



International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church

ISSN: 1474-225X (Print) 1747-0234 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjsc20>

The Church as sacrament

Rowan Williams

To cite this article: Rowan Williams (2010) The Church as sacrament, International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, 10:1, 6-12, DOI: [10.1080/14742251003643825](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742251003643825)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742251003643825>



Published online: 28 May 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 175

The Church as sacrament

Rowan Williams

The association of the Church with the vocabulary of ‘mystery’ is rooted very particularly in the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. In one of the best-known passages of the former, the relation of husband and wife, as set out in the Genesis prescription that a man must leave his parents and become one with his spouse, is characterised as a great *musterion*, applying to Christ and his Church (Eph. 5.32). Strictly, it is not the Church itself that is called a mystery, but the relation in which the Church stands to Christ; but the phrase echoes language found elsewhere in the epistle about ‘mystery’. In five other passages we find reference to the mystery of the good news or of God’s purposes, a mystery committed to the apostle’s guardianship (1.9; 3.3; 3.4; 3.9; 6.19). God has uncovered purposes about which he was previously silent (we should remember the root of *musterion* in the verb *muo*), and Paul now has the privilege of announcing that the silence is broken – anticipating the powerful language of Ignatius of Antioch in his Letter to the Ephesians (19) about the ‘mysteries that are cried aloud’, *musteria krauges*, yet are performed in the ‘repose’ or ‘silence’, *hesuchia*, of God.

Behind this lies the world of classical and Hellenistic usage, in which *musterion* means both the secret and the ritual or form of words that hides the secret. Thus in the Orphic and Eleusinian traditions and in texts like the Sybilline oracles and the Greek magical papyri, a ‘mystery’ is the rite itself which makes the secret known. In this light, the language of Ephesians is pointing to the fact that the marital relationship is the visible sign of something secret; and that secret is the eternally predestined union between the Son of God and the people of God. This is exactly what the Letter to the Colossians says (1.27): the hidden or silent purpose of God throughout the history of creation is that Christ should come to be in us; and this relation of indwelling is ‘the hope of glory’, the first beginning of the enjoyment of God’s radiant presence as it shines within the believer. God’s mystery is what he has now spoken out, the *pleroma* of his word (Col. 1.26); and what his word has brought into being is the indwelling of Christ. But looking back to the core Pauline texts, notably 1 Corinthians 4, we find that the apostle as ‘steward of the mysteries’ is portrayed as the person who discerns what is *still* secret within the life of the Christian community: at the level of appearances, there may still be a lack of clarity, since motivations and desires do not display themselves unambiguously. The secret is not simply laid bare for good and all by the proclamation of God’s purpose (hence also the related language in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 about what is seen and what is unseen). The silence of God may have been broken but the visible sign of that broken silence still needs to be ‘read’, decoded, since it belongs in a world where the truth of God cannot simply be read off in an obvious way from any phenomenon in history.

Thus, the reconciliation between God and humanity brought about through the paschal events is what God has eternally purposed, and now has ‘spoken out’ in the incarnate reality of Jesus and the Spirit-inspired communication of that reality. We can now see that certain things in pre-Christian history carried the secret without spelling it out – but presumably conveyed in hidden ways some of the promise or grace fulfilled in Christ. Among these is the Genesis description of marital union: two apparently mutually exclusive objects or agents become one. This ‘mystery’ – a reality which in its own being encodes the purpose of God – points to the ultimate ‘mystery’ of Christ’s indwelling in the Church, which in turn is the ‘mystery’, the sign within the world, of God’s everlasting will. The word works within a nest of significances to do with hiddenness and manifestation, and it allows a paradoxical element to the process of revelation itself: God breaks silence and yet that breaking imposes another kind of silence or darkness. The realisation of God’s purpose within history works precisely *within* history. God can break his silence only in words and events that belong in this world: and so revelation is always caught up in the tension between what is already true and what is to be hoped for, what is finished and what is unfinished, what is seen and what is not. God’s revelation does not bring history to an end; and so the breaking of silence is not the revelation of a light and power that annuls the world which receives the revelation. Strength is made perfect in weakness, to use another Pauline trope, and the manifestation of God’s reconciling work occurs in the place of human defeat and dereliction, so that there can be no confusion between human success and divine action.

