Chapter 5
INSTITUTED BY CHRIST

We ended our last section with a question: Why Christian sacraments? Answering that question adequately will take centuries, literally the remainder of the church's historical existence. But we can take an important step toward an answer by trying to understand what we mean by "Christian sacrament," by trying to see what is distinctive about what Christians do in sacrament. Whatever understanding we do arrive at will somehow be related to, be implicit in, the classic statement that Christian sacraments were instituted by Christ.

Historical Reassessment

Like many other doctrinal statements of Christian faith, we have repeated for centuries that "sacraments are sacred signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace" and we have done so without particularly challenging the meaning of what we were saying. Or, if we did explain it catechetically, we often gave it a superficial explanation, even at times a misleading explanation. For centuries, we understood it to mean that Jesus himself, during the years of his public ministry and prior to his ascension into heaven, had directed his disciples to perform various sacramental rituals (baptizing, celebrating eucharist, etc.). There was a centuries-long dispute among theologians as to whether Jesus had himself prescribed in detail the essential liturgical actions (for example, using water in baptism with a trinitarian formula) or whether he had given his disciples only the general forms of sacramental actions and left the details to them. But whether theologians opted for a "specific" institution of sacraments or for a more "generic" institution, there was agreement that the sacramental liturgies were somehow themselves foreseen and mandated by Jesus.

For quite some time this explanation has run into difficulties. In the New Testament accounts of the activity of Jesus there is little trace, if any, of such institution by Jesus, except perhaps for baptism and eucharist. Modern biblical and historical studies, clarifying considerably the picture of what emergent Christianity really was like, have made the "traditional" understanding even more difficult to accept. As a matter of fact, in the light of what we now know about the infant church, it is almost impossible to hold the opinion that the sacramental rituals were foreseen, much less commanded, by Jesus. But what, then, are we to do with what seems to be the deeper and enduring element of
Christian belief, that somehow what Christians do in sacraments finds its origin in Jesus' own redeeming activity?

Part of the problem probably lies in the fact that we were looking for the wrong thing when we went back to the New Testament and other early Christian documents. We were searching with too narrow a perspective, looking for liturgical actions that were structured, at least in skeleton form, like our own "seven sacraments." What is helping us now is that we are taking a broader view of our hypothetical understanding of "sacrament": that which effects something by its significance. Sacrament, in other words, is that which gives a new meaning to things. So, our inquiry now becomes: What did Jesus do that has changed the meaning of our human reality? What was there about the significance of his actions that altered the significance of our human experience and therefore the reality of our human existing?

Institution Is Living, Dying, Rising

Let us start with a very general response to this inquiry, and then go on to make it more detailed. Jesus instituted (and continues to institute) the Christian sacramental system by his entire life and especially by his death and resurrection. By living, dying, and passing into a new mode of human living, he has transformed the reality and the significance of what it means to be human. He has poured a new meaning into "human." For this reason he is a new revelation from God as to what humanity is all about. As some theologians are saying today, Jesus is "God's parable," the actual living narrative that explains what both humans and God are all about.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has given to the entire course of human experience a "Christ" meaning; he has given to human life an intrinsically filial significance by realizing in his own human development what it means to become increasingly human by responding to the God he experiences as Abba. He has shown how one can become more human by accepting the reality of being God's "beloved one." Of course, his death and resurrection, his passover into new and full human existence, is what throws light on his whole life and reinterprets with new depth the significance of all he had experienced. This was what radically changed the basic sacramentalities of human life, his and ours.

Another way of describing the role of Jesus in instituting Christian sacraments is to say that he is himself the fundamental sacrament of God's saving presence in human history. Speaking about Jesus in precisely these terms is relatively new, but the understanding expressed by those words is contained in the New Testament itself. The categories used by the primitive church, and therefore by the New Testament writings, to understand this sacramental role of Jesus were: 1) Word of God and 2) the New Temple.

Jesus, God's Word

Behind the New Testament theology of Jesus as God's own Word, there lies a long Old Testament tradition of careful religious reflection about God's word. About the time the great
prophetic movement emerged in Israel (roughly the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.), the idea grew that it was God's word that brought the power of life to human history. Words had mystified and worried people for a long time before that. Why was the word of a law, whether written or spoken, able to cause death or imprisonment or reward? How could those strange signs dug into clay tablets or inscribed on papyrus bring a message hundreds of miles? How could the power of a king be carried through a command? So Israel, made a people by a God who spoke to them, particularly in law, became increasingly fascinated by the power of God's word.

The word of God came of necessity through human agents. Most evidently, Yahweh addressed the people through the prophets, whose very function was to speak for God; but more basically God's word directed the life of the people Israel through the law, as this was proclaimed and explained by priests and scribes. This word gave direction and solace; it was a teaching word, but it was above all a word of command that was accompanied by promise or threat.

The word of God carried unique power, especially the power of life. When God calls the prophet Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry, he is told that God's word will be on his lips to build and destroy, to plant and to uproot. No wonder, then, that Jeremiah rather reluctantly proclaims the dire predictions of Jerusalem's destruction. Once gone out of the prophet's mouth, this word of prediction is like a physical force that causes what it speaks. This powerful word is strikingly described in one of the most graphic passages of Scripture (Isaiah 55:9-11):

For as the heavens are higher than Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts; and as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered Earth, making it blossom and bear fruit, and give seed for sowing and bread to eat, so shall the word which comes from my mouth prevail; it shall not return to me fruitless without accomplishing my purpose or succeeding in the task I gave it.

Not only the prophets developed this understanding of God's effective word. In the priestly tradition, as we find it in the opening chapter of Genesis, God's word is the very power of creation. Unlike other ancient myths about the origin of the world, this priestly version sees Yahweh as simply commanding the emergence of the universe. God said, "Let there be light." This word was creative of the world; it was creative of Israel as a people. From a purely sociological point of view, Yahweh's word as believed by Israel, more than any other influence, shaped Israel as a people.

When we come to the pages of the New Testament we see Jesus related to this theology of God's word on several levels. He is a prophet, the great expected prophet who proclaims the definitive advent of the "Day of the Lord." But he is more than that. He realizes the ideal of prophetic vocation as described in the Servant Songs (Isaiah 52-53); he actually recapitulates in his own ministry the history of Israelitic prophetism. But Christian reflection about Jesus pushed even further. Not only is God's word on the lips of Jesus in most exceptional fashion; he is, in his very being as this man from Nazareth, God's saving, creating, and revealing Word.

However, it is good to keep in mind the Christian belief that this mystery of Jesus as the embodiment of God's self-revealing Word continues in history. With his death and resurrection Jesus
does not cease to function as this Word, as if his work were complete. Instead, with his resurrection he enters into the full exercise of this function. To be God's Word is to communicate God's self-gift, so that humans can accept this gift and in so doing be saved and enlivened by God's Spirit; and Jesus is forever and irrevocably that Word. So, in studying the incarnating of the Word in Jesus, we are speaking not just of what has happened, but of what is still happening today.

**Jesus, the New Temple**

Just as Jesus fulfills pre-eminently all Israelitic insights into the word of God, so also he realizes in his person and work the deeper meaning and function of the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood. During the centuries it stood in Jerusalem, the temple built by Solomon played a profoundly symbolic role in Israel's life. Its existence was a sign of Yahweh's confirmation and support of the Davidic dynasty, and, through this dynasty, of the people of Judah. As it became gradually the central shrine for all of Israel, and as its priesthood gained an ascendancy over the religious life of the people, the temple became increasingly a unifying center. It was in the temple that the ark of the covenant was kept as a remembrance of the covenant made at Sinai. It was in the temple that the sacrifices to Yahweh prescribed by the law were performed. It was at the great temple festivals that Israelites, gathered together from outlying areas as well as from Jerusalem itself, heard proclaimed and explained the law by which their God guided their life.

This temple was in some sense the special location of the presence of Israel's God. Not that Yahweh was confined to the Holy of Holies, that most sacred portion of the temple; but it was here that God's presence was somehow focused, where one could be assured of the opportunity to contact God, where the smoke rising from the sacrifices assured the people that God was accepting their prayer and responding to their needs. The temple served as a symbol of Israel's continuing fidelity to God; it served no less as a symbol of God's continuing fidelity in protecting and guiding the people.

Given this central and powerful symbolic role of Solomon's Temple, we can scarcely imagine the sense of catastrophe that descended upon the people when the Babylonian armies destroyed it in 586 B.C.E. We can only begin to appreciate the almost obsessive desire of some of the Jews in Babylonian exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it.

By Jesus' day, the rebuilt temple had acquired even broader symbolic impact. Although Jews were scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin in the diaspora that resulted from the invasions of Palestine, they found a source of identity and unity in the Jerusalem temple. When possible, they came to this temple to celebrate the great feasts. Even when the journey to Jerusalem was not possible, the very knowledge of the temple's existence was a unifying force among the Jewish people.

As described in the gospels, the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership boiled down finally to the relation between himself and the temple establishment. Not only does Jesus attack the abuses of temple worship, but his ministry also marks the beginning of the end for the temple and all that occurs in it, the end of the special mediatorial role of the temple priesthood. What he accomplished in his life and particularly in his death and resurrection is both replacement and fulfillment of all that the temple was meant to be in the life of the covenant people. Jesus is himself the
new "dwelling place" of God's saving presence; he is the new and final "holy of holies." No longer is God's presence to be attached to a sacred place; God's dwelling is to find its focus in the new covenant people, the community that is (in Paul's language) "the body of Christ."

Jesus, the Presence of Abba

When we stop to reflect on these New Testament themes of Jesus as Word and Temple, we can see that Christian faith views Jesus as the basic sacrament of God's saving power in history. Not only is he the visible sign that God is at work in our world; he is God's work in our world. This begins with God's unique presence to the consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth; the Abba experience of Jesus, that unparalleled exposure of his human psyche to the reality of the transcendent, is something we can only dimly imagine. We can refer to it as an immediate vision of God, we can say that he has a face-to-face awareness of God, we can say that awareness of God permeates all his consciousness, but all of these statements are inadequate, even misleading expressions of the mysterious intimacy between this historical personage and the transcendent God he addresses as Abba, the familial and familiar word for father. No Jew of Jesus' day would have used such an intimate word in addressing the God of Israel.

We can draw a faint analogy from some of our human situations of personal intimacy. For example, when I am in conversation with someone I deeply love and I look into that person's eyes, there is an honest immediacy of personal contact and I do not hide myself from that person, and we therefore become very present to each other. In reverse, if I do not really wish to speak that honestly with someone, I avoid direct eye contact. So, we can project that Jesus, with what we could call "the eyes of the soul," lived in intimate conscious exposure and presence to God, and that he did so with the awareness of being, beyond what others could claim, God's own child.

Because this awareness of the transcendent God as his Abba was inseparable from his own self-identification, Jesus lived always in the conscious presence of God; God dwelt in special presence in Jesus. God uttered self as person to this human son; Jesus is that utterance received and "translated" in a human life. Jesus is God's enfleshed word. Quite literally, Jesus could not think about himself apart from awareness of Abba, in relation to whom he formed his own self-identity.

We must not think, however, that Jesus' role relative to this presence of God was an entirely passive one. Presence requires that one be freely open to the person who wishes to communicate; it demands listening in the deepest sense of that term. New Testament thought refers to this aspect of Jesus' relation to his Father in terms of "obedience." He lived in unbroken and unqualified receptiveness; everything in his life was loving response to the love he experienced coming from his Father. The tradition in John's Gospel describes Jesus as "doing always the things that please [his Father]." Concretely, on the level of personal living, Jesus' return of love to his Father was what it meant for him to exist humanly and consciously as son.

Jesus was human and, like the rest of us, the relation involved in being someone's son or daughter was a developing thing. Unfortunately, many a woman or man comes into adult life only biologically and legally someone's child, because they have long repudiated and rejected their parents
on the personal level; this relationship is not important to them; it does not lie at the root of their own identity. For all of us, becoming son or daughter is a rather long process, in many instances a difficult process. For Jesus, the process of becoming son to Abba continued throughout his earthly life and through death into resurrection.

This “becoming son” was inevitably conditioned by the circumstances of time, place, and happening that made up the day-after-day experience of Jesus; his relatedness to and acceptance of his Father was lived out quite particularly in the course of his responding to these circumstances. Thus, the individuality of his historical life became, and still is, an intrinsic part of his reality as the incarnated Word of God. It is this human, Jesus of Nazareth, in his particularity, who is the Christ and the Lord.

Because the human development of Jesus unfolds in continuing response to the special presence of his father, we can say that God's personal self-utterance, the Word, is increasingly creative of the man Jesus. It is not only creative ontologically as it is with everything in the universe that it keeps in existence. Nor is it creative only in the way that the intense religious experience of God shapes the consciousness of prophet or mystic. In Jesus it goes beyond this in unique fashion, because it is the very source of his personal self-identification. His human identity is to be the son of Abba.

**Jesus, the Sacrament of God's Saving Presence**

Another way of expressing the unique being and role of Jesus is to say that he is the sacrament of God's saving presence, which obviously brings us closer to our study of what we mean by Christ instituting sacraments. At the heart of Jesus' sacramentality, and of all Christian sacramentality, lies that special presence of God to Jesus that he knew in his Abba experience, a presence that demanded from Jesus a total openness to his Father's self-giving. As it developed throughout his earthly life, this experience was the fundamental symbol through which Jesus became increasingly conscious of God and of himself.

However, for this transforming and creative presence of Jesus' Abba to become sacramentalized to others, for it to be manifested in a way that would change the meaning of human life, it had to be "translated" on two levels: 1) It had to be part of Jesus' awareness in a way that touched the meaning of everything else he experienced. 2) It had then to be expressed in *those* words and deeds Jesus shared with those around him to express what life meant for him. His awareness of and openness to his Father must have occurred as an integral element of his continuing experience of being this man Jesus. He experienced his Father as the source, final meaning, and ultimate purpose of all the events that made up his human career. His Father was revealed to him in the midst of and through those events; at the same time, those events were radically different as human experiences than they would have been had they not included this presence of his Father.

Jesus lived a particular historical sequence of human experiences (being a Galilean during the period of social unrest that finally led up to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, teaching and forming a small group of followers, being opposed by the high priesthood, etc.) in constant exposure to his Father's presence. The reality of being human was, for him, constantly being "divinized." Since his Father was the most basic reality he was constantly aware of, the reality of his Father provided the
In this way the fundamental course of human experience was transformed in its significance, that is, in its sacramentality, by what took place in Jesus' awareness. By this radical psychological exposure to the transcendent, all the basic elements of becoming human—being born and growing, suffering and joy, success and failure, decision and risk and uncertainty, death, fear, hope, and love—took on a depth of meaning they never before possessed. Here in Jesus it was revealed what humanness could be if lived in intimacy with the divine; here in Jesus was revealed the destiny of humanity.

What took place in Jesus' own consciousness was, however, only the first level of "translation." In order that the unique divine Abba presence be sacramental for others, this transformed meaning of human life had to be communicated by Jesus through his words and actions. This is what the gospel narrative of Jesus' ministry and death-resurrection is all about. Through Jesus' teachings and healing actions, but above all through his life-giving encounter with death, he sacramentalized that transforming presence of Abba by which he himself lived.

When we look carefully at the earliest decades of Christianity and at the process of reflection and oral tradition that led up to the composition of the New Testament writings, we can see that the early Christians were quite aware of this "second level translation" of Jesus' sacramentality, though, obviously, they did not examine it in the way we are now doing. Their approach is expressed in the notion that God had done these great deeds: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; that this is the culmination of all the great deeds of God that made up the history of Old Testament Israel. What Jesus did was, of course, truly Jesus' doing, but it was also God's work in Jesus: God had sent Jesus as savior, and had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. What Jesus was and did and said must be seen, then, as manifesting God's saving presence and saving intent. To put it in biblical terms, Jesus was and is "the glory of God."

Nothing about Jesus was, therefore, insignificant. In ways that needed (and still need) clarification, Jesus' actions and his very being conveyed meanings that reveal to us the meaning of our own life experiences. The significance of what he said and did challenges the meanings we read into our own experience. His life and, more especially, his death and resurrection are a somewhat enigmatic parable that God gives us as a source of unfolding insight into the human condition. Those who claim to be Jesus' disciples are such by accepting this "Jesus meaning" as their own and making it the "new law" that directs their lives. The insights that come from listening to "God's parable" are for those disciples the most important and controlling elements in their hermeneutic of experience.

**Summary**

Jesus did not "institute the sacraments" by initiating certain religious rituals himself. Instead, he gave to the entirety of human experience a new significance, because he lived and died and rose into new life under the constant impact of God's intimate presence. God, Jesus' Abba, dwelt with him in
unparalleled immediacy, so early Christianity saw Jesus as "the new temple." Jesus was a living embodiment of this saving divine presence, for he was God's own Word, the sacrament of God's saving power in human history.

Though the whole of Jesus' life was sacramental, special meaning attached to his death and resurrection. In experiencing death as the free acceptance of ultimate risk, as complete fidelity to truth and love, as supreme witness to his Abba, and as passage into new life, Jesus gave human existence its full and final significance. This is the Christ-meaning expressed by the Christian sacraments as they trans-signify human life. Jesus instituted these sacraments by being--in life, death, and resurrection--the primordial sacrament of his Father's saving presence.