Declaration Concerning the Desires of All Those Faithful Ministers that Have and Do Seek for the Discipline and Reformation of the Church of England,” in *ibid.*, 239–301.

Puritan understandings;²¹ and in his poetry he freely makes use of the most elevated imagery: “Blest Order, which in power dost so excel, / That with th’one hand thou liftest to the sky, / And with the other throwest down to hell / In thy just censures; fain would I draw nigh; / . . . th’holy men of God such vessels are, / As serve him up, who all the world commands.”²²

Such an understanding of priesthood is closely linked with a holy life that can serve as an icon of Christ: “Doctrine and light, colors and life, in one / When they combine and mingle, bring / A strong regard and awe.”²³ In *The Country Parson* Herbert presents a model for such a life. The parson is “exceeding exact . . . holy, just, prudent, temperate, bold, grave in all his ways”; he is “exact in the governing of his house” and equally so in visiting and exhorting his people.²⁴ Although he should know scripture, the Fathers, and a variety of practical matters—indeed he “desires to be all to his Parish, and not only a Pastor, but a Lawyer also, and a Physician”—his true “library is a holy Life.”²⁵ “Perirrhantierium,” the first preparatory poem in “The Church Porch,” is not addressed specifically to pastors but gives an idea of the holy life Herbert envisions with its cautions against lust, drunkenness, swearing, jesting, idleness, inconstancy, gluttony, greed, wastefulness, and indiscreet conversation.²⁶ Herbert’s continual exhortation to self-examination and moral excellence is inspiring; it may well also prove discouraging to a reader who senses his or her own inadequacy to such constant saintliness.

Yet Herbert notes his purpose in his preface: he writes in order to provide himself with an ideal “which also I will set as high as I can, since he shoots higher than threatens the Moon, than

²¹ “Priest”: see, e.g., “The Parson’s Charity,” XII, 74, in which “other givings are lay, and secular,” but catechizing while giving alms “is to give like a Priest.” Fatherhood: “The Parson a Father,” XVI, 78.

²² “The Priesthood,” 285-86.

²³ “The Windows,” 183.

²⁴ III, 56; X, 68; XIV, 75-77.

²⁵ “The Parson’s Knowledge,” IV, 58; “The Parson’s Completeness,” XXIII, 87; “The Parson’s Library,” XXXIII, 104.

²⁶ 121-137.

he that aims at a Tree.”²⁷ The true dynamics of Herbert’s understanding of priesthood are found in his poetry, which reveals a deep sense of personal sin: the allure of rebellion against God, as in “The Collar”; the swiftness of temptation, as in “Sin (I)”; the magnitude of Christ’s suffering for sin, as in “Good Friday.”²⁸ Indeed, there is hardly a single poem in “The Temple” that does not express this profound awareness of human fallenness. Thus in “Priesthood” Herbert moves from expressing his high understanding of the “Blest Order” to contemplating both finitude and sin: “I am both foul and brittle; much unfit / To deal in holy Writ.”²⁹

It is God’s forgiving grace that overcomes sin for the priest as for all people. Herbert’s model counsel for worried sinners is surely grounded in his own experience of grace: “notwithstanding [God’s] infinite hate of sin, his Love overcame that hate; and with an exceeding great victory, which in the Creation needed not, gave them love for love, even the son of his love out of his bosom of love.” Herbert can also portray this “boundless Ocean of God’s love”³⁰ as a purifying fire that transforms the unworthy priest into an appropriate sacramental vessel: “Yet have I often seen, by cunning hand / And force of fire, what curious things are made / Of wretched earth. . . . / since God doth often vessels make / Of lowly matter for high uses meet, / I throw me at his feet.”³¹

Herbert portrays the experience of this grace as one of strongly realistic union with Christ. Thus in “Easter Wings” he draws from the practice of repairing (“imping”) a falcon’s wing with borrowed feathers: “With thee / Let me combine, / And feel this day thy victory; / For,

²⁷ 54. Justin Lewis-Anthony notes that “this is not a simple practical handbook; it is, rather, a different genre, a ‘character’ book”: *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically Rethinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 2009), 19.

²⁸ 278, 159, 152.

²⁹ “The Priesthood,” 285.

³⁰ XXXIV, 108.

³¹ “The Priesthood,” 285-86.

if I imp my wing on thine, / Affliction shall advance the flight in me.”³² This union with Christ underlies Herbert’s strongest statement of his theology of priesthood in “Aaron,” where he combines the highest possible Old Testament typology (“Holiness on the head, / Light and perfections on the breast, / . . . Thus are true Aarons drest”) with a deep awareness of personal sin (“Profaneness in my head, / Defects and darkness in my breast / . . . Poor priest thus am I drest”). The two are resolved through the priest’s total identification with Christ in an image that is at once priestly and baptismal, drawing as it does both on the practice of putting on vestments and on Paul’s image of being clothed with Christ in Gal. 3:27: “Christ is my only head, / My alone only heart and breast, / . . . That to the old man I may rest, / And be in him new drest.”

It is only by grace—*sola gratia*—that a sinful human can become a vessel for the sacramental presence of God. And, for George Herbert, this is precisely what happens in priesthood. Thus, in the end, the pastor is able to “rest” from personal unworthiness and trust in the merit of Christ, “who is not dead, / But lives in me while I do rest.” This utter reliance on grace is finally what allows the high, priestly, typological interpretation to become paradoxically appropriate once again. “Come people; Aaron’s drest.”³³

Conclusion

The Lutheran liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop writes of “broken symbols” as core elements of a spirituality that is both catholic and reformed.³⁴ Lathrop’s vision would be congenial to George Herbert, whose core identity as a Christian of the Reformation kept him

³² 157.

³³ 300.

³⁴ See, for example, Gordon Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 5. This little volume of Lathrop’s is inspired in large part by *The Country Parson*. Lathrop’s theology of broken symbols is developed in his trilogy, *Holy Things* (1998), *Holy People* (2006), and *Holy Ground* (2009; all from Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN).

insistent on the primacy of grace, and whose deep sacramental instinct kept him alert for the presence of God in a world that was charged with God's glory. It is sometimes claimed that "God left the world" with the English Reformation, as if the rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation left the English experience of the universe irreversibly desacralized.³⁵ For Herbert, at least, this is far from the case. Instead, God is tangibly and delectably present: in the eucharist, very certainly, but not only there. Scripture, prayer, the "enchantment of place" of the church building, the creation, and not least, ordained priests can also serve as means for the encounter with a God who is to be savored and adored.³⁶ This is not the sacramentality of a "holiness in the things" but a sacramentality based on grace, the prevenient grace of a God who moves toward humans because humans cannot first move toward God. Because of the faithfulness of this God, even the highest sacramental language can become appropriate: the broken altar, in Christ, is indeed an altar; the unworthy priest, in Christ, is indeed well dressed. Herbert expresses this dynamic of fallenness, grace, and newfound glory simply and directly in "The World," where the metaphor is that of the world as a "stately house" built by God's love. The closing Trinitarian image expresses Herbert's view of a restored cosmos made sacramental through grace:

Then *Sin* combin'd with *Death* in a firm band
To raze the building to the very floor:
Which they effected, none could them withstand.
But *Love* and *Grace* took *Glory* by the hand,
And built a braver palace than before.³⁷

³⁵ See Regina M. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Press, 2008).

³⁶ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁷ "The World," 202.