What this seems to suggest is that the sign of God’s breaking of his silence is bound to be marked by ambiguity. It is not a morsel of heavenly reality placed on the earth from elsewhere, but something genuinely ‘worldly’ and thus vulnerable and questionable. Christ is, according to Luke’s Gospel (2.34), a ‘sign of contradiction’, a sign that is questioned or denied; the Church cannot be a different sort of sign. Its identity is defined in that dual sense of *mysterion* which has in view both the secret that is uncovered and the riddling quality of the vehicle through which the uncovering takes place.

I have begun a reflection on the Church as sacrament with these points about the biblical usage of *mysterion* because that usage illuminates the Christological heart of any discourse about ecclesiology in terms of sacramentality. That earlier and richer cluster of meanings which attaches to the Greek word reminds us that speaking about ‘sacrament’ is not speaking about determinate actions with determinate supernatural results or even about some natural quality in the created world which makes it transparent to God. To identify, as the biblical texts do, the levels of significance that can be discerned in the language of ‘mystery’ is to see that all Christian revelation shares in the central character of what happens in Christ; and that central character is defined by St Paul as kenotic and cruciform, a revealing *in* what the world sees as hiddenness. God is made clear, God speaks, breaks his silence, in events that display the extremity of human resourcefulness, the silencing of human subtlety or eloquence and the emptiness of human achievement and security. The paschal events are a record of death and resurrection, utter emptiness issuing in fullness, life out of nothing. This is the pattern that dominates Paul’s thoughts in the Corinthian correspondence. Revelation is not a form of supreme human triumph, an epiphany of meaning achieved through act or speech; and so its witness is always something other than epiphany, always characterised by death and resurrection.

‘We who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body’ (2 Cor. 4.11).

So the mystery of the Church is both a witness to the secret of God’s purpose and itself a riddle, a place where truth is hidden as well as manifest as it is in the events of Christ’s incarnation and passion. This is also the theological foundation for that association between ecclesiology and the formularies of Chalcedon which Vladimir Lossky, among others, noted: ‘In the history of Christian dogma,’ writes Lossky in a well-known passage, ‘all the Christological heresies come to life anew and reappear with reference to the Church’.¹ Lossky goes on to elaborate what monophysite and Nestorian versions of ecclesiology look like; but the point could be made at a still more basic level. The incarnation is the primary and determining Christian *mysterion* – the sign of an eternal purpose revealed; and as a sign within the world, it is also a ‘sign of contradiction’, as we have noted. God, in speaking to us, ‘hides’ at the same time in the form of a servant, lest we confuse human power with divine. So in the Body of Christ we have to understand the servant form as essential to the Church’s integrity: for it to speak as God speaks – whatever exact sense we give to such a phrase – it must also ‘hide’ its divine origin under the form of poverty and death. Its sacramentality is its capacity to dispossess itself and to be transparent to its root in the divine self-giving.

It is possible, and indeed right, to say that the Church is most truly itself when it is engaged in sacramental worship; that when above all it meets for the Eucharist, it exists simply as it should and expresses its deepest identity. This is true in the sense that what happens in the Eucharist is the act of God which brings about his long hidden purpose, ‘Christ in us, the hope of glory’. The visible sign in which this purpose is made known, the ‘utterance’ of God’s secret, is the assembly of those who have been identified in baptism with Christ praying his Spirit-filled prayer so that the food which unites them at the material level becomes the life and agency which unites them with the Father and so unites them afresh with one another. In the Eucharist, the Church articulates its ‘poverty’: it does nothing but immerse itself in the prayer of Christ, it has nothing except the food given it from heaven. And as it prays and feeds, it realises for that moment the eschatological unity of humanity in the trinitarian life that is the eternal ‘mystery’ of God’s purpose. It gives place to God’s future, instead of occupying and defending a place that is its own. The sacrament of Christ’s Body is equally the food through which the life of Christ consolidates the unity of the community and the community that is thus consolidated; the filling of the bread and wine with the life of the Spirit is the means for the community to be filled with that life, the life that is Christ’s relation both with the Father and with the creation. In all this, the community’s attention and imagination are held or directed by listening to the written Word in Scripture, which provides the ‘roles’ we must adopt if we are to be open to the Spirit’s gifts.

So the Church is supremely the Church when – in the old phraseology of Reformed theology – its stands under the Word of God and exposes itself to the act of God in the sacrament. Listening, praying, receiving, it becomes a *mysterion* as it displays the will and action of God. But there is another dimension to be added, if what has already been said is right. There will be a temptation to take the completely correct description of the Church as being itself in the moment of biblically focused obedience and sacramental practice as once again lifting the Church out of history.

¹Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 186.

One of the objections to ‘Nestorian’ Christology in the fifth century was that it encouraged the reader of the Gospels to think of some of Jesus’ acts being performed in or by his humanity and some by his divinity. But the Chalcedonian formulation insists that the divine agency is always intertwined with the human. And so the sacramental life of the Church in the narrower sense of the performance of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, is not to be thought of as an arena of purity and clarity where God is at work in contrast to the daily existence of the Christian community, with all its unevenness and ambiguity. The Church is a mystery *as a whole*: not only in its praying and feeding but in its vulnerable historical actuality.

In this sense, as I have argued elsewhere, the Church is analogous to Scripture. You cannot go through the Bible identifying the sections that are inspired by God and those that are ‘merely’ human: as Karl Barth’s introduction to the third edition of his Romans Commentary famously insists, the whole of Scripture is the Word of God and the word of humanity at once.² It is a sign and a revelation in its integrity and thus also in the manifold nature of its human voices. But if the hermeneutical centre of the Bible is the Cross of Jesus, so that the plural perspectives of the rest of Scripture have to come to this point to be tested and understood, so too for the Church. The entire humanity of the Church is caught up in the sacramentality of the community; but what gives coherence and authority to this diverse vehicle of sacramentality is what connects the ordinary and ambiguous humanity to the central moment of sacramental transparency in the Eucharist, yet without ‘denaturing’ that humanity. What distinguishes the Church is ultimately not the presence of a pure and separate sphere of sacramental life in the midst of human error and sin, nor the achievement of a complete transparency in all areas of the church’s historical existence. It is the capacity of the community to see itself, its whole self, in the light of the central identifying activities of praying and feeding so that its failures may be seen and spoken of in repentance. It is given the capacity to tell and re-tell its human narrative in the light of the gift realised in the Eucharist.

Thus it becomes sacramental as a whole when it penitently redescribes itself in the light of the self-giving of God. By so doing, it surrenders the power of deciding what it is in human terms alone. It establishes its identity as ‘mystery’ by admitting that it is humanly ambiguous – capable of failure and sin – and so also a sign that encodes as well as revealing. Its sacramental character is in its confession that it participates in a humanity still in process of enlightenment and transfiguration, still absorbing the effect of the divine act in Christ. As we have already noted, it is a sacramental sign in its admission of poverty in respect of God: it has nothing to do or say that can reveal God except the admission of dependence on God in Christ. In confessing dependence and penitence, the Church confesses *hope*, a conviction that the renewing power of God is accessible in forgiveness and that the purpose of God for the ultimate future of the universe is to be relied upon. The mystery, the interwoven silence and speech, of the Church is something that realises the future God intends, not simply by offering a glimpse of transformed reality but by showing how the fragmented pieces of human history, individual and corporate, can be drawn together around a promise that is fleshed out in the Cross and Resurrection.

In the practice of the Church, therefore, its sacramentality is expressed both in its specific sacramental acts and in its awareness of its poverty, articulated in penitence

²Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 16–20.

and also in the silence of contemplation. Those aspects of the Church's life which consciously give place to the divine act, whether in confession of sin, thanksgiving for what is achieved and given in the paschal mystery, or silence before the uncontainable reality of God, are all moments in which the Church declares itself to be aware of what it is in relation to God; and God 'breaks his silence' in this many-faceted confession of human extremity and human openness to grace. The Church as *mysterion* is the Church consciously surrendering to God – aware in that moment also of its surrender of the attempt to secure its own place and success in the world on its own terms. Thus, as Kevin Vanhoozer argues in *The Drama of Doctrine*, 'The church is a theater of divine wisdom, a participatory performance of the doctrine of the atonement, precisely when it is a theater of "holy folly"'.³ The counterintuitive practice of welcoming and forgiving enemies is not, says Vanhoozer, convincing *Realpolitik*;⁴ but when the church acts in this sort of way, letting go of the habits of self-protection, its folly is shaped by the Cross. It is when the Church engages in a self-assured political agenda or in claims to provide easily marketable answers to questions and to assure individuals of the meaningfulness of their lives that it can fall into a non-sacramental folly and so obscure its sacramental character even as it tries to establish its credibility. Its insecurity and uneven 'success', even its public confusions or uncertainties, may be part of the sacramental gift, to the extent that they represent a refusal to look for ultimate affirmation anywhere but in the creative and absolving Word of God in the mystery of the Cross. That is not an excuse for avoidable foolishness or irresponsibility, simply a recognition of how the Church's identity as mystery is bound up with its capacity to face its own temptations to manage human need and questioning simply as an institution with answers of its own – rather than as the place in which divine purpose is realised in those who open themselves to it in trust.

The centrality of the paschal paradox, as shown forth in the Eucharist, is what gives to the community its self-critical and self-aware capability: it is, in the simpler language of the New Testament, the presence of the Spirit of Truth with its power to 'convict' the world (John 16.8ff.), and so also to convict the Church insofar as it still lives in the unconverted frame of reference that is the world's way. We know what failure and sin are because of the Eucharistic gift; the sacramental sign of Christ in us, as we gather around his table and eat the food in which is his life, shows that the refusal of praying and feeding and the refusal of the company of the baptised will represent some degree of refusal to be sacrament as community. And that refusal of praying, feeding and company may be visible in a wide variety of actions and policies in the individual and collective lives of believers: in unforgiveness, prejudice, self-seeking aggression or lust, fear and dominance and so on. The task of Christian ethics is in significant part to clarify what kinds of human behaviour are, in the words of Irenaeus of Lyons, 'inconsistent with the Holy Eucharist'.

As a *mysterion*, the Church is of course an eschatological sign. In its sacramental practice, it displays what the realised purpose of God will be: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' in the Eucharistic community is the foreshadowing of God as 'all in all' at the end of history (1 Cor.15.28). Creation has its primal coherence in Christ (Col.1.16ff); all things exist because of the self-giving of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father in eternity, the mutual self-giving that is manifest in a human

³Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 439.

⁴*Ibid.*, 438.

biography in Palestine, in the Father's gift to the Son of authority to heal and forgive and the Son's gift to the Father of his entire loving devotion, even at the price of life itself. The purpose of God in creation is to be understood in terms of his eternal self-relation – not that creation is a necessary aspect of this, but that creation is a natural outflowing from it, a free reiteration of what is eternally true. And so the heart of all Christian language about *mysteria* is in the trinitarian life: the hidden purpose of God is grounded in his threefold being. The breaking of God's silence in the events of Christ is the bringing into speech and sight of the trinitarian truth, which the Spirit of Truth makes actual by adopting us as children of Jesus' Father. Yet as this trinitarian mystery exceeds all our capacity to utter it, it cannot simply be written in plain language in the events of history. As we have seen, it appears in the Cross, in poverty and in silence, precisely because of its transcendent weight, which is incommensurable with any measure of power or significance within the universe. The hidden purpose of God is to live within what he has made: he 'desires' to be in the world, which has been created so that it may come to share his own harmony – his own joy or bliss as far as sentient creatures are concerned, his own intelligent love as far as reasoning beings are concerned. So as human beings come to share in the community of Christ in the Holy Spirit, God's purpose of coming-to-be within the universe is taken forward at the most comprehensive level we can know of in our context (that of our own intelligent life). The end of all things which is anticipated in sacramental life and action is the end of that line of will and act which begins in the relation of Father and Son: as at the beginning, so at the end, all things 'cohere' in Christ. The eternal actuality of communion between Son and Father initiates the process of the time in which this communion is brought to completion in the radically other mode of changeable and vulnerable life within the universe. The sacrament of the future is at the same time a sacrament of the eternal actuality of the Trinity.

As Gregory Dix expressed it in a classical passage of *The Shape of the Liturgy*, there is in a significant sense, only one 'coming' of Christ – the coming, the movement of the Son to the Father in eternity, in the incarnate life, in the gift of the Spirit, in the offering of himself that is recapitulated in the Eucharist, at the end of time.⁵ The Church's sacramental character is seen in the fact that it is, as we could put it, visibly 'inclined' towards the Father under the pressure of the Son's eternal movement, like grass under the wind: moving with the Son in the prayer of the Eucharist, moving in hope away from its own human betrayals and obscurings of God's purpose, moving away from the struggle for position and success in the world, yet achieving its missionary aims by the degree to which it allows that 'pressure' to come through in its life and to make a transfiguring difference in the world. When the Church becomes recognisable as sacramental, it is transparent to the eternal foundations of the universe, to the death and resurrection of Jesus and to the end of time all at once. Its sacramental life is inseparably memorial and hope.

Alexander Schmemmann wrote eloquently in his book on the Eucharist of the link between thinking about sacramentality and thinking about the Kingdom of God, noting that the language and experience of the first believers was not of a system of belief or ritual designed to secure fortunate results for individuals, but of the new world. 'There are no external signs of this kingdom on earth . . . But for those who have believed in it and accepted it, the kingdom is already here and now, more

⁵Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, 262–3.

obvious than any of the “realities” surrounding us’.⁶ As he argues, the symbolism of the Church’s life is not an illustrative symbolism, a scheme of edifying codes and puzzles to be deciphered – which has been a common enough distortion in the history of Christian liturgy and art; it is the awareness that a whole complex of words and actions is ‘referred’ to the Kingdom for its judgement and its meaning, and that through this experience of being pointed towards the Kingdom, life is renewed – ‘in that common action, common standing before God, in the “assembly”, in the “ascent”, in unity and love’.⁷ And if my argument here has been correct, that ‘referral’ to the Kingdom is visible both in explicitly sacramental action in the liturgy and in the practice of self-awareness and penitence, the ‘watchfulness’ that is so crucial for the writers of the *Philokalia*, for example.

In sum, a proper understanding of what it means to think of the Church as sacrament leads us not towards a static picture of the Church as a simple epiphany of the ‘sacred’, nor to an unreal model of it as a perfect spiritual entity (somehow detached from the compromised historical communities and traditions which bear the name of church), but to a grasp of the fact that the Church is the sign of God’s realised purpose, his will to come-to-be within the universe he has made, for the fulfilment of that created life. Because this life is still in formation, still subject to change and suffering, his coming-to-be is sometimes obscured and betrayed; yet what is expressed when that history is retold in the light of hope is the groundedness of the Church in an eternal truth, an eternal relation. The Church lives sacramentally when it is aware of itself not only in the actions of prayer and feeding which express its deepest character but when it is capable of seeing itself truthfully and renewing its ways of describing itself in the light of Christ. And in this perspective, the language of the sacramentality of the Church allows crucially for a theology that is both visionary and honest about our humanity: Christ in us – truly Christ, the eternal Son made flesh; truly us, the fallible and fragile creatures to whom the mystery has been entrusted; treasure in earthen vessels.

Acknowledgements

The editors are grateful to Dr Rowan Williams for permitting the version of his paper which was given to the Consultation on Orthodox Ecclesiology at St George’s House, Windsor Castle, on 7 December 2009, to be published in this issue alongside the report on the Consultation. All the papers given, edited and amended in the light of discussion, will be published as a collection at a later date.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. 3rd ed. Trans Edwyn C. Hoskyns. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Dix, Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. London: A & C Black, 1986. Originally published 1945.
- Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1973. Originally published in French 1944. English trans. 1957.
- Schemmann, Alexander. *The Eucharist*. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1988.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

⁶Schemmann, *The Eucharist*, 41–2.

⁷*Ibid.*, 47.