

“Sacerdotalism”  
from *The Plan of Salvation*  
Benjamin B. Warfield

IT IS THE consistent testimony of the universal Church that salvation is from God, and from God alone. The tendency constantly showing itself in all branches of the Church alike to conceive of salvation as, in one way or another, to a greater or less degree, from man, is thus branded by the entire Church in its official testimony as a heathen remainder not yet fully eliminated from the thinking and feeling of those who profess and call themselves Christians. The incessant reappearance of this tendency in one or another form throughout the Church is evidence enough, however, of the difficulty which men feel in preserving in its purity the Christian ascription of salvation to God alone. And this difficulty obtrudes itself in another way in a great and far-reaching difference which has arisen in the organized testimony of the Church itself with respect to the mode of the divine operation in working salvation in men.

Though salvation is declared to be wholly of God, who alone can save, it has yet been taught in a large portion of the Church, (up to today in the larger portion of the Church), that God in working salvation does not operate upon the human soul directly but indirectly; that is to say, through instrumentalities which he has established as the means by which his saving grace is communicated to men. As these instrumentalities are committed to human hands for their administration, a human factor is thus intruded between the saving grace of God and its effective operation in the souls of men; and this human factor indeed, is made the determining factor in salvation. Against this Sacerdotal system, as it is appropriately called, the whole Protestant Church, in all its parts, Lutheran and Reformed, Calvinistic and Arminian, raises its passionate protest. In the interests of the pure supernaturalism of salvation it insists that God the Lord himself works by his grace immediately on the souls of men, and has not suspended any man's salvation upon the faithfulness or caprice of his fellows. In the words of old John Hooper, it condemns as "an ungodly opinion" the notion "that attributeth the salvation of man unto the receiving of an external sacrament," "as though God's Holy Spirit could not be carried by faith into the penitent and sorrowful conscience except it rid always in a chariot and external sacrament. "In opposition to this "ungodly opinion" Protestantism suspends the welfare of the soul directly, without any intermediaries at all, upon the grace of God alone.

The sacerdotal principle finds very complete expression in the thoroughly developed and logically compacted system of the Church of Rome. According to this system God the Lord does nothing looking to the salvation of men directly and immediately: all that he does for the salvation of men he does through the mediation of the Church, to which, having endowed it with powers adequate to the task, he has committed the whole work of salvation. "It is hardly incorrect to say," remarks Dr. W. P. Paterson in expounding the doctrine of the Church of Rome on this point, "that in the Roman Catholic conception the central feature of the Christian religion is the supernatural institution which represents Christ, which carries on his work, and which acts as the virtual mediator of the blessings of salvation. Its vocation or commission is nothing less than the perpetuation of the work of the Redeemer. It does not, of course, supersede the work of Christ. Its pre-supposition is that Christ, the Eternal Son of God, laid the foundation of its work in his incarnation and his atoning death; that from him come ultimately all power, authority and grace; and that as from him all spiritual blessing proceeds, so to him belongs all the glory. But in the present dispensation, the Church, in large measure, has taken over the work of Christ. It is in a real sense, a reincarnation of

Christ to the end of the continuation and completion of his redemptive mission. Through his Church he continues to execute the offices of a Prophet, of a Priest, and of a King. His prophetic office it perpetuates by witnessing to the truth once delivered to the saints, and by interpreting and determining doctrine with an infallible authority that carries the same weight and assurance as his own original revelation. It succeeds him on earth in the exercise of the priestly office. It represents him so completely in the priestly function of mediation between God and man, that even as there is none other name given among men than that of Jesus, whereby we must be saved, so there is no covenanted salvation outside the visible organization of which he is the unseen Head. It is further conceived that it represents him as sacrificing priest by the perpetual repetition in the Mass of the oblation which he once offered on the cross. In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, it is taught, 'that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner on the altar of the cross; and this sacrifice is truly propitiatory.' And, finally, it administers the kingly power of Christ on earth. It has an absolute claim to the obedience of its members in all matters of faith and duty, with the right and duty to punish the disobedient for the breach of its laws, and to coerce the contumacious.

In one word, the Church in this system is conceived to be Jesus Christ himself in his earthly form, and it is therefore substituted for him as the proximate object of the faith of Christians. "The visible Church," says Mohler, "is the Son of God, as he continuously appears, ever repeats himself, and eternally renews his youth among men in human form. It is his perennial incarnation." It is to the Church, then, that men must look for their salvation; it is from the Church and its ordinances alone that salvation is communicated to men; in a word it is to the Church rather than to Christ or to the grace of God that the salvation of men is immediately ascribed. Only "through the most holy sacraments of the Church," it is declared plainly, is it, "that all true justice either begins; or being begun is increased; or being lost, is repaired." "The radical religious defect of the conception," comments Dr. Paterson justly, "is that it makes the sinner fall into the hand of man, rather than into the hand of the all-merciful God. We look to God for salvation, and we are referred to an institution, which in spite of its lofty claims, is too manifestly leavened and controlled by the thoughts of men like ourselves." And again: "The radical error of the Roman system was that the visible Church, which is human as much as it is divine, and which has become increasingly human, had largely thrust itself in the place of God and of the Saviour: and to the deeper religious insight it appeared that men were being invited and required to make the unsatisfactory venture of entrusting themselves to provisions and laws of human origin as the condition of attaining to the divine salvation. It was felt that the need of the soul was to press past the insecure earthly instrument, with its mediatorial claims and services, to the promises of God and to a finished work of the divine Saviour, and to look to God for the better assurance of truth and salvation which is given inwardly by the Holy Spirit of God. The Protestant revision, in short, was more than justified by the religious need of basing salvation on a purely divine foundation, and of dispensing with ecclesiastical machinery which was largely human in its origin and conception." The question which is raised in sacerdotalism, in a word, is just whether it is God the Lord who saves us, or it is men, acting in the name and clothed with the powers of God, to whom we are to look for salvation. This is the issue which divides sacerdotalism and evangelical religion.

The essence of the sacerdotal scheme as it regards the actual salvation of individual men, may perhaps be fairly expressed by saying that, according to it, God truly desires (or, as the cant phrase puts it, wills by an antecedent conditