



The Proclaimed and Visible Word

PETER H. VAN NESS

Union Theological Seminary, New York, New York

In a recent book, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and colleagues report on the current status of American individualism. As has been the case since Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, such reflections reveal an enduring feature of American social life. In Bellah's words: "The inner tensions of American individualism add up to a classic case of ambivalence. We strongly assert the value of our self-reliance and autonomy. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments."¹ The consequences of the American individualist credo can be loneliness, when autonomy is too greatly valued, or conformism, when a rejection of traditional authority combines with an excessive deference to contemporary peers. David Riesman coined the phrase "the lonely crowd" to describe the American social character which suffers in both of these ways.²

One of Bellah's remedies for such social ills is the nurturing of a culture of meaning and coherence. "We need to learn again from the cultural riches of the human species and to reappropriate and revitalize those riches so that they can speak to our condition today."³ Biblical and republican traditions stand foremost in Bellah's list of cultural legacies in need of revitalization. Many Americans seek relief from contemporary social distress in communities of religious worship. The Christian community at worship seems to be a fitting antidote to the social ills portrayed here. It is a public context for the proclamation of an intimate message—a message of love. The Christian gospel proclaims that in Christ God shows love for all people and calls them to love one another. Indeed, the very structure of the Trinitarian God suggests a process of communication. God as

¹Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 150-151.

²David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University, 1950) 19-26.

³R. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 283.

the first person of the Trinity is the source and transmitter of Christ as the Word, the message, and this message is destined to be received by human beings prepared with faith by the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately the theological promise of the Christian Church as a source of renewal in community life has not always been historically fulfilled. Historical theologians have long recorded the manifold divisions that have beset the Christian Church and have assiduously interpreted the variety of miscommunications between the separated Christian communions. The

thesis of this essay is that this historical legacy has bequeathed to some contemporary Christian worship a series of theological divisions that impede Christian community life and hamper the attainment of meaning and coherence in this context. In the essay's second half, a conception of religious symbolism is advocated with the intent of partially resolving these theological divisions. While the vantage point of the author is a particular one, coming as he does from the Reformed theological tradition, it is hoped that the remarks made here will contribute to an ecumenical theology of Christian sacraments, preaching, and worship. Especially it is hoped that a rearticulation of Calvin's conception of the sacramental sign will promote ecumenical convergence in sacramental theology—a task which students of the Genevan Reformer have all too often left to their Lutheran and Anglican colleagues.

I. DICHOTOMIES OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Divisions in the worship life of the Western Christian Church were more greatly deepened and multiplied by the events of the Protestant Reformation than by any other integral set of events in the preceding millennium of church history. Although it is difficult to characterize summarily the diverse changes in worship life in the newly established Christian communities, most were at least partially motivated by a shift in priorities regarding the means of divine grace. Grace no longer was communicated primarily through an elaborate sacramental system, as had been the case in the medieval church; rather, grace—understood as God's unmerited favor for Christ's sake—was freely offered in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who responded with faith. This new recipe for Christian worship was a corollary to Luther's pivotal doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, and so can claim along with that doctrine to epitomize the theological import of the Reformation.

The new evangelical orientation is first fully evident in Luther's 1520 treatise *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae*. The divisive potency of the document was quickly recognized by Erasmus, who is reported to have said upon reading it, "The breach is now irreparable!"⁴ Of course, Luther denied that schism was his intent, maintaining instead that he sought to remedy practices and beliefs that had effectively silenced the gospel of Christ. The proximate occasion for his writing about the sacraments was the priests' practice of withholding the wine from the laity in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, while administering both

⁴Cited by Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1956) 58.

bread and wine to fellow clergy. From this fact, and from the testimony of scripture to which this professor of Bible gave supreme authority, Luther concluded that priests were both depriving others of spiritual sustenance and neglecting their own vocations as servants.

According to Luther, a far more serious misconception of the priest's vocation was manifest in the belief that the Christian Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice and good work. On the contrary, Luther contended, it is God's unconditional word of promise and a free gift of grace. Along with the neglect of God's word of promise came an overemphasis on the priest's handling of the sacramental signs of bread and wine. Luther reversed these priorities, emphasizing most the faithful hearing of God's Word:

In every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so

that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus, in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine the sacrament. And there is greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament. “Believe,” says Augustine, “and you have eaten.” But what does one believe, other than the word of the one who promises? Therefore I can hold mass every day, indeed, every hour, for I can set the words of Christ before me and with them feed and strengthen my faith as often as I choose. This is truly spiritual eating and drinking.⁵

As Erasmus foresaw, this new articulation of the relationship between word and sacrament gave impetus to dramatic developments. On Christmas day of 1521 Andreas Bodenstein (called Carlstadt) celebrated “the first ‘Protestant’ communion” with lay communion in both kinds and without vestments, sacrificial language, or the elevation of the host. Carlstadt denied the real presence of Christ in the sacramental elements, and eventually he arrived at the original but extreme position of questioning whether the bread and wine of the Supper even symbolize Christ’s body and blood. Another Spiritualist of Lutheran background, Caspar Schwenckfeld, so interpreted the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel as to spiritualize entirely the communion with Christ, thereby allowing for the suspension of the Eucharist altogether.⁶

Taken to such extremes the Protestant Reformation of Christian worship essentially replaces a celebration of the sacraments without the word by a proclamation of the word without the sacraments. Although most evangelical Christians, and certainly Luther, rejected these Spiritualist innovations, so many Protestant groups favored the word over the sacrament that they were vulnerable to the charge of embracing an unhealthy dichotomy of word and sacrament in anew, inverted form. For instance, in Reformed Geneva the city

⁵Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 36.44.

⁶For the historical role of Spiritualists in sixteenth-century eucharist controversies, see George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 38-58 and 101-117.

councils allowed the celebration of the Lord’s Supper far less frequently than John Calvin thought advisable.⁷

When coupled with a rejection of the dogma of transubstantiation Luther’s new priorities decisively shifted the theological underpinnings of Christian worship away from scholastic metaphysics and toward biblical exegesis. Such exegesis was widely carried out in keeping with methods of interpretation newly fashioned by humanist scholars. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of the Zurich reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. Since his youth Zwingli had been an avid student. The seeds of his reforming career were planted quite early by the Renaissance scholar Heinrich Woelflin (called Lupulus) who taught him liberal arts at Berne, and by the Basel lecturer on Scripture and Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, Thomas Wyttenbach.⁸ From the former the young Zwingli became acquainted with classical literature and the philological method, while from the latter he learned the importance of the Word of Scripture as an object for faith. Of

course, it was chiefly the influence of Erasmus and Luther which precipitated Zwingli's evangelical conversion and the liturgical reforms of present interest. During the Second Disputation of 1523 before the City Council of Zurich, Zwingli appealed to his exegesis of the Scriptures as the warrant for the abolition of the Mass and the prohibition of images in Christian worship.

Zwingli's arguments helped to convince the Council and to launch a program of liturgical reform: in 1524 images and relics were banned; in 1525 the Mass was abolished; in 1527 the liturgical calendar was reduced to only the few major festivals; and by 1528, despite Zwingli's inveterate love of music, the Great Minster organ had been disassembled. All this was done, and more, to return Christian worship to the model provided by the New Testament Scriptures. Zurich's worship services were almost entirely devoted to the reading, interpretation, and proclamation of the Scriptures. Zwingli's reforming activity showed a puritan tendency to shun the material media of spiritual truth; it was an austere aesthetic, foreign to Luther, but most influential upon the Puritans in England and America.

In accordance with his reading of Scripture, Zwingli recognized only two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Showing the influence of Dutch sacramentarian thought, he denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper and the cleansing power of the baptismal water. In a confession of faith submitted in 1530 to the Emperor Charles V he was adamant on this point: "I believe, indeed, I know, that all the sacraments are so far from con-

⁷Compare Calvin's views in the *Institutes* with the version of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* approved by the Genevan councils: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 4.17.44-46 (pp. 1422-1425); and John Calvin, *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 66, n. 58.

⁸For the formative influences during Zwingli's educational career, see Oskar Farnet, *Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Work* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1952) 12-16.

ferring grace that they do not even convey or dispense it."⁹ For Zwingli, the sacraments signify grace only in a commemorative sense, being "given as a public testimony of that grace which is previously present to every individual."¹⁰ He was so publicly emphatic on these points that the label 'Zwinglian' became synonymous with the sacramental position.

Zwingli's views on this subject were renounced by both his theological mentor Luther and his reforming heir John Calvin. Indeed, the failure of Zwingli and Luther to agree at Marburg in 1529 regarding the theology of the sacraments inaugurated an historical parting of the Reformed and Lutheran camps. Luther adhered to a literal reading of Christ's words of institution, insisting that the body and blood of Christ are truly "in, with and under" the consecrated elements. Calvin agreed with Zwingli that when Christ at the Last Supper took bread and said, "Take, eat; this is my body," he was speaking symbolically. However, Calvin always confessed that the sacramental bread is a symbol conjoined with the reality it symbolizes (*figura ut simul annexa sit veritas*).¹¹ Hence, he concurred with the Tridentine condemnation of those who deny that the sacraments convey the grace they signify.¹² Calvin, like Luther, disagreed with the Roman Catholics regarding the manner in which grace is present in the sacramental bread and wine, i.e., with the dogma of transubstantiation. However, because Calvin was so quick to defer to divine mystery on this issue and because Luther's affirmation of the ubiquity of Christ's

physical body had seemed absurd to the Swiss, Zwingli's position came to characterize much Reformed sacramental practice. In my judgment, symbol and reality became severed in Zwingli's thought, and the efforts of Calvin and subsequent Reformed theologians were not entirely successful in restoring their unity.¹³

Luther's conception of a new relation between word and sacrament was instrumental in bringing about the rupture between the Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, and Zwingli's dichotomizing of the sacramental sign and its referent was likewise effective in dividing the Reformed and Lutheran churches. The parallel between semiological dichotomy and sociological division is manifest in each case. I believe that this pattern was repeated in England and on the American continent in relation to the Puritan conception of the preaching of the Word of God.

Dichotomies are prominent in Puritan reflection about the purpose and preparation of sermons. The purpose of the Puritan sermon was to appeal both to the intellect and passions of the congregation, eliciting, in John Cotton's

⁹Huldreich Zwingli, "An Account of the Faith of Huldreich Zwingli, Submitted to the German Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg," *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, ed. and intro. William John Hinke, trans. Samuel Macauley Jackson (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1922) 2.46.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2.47.

¹¹Joannes Calvinus, "Catechismus Ecclesiae Genevensis," *Opera Selecta*, ed. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel (5 vols.; Monachii: Chr. Kaiser, 1952) 2.134.

¹²John Calvin, "Antidote to the Council of Trent," trans. Henry Beveridge, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 213-214.

¹³For an historical account of Reformed sacramental theology in this era, see Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), chapters 6 and 7.

words, "a saving knowledge of Christ, and hearty affection to him."¹⁴ The preparation of the sermon proceeded according to rigid structures: first, the doctrinal content of the relevant Scripture passage was derived by a process of grammatical and logical analysis; then the appropriate use of this Scriptural truth was illustrated and motivated by rhetorical devices. In works of systematic theology, such as William Ames's *Medulla Sacra Theologiae*, one can clearly see the influence of Petrus Ramus in sections devoted to the means of grace. In more practical handbooks, such as *The Art of Prophecy* by William Perkins, the distinctly Puritan strand of Augustinian piety is evident in the preference for models instead of rules and in the importance placed on arousing a repentant love of God. For Perkins, the preacher was to imitate the model of great rhetoricians while himself being a model of aroused Christian affection: "He must first bee godly affected himselfe who would stirre up godly affected affections in other men."¹⁵ Hence, preaching is part proposition and part performance.

The Puritan Reformation in England was accompanied by a theological tendency to interiorize the history of the encounter between divine grace and human sinfulness. The choice by John Bunyan of spiritual autobiography (*Grace Abounding*, 1666) and allegory (*Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678-1694) as the literary forms for conveying his distinctive message is evidence of this orientation. This same orientation is present in newly adapted classical techniques which the Puritans chose to emphasize in their theology and preaching. Unlike Luther and Zwingli, who

incorporated humanist advances in historical and philological scholarship into their project of expositing the Word of God, the Puritans turned to resources of the *trivium* newly formulated by Petrus Ramus. These resources were more directly relevant to the individual psychology of conversion understood in traditional categories derived from Aristotle and Augustine.

While the value of Ramus' intellectual achievement is very questionable, the Puritans' motivation in turning to his works is theologically commendable: they wished to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in a simpler and more direct fashion than did Anglican preachers like John Donne, and they recognized the need for scholarly methods such as those provided by the classical *trivium* in order to do this responsibly. Ramist texts on logic and rhetoric gave more direct access to these classical resources than did the traditional medieval texts. However, theologians like Ames also inherited from Ramus some unfortunate prejudices, such as the conviction that religious truth is basically propositional, the attribution to Aristotle of many medieval excesses, and a relentless penchant for dichotomies. Still, the Puritan adoption of Ramist views was motivated by a desire to insure that the Word of God was preached with evangelical integrity and intellectual responsibility.

The coming of revivalism to New England during the Great Awakening is evidence that the elements of proposition and performance were not always maintained in their desirable balance. Sydney Ahlstrom writes:

¹⁴Cited by Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1939) 300.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 301.

page 185

The Great Awakening in New England was not essentially different from the "frontier revival" of the preceding decade; but it nevertheless bore certain distinguishing marks. Flamboyant and highly emotional preaching made its first widespread appearance in Puritan churches (though by no means in all), and under its impact there was a great increase in the number and intensity of bodily effects of conversion—fainting, weeping, shrieking, etc. But we capture the meaning of the revival only if we remember that many congregations in New England were stirred from a staid and routine formalism in which experiential faith had been a reality to only a scattered few.¹⁶

For revivalist preachers like George Whitefield, his staid colleagues lacked an adequate demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit in their preaching, while for conservatives like Charles Chauncy the revivalists were derelict in their responsibility to communicate the truths of Christian doctrine and morals. Once again, a difference regarding the communication of Christian truth led to institutional divisions. Western revivalism led to the growth of what Ahlstrom calls the "popular denominations," the Baptists and the Methodists, and it led to fractures in more traditional groups, such as the secession of the Cumberland Presbytery from its parent denomination.

II. THE INTEGRITY OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

There is a tragic irony in the developments just recounted. The several dichotomies

described above—of word and sacrament, symbol and reality, and proposition and performance—have promoted divisions in the Christian community. According to the priorities and values assigned to the dichotomous elements, Christians have instituted different types of worship and, ultimately, different ecclesiastical structures. This fracturing of the body of Christ was not intended by Reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Ames. On the contrary, I believe that the primary motivation for their formulation of these distinctions was to achieve an intellectually responsible and religiously effective proclamation of the Word of God. Nevertheless, the legacy of these divisions remains until the present day, and to the extent that they prevent contemporary Christians from joyously worshipping together, they prevent the church from being the remedy for the lonely and sullen discontent that characterizes much of modern American life.

This sad situation presents Christian theologians with an apparent dilemma. Insofar as they fail to address the pernicious influence of these dichotomies, they appear to assent to the institutional divisions of the Christian Church and to the spiritual enervation of Christ's gospel; furthermore, they become vulnerable to the charge that their efforts on behalf of the visible church contain an unannounced, and perhaps unconscious, element of denominational triumphalism. On the other hand, if theologians seek constructively to address the unhealthy divisions in Christian life and worship, they will certainly rely on biblical resources and the fruits of recent humanistic scholarship, thereby follow-

¹⁶Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1975) 2.353-354.

ing the patterns of previous theologians and risking precisely the same sort of conflicts of interpretation that precipitated the original divisions.

In my judgment one should choose the latter option and venture forth in search of reconciling insight. Theological dialogues are never without risk, and so they should commence with a hopeful prayer that human controversy will both advance toward truth and defer to divine grace. Certainly I hope that the remarks which follow will enhance the integrity of Christian worship and promote ecumenical convergence on these matters. In brief, my thesis is that the notion of semiotic self-reference has a great potential for providing an adequate articulation of how Christian worship is an integral experience of God in Christ. This notion has figured prominently in the work of twentieth century logicians like Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and it occupies a central, though disputed, place in contemporary literary theory. It has a long, if little known, history in Western philosophy and theology, and it is my belief that a skillful theological redeployment of this notion can help overcome liturgical dichotomies introduced by Protestant reformers.

Semiotic self-reference may be broadly identified as signs referring to signs. A narrower definition preferred by logicians requires that a sign refer to itself, e.g., 'English' is an English verbal sign. Broadly construed, semiotic self-reference is a phenomenon that is at least implicitly addressed by the earliest philosophers. It can be found in Aristotle's definition of truth, which holds that the predicates of truth and falsity apply not to things but to the declarative sentences which describe the relations between things; it is implied by the Stoic definition of signs, which specifies that the denotations of signs are physical objects of some sort, and so potentially include the graphic and acoustic media of signs themselves; finally, Porphyry's distinction between

names of first and second imposition clearly articulates a species of linguistic self-reference, one that became the shared inheritance of scholars in the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Indeed, the *Insolubilia* literature of that era shows some logicians to be sufficiently acute in their analysis of self-referring language that they identified it as the cause of the “Liar” and the associated paradoxes which had bedeviled philosophers since at least Eubulides of Megara in the fourth century before Christ.¹⁸

It is not certain what classical source influenced him, but it is known that Augustine of Hippo introduced reflection on semiotic self-reference to the Western theological tradition. In the early text *De magistro*, written as a dialogue with his son, Adeodatus, Augustine clearly identifies the category of self-referring signs (here in the narrower sense) :

Augustine: Do all signs seem to you to signify something other than what they are, as when we say ‘animal’ this three-syllable word in no way signifies what it itself is?

¹⁷Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, D1011b; sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos*, 2.11; Porphyry, *Aristotelis Categoriae expositio per interrogationem et responsionem*, 4.1.

¹⁸The *Insolubilia* literature consists of material in the medieval *summae* of logic that dealt with puzzles and paradoxes; the material usually occurred as an appendix to the text proper. See also William of Ockham, *Summa logicae*, 1.11; Paul of Venice, *Logica magna* (Venice 1499), f. 192.

Adeodatus: Surely not, for when we say ‘sign’ it signifies not only other signs whatever they are, but it also signifies itself, for it is a word and all words certainly are signs....

Augustine: Then there are signs which signify themselves along with the other things which they signify?

Adeodatus: There are.¹⁹

Some scholars do not attribute much significance to these passages in *De magistro*. I, however, believe they show considerable insight into how linguistic self-reference is expressive of both the power of language—language as a system of signs can talk about all things, including itself—and its limitations. In this same text, Augustine mentions several ways in which self-reference leads to linguistic puzzles and problems, though he omits citation of the most profound case, the Liar paradox. (The sentence ‘I am lying’ is true if false, and false if true.) Clearly, his discussion of signs and their limitations in *De magistro* is a prelude to the affirmation that true knowledge and learning must ultimately rely on Jesus Christ as the *intus magister*, yet this epistemological agenda does not discount that Augustine achieved considerable insight into the importance of semiotic self-reference for religious language and symbolism.

In his own rhetorical practice Augustine shows an appreciation for the precarious status of Christian didactic and confessional language. Early in the first book of *De doctrina Christiana*, immediately after a short exposition of the Trinity, Augustine reflects on his teaching:

Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel I have done

nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction [“pugna verborum”] in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable.²⁰

Predications of divine ineffability are self-referential. This is more evident when they are paraphrased as saying, “God is such that all sentences which purport to describe God are ultimately not true.” Of course, this very sentence seeks to describe God, implying that if it is true then it is false. The self-reference here is self-denying or apophatic.

In the *Confessiones* Augustine employs a similar rhetorical form by asking how his readers will know that he speaks truly when he confesses things about himself. Here he includes the query, “And if a man recognizes his true self, can he possibly say ‘This is false’ [“falsum est”], unless he is himself a liar?”²¹ This question offers a version of the Liar paradox known to Augustine, and his use of this self-referential phrase is again intended to show that the Christian cannot

¹⁹Saint Augustine, *Concerning the Teacher*, trans. George C. Leckie in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oakes (2 vols.; New York: Random House, 1948) 2.369-370.

²⁰Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Library of Liberal Arts; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1958) 1.2.2 (pp. 10-11).

²¹Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and intro. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961) 208.

even confess wrongdoing without the aid of the Holy Spirit. For Augustine, linguistic self-reference testifies to human sinfulness and divine grace.

Not all semiotic self-reference is of the apophatic or paradoxical sort. Sentences like ‘Some sentences are written in English’ are self-confirming, or cataphatic, because they refer to themselves, and it is this variety of semiotic self-reference that I believe is crucial for the understanding of Christian symbolism. Consider the New Testament symbol of the kingdom of God as it appears in a saying recorded in Luke 17:20-21:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, [Jesus] answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

This passage plays a significant role in Luke’s theology, serving to deny the apocalyptic form of historical expectation. What the passage affirms is conveyed in its last line. Hans Conzelmann has summarized its import well: “The main declaration is not that the kingdom is coming, but that the kingdom is being preached by Jesus and made manifest in his ministry.”²² In this light one can ask whether Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God is itself part of the “ministry” which Conzelmann claims manifests God’s kingdom. If one answers this question

affirmatively, as, for instance, Norman Perrin was inclined to do, then Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom is cataphatically self-referential.²³ It is an instance in which Jesus's own language counts as evidence for the truth he proclaims, i.e., that God's kingdom is present.

In my judgment, a self-referential analysis of the kingdom sayings of Jesus has important implications for Christian preaching. Just as Jesus both proclaimed and manifested God's kingdom so too should Christian preachers integrate propositional and performatory elements in their preaching. The Word of God is best preached when it is both articulated in an intellectually responsible way and exemplified in the character and speech acts of the evangelist.²⁴ When Christian preaching is an instance of cataphatically self-referential symbolism, its propositional and performatory components attain an intimacy that resists mechanical dichotomization.

It might be argued that this conception of preaching demands that the preacher be a "virtuoso in religion." Karl Barth levelled this very criticism against Schleiermacher, who presumably wished the preacher to effect a "self-imparting" of the preacher.²⁵ The only satisfactory response to Barth frankly ad-

²²Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 122.

²³Commenting on Luke 11:20, where Jesus says "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," Norman Perrin wrote that "the claim of the saying is that certain events in the ministry of Jesus are nothing less than *an experience* of the kingdom of God." See Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 67.

²⁴This complementarity of form and content is likewise essential to Luther's theology; see David W. Lotz, "The Proclamation of the Word in Luther's Thought," *Word & World* 3 (1983) 351-54.

²⁵Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1973) 443ff.

mits that when any Christian exhibits the advent of God's kingdom, it is as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Grace is the effective force. A virtue of the self-referential analysis offered here is that of the apophatic variety of linguistic self-reference leads precisely to this affirmation. Augustine shows that such language makes evident the Christian reliance on the Holy Spirit as an *intus magister* for the speaker and as the disposition of charity in the audience. The self-denying and self-confirming varieties of semiotic self-reference maintain a dynamic balance.

A similar analysis can help prevent the sacramental sign from suffering a radical dichotomization. Consider Jesus's words of institution in Mark 14:22, "Take; this is my body." Calvin wrote of this passage "...on account of the affinity which the things signified have with their own symbols, the name of thing was given to the symbol—figuratively, indeed, but not without the most fitting analogy."²⁶ His remarks about the type of symbolism involved here encompass two separate notions: analogous reference—the sign and thing signified share some important property, for example, of being tangible nourishment; and metaphorical intent—the sign is spoken of as if it were the thing signified. Zwingli's conception of sacramental symbolism included these same two elements; indeed, both Reformers were indebted to Augustine for them.²⁷ However, Zwingli and Calvin differed inasmuch as Zwingli believed that these two elements exhaustively constituted sacramental symbolism, while Calvin further held that the sacrament is not "a vain and empty sign," but that God "offers and shows the reality there signified."²⁸ Calvin agreed with Luther and the theologians at Trent on this point, but he could not accept their ways of explaining the *signum efficax gratiae*.

Calvin's understanding of the sacramental sign is certainly not self-referential in the sense that the sacramental bread, for instance, simultaneously refers to itself as Christ's body. Calvin denied the local and physical presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. However, recall that for Calvin the sacraments signify "Christ with his spiritual riches."²⁹ Sacramental symbolism involves a double reference: "Two things are presented to us in the Supper, viz., Jesus Christ as the source and substance of all good; and secondly, the fruit and efficacy of his death and passion."³⁰ The sacraments—baptism too—involve a mediate reference to the fruits and benefits of Christ's passion. When it is also recalled that Calvin speaks of the sacraments as "parts" of the "righteousness and salvation" offered in Christ, then it becomes clear that sacramental signs are mediately self-referential, being among the benefits to which they mediately refer.³¹ In general, symbols are that special sort of sign characterized by the

²⁶John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.27.21 (2.1385).

²⁷*Saint Augustine: Letters*, Vol. 18 of *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Wilfred Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 137-138.

²⁸John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.27.10 (2.1370).

²⁹*Ibid.*, 4.14.23 (2.1299).

³⁰John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ," trans. Henry Beveridge in *John Calvin: Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger, 11 (p. 513).

³¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.16 (2.1291).

reflexivity and transitivity of the reference relation.³²

A genuine experience of the Christian sacraments involves a faithful response to the word of promise conjoined with them. This sustaining experience of the sacrament is a gift of divine grace both because of the promise it conveys and because of the faith with which it is received; also the divine grace which is its effective cause is the same grace which the sacrament as a sign signifies. To understand sacramental symbolism in this way, as mediately and cataphatically self-referential, insures that symbol and reality do not suffer radical separation; it insures that the sign is not "vain and empty," to use Calvin's words. Furthermore, it does so without definitely prejudging the merits of the doctrine of transubstantiation inasmuch as the notion of reference is compatible with divergent metaphysical characterizations of referents. Objects to which symbolic reference is made may be equally well understood as Aristotelian substances, Whiteheadian occasions, or Machian sense data. Hence, understanding sacramental signs as mediately self-referential allows one to affirm that sacraments convey the grace they signify without affirming, or denying, the dogma of transubstantiation. This concurs with the direction of ecumenical convergence in sacramental theology; indeed, I believe that this conception of a sacramental sign is a viable candidate for filling a theological lacuna in the formulation of the Faith and Order Commission's landmark ecumenical text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.³³

My constructive thesis of the last few pages has argued that an understanding of Christian symbolism in terms of cataphatically self-referential signs is capable of intellectually overcoming some of the dichotomies that have historically marred the worship life of Christian evangelicals. The cases for overcoming the proposition/performance split in preaching and the symbol/reality division in sacramental worship have now been made. Greater integrity has indirectly been brought to the dyad of word and sacrament because they have both been articulated as instances of a broader phenomenon of semiotic self-reference.³⁴ This manner of formulating the media of

God's grace lessens the temptation of valuing one component of these dichotomies exclusively, with the result of preventing Christians from worshipping God together. The steps

³²That symbols are self-referential—members of the class of things which they denote—bears comparison to Paul Tillich's view that only symbols participate in the reality to which they point, and that symbols involve mediated stages of reference has parallels to Paul Ricoeur's claim that symbols, unlike signs, have double meanings. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951-63) 1.239; and Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 15.

³³The document lacks an explicit definition of a sacramental sign. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

³⁴Although I did not mention mediate reference in the explanation of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, this idea can be naturally introduced by recalling that the kingdom of God for the Jews referred primarily to God's creative and constitutive activities on behalf of the people of Israel, and only mediately to God's redemptive activity as exemplified in the ministry of Jesus. See Peter H. Van Ness, "Linguistic Self-Reference and Religious Language," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 41/2 (Autumn 1986).

toward semiological integration offered here affirm the church that will one day praise God with a single, but full voice.

III. CONCLUSION

Theology serves the church of Jesus Christ, and the church serves the world in Jesus's name. A segment of the contemporary American world is accurately pictured as a lonely crowd; the church must minister to this alienated population. Its remedy is a tradition of publicly proclaiming and manifesting God's love for us and our love enlivened by grace. It witnesses to the Trinitarian God who is a paradigm of community and communication. Yet traditions falter, testimony errs, and the world changes; so the Christian Church must constantly embark on new efforts to reclaim its enduring message, even sometimes employing novel conceptions in doing so.

Integrity in Christian worship and unity in Christian social life are prerequisites for the achievement of genuine Christian excellence. Stated more affirmatively, the experience of the integrity of God's Word and of the unity of Christ's church promotes the manifold forms of excellence which constitute the fullness of Christian life. Liturgy, worship, and art are distinctive forms of Christian excellence. Christians should affirm the diversity of ways for celebrating life redeemed by Christ as a means of embracing the full diversity of the Christian Church in its denominational divergences and in its increasingly non-Western membership. The conception of Christian symbolism offered here is intended to promote a vision of the church that offers to members of today's lonely crowd the opportunity to "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19).

In recent years the historical theologian Margaret Miles has sought to reclaim and rearticulate a particular tradition of Christian ascetic life, and in doing so she has called the Christian community to embrace a new "fullness of life."³⁵ A disciplined pursuit of moral excellence is what Miles's challenge requires of contemporary Christians. A similar rededication to a disciplined pursuit of excellence is the remedy for what ails Christian worship life. Informed by spiritual and intellectual discipline, and committed to moral and aesthetic excellence, I believe the Christian Church can be a community of meaning and coherence responding effectively to

the lonely, the suffering, and the oppressed. To affirm this hope is to affirm the divine grace manifest in the proclaimed and visible Word of God.

³⁵Margaret Ruth Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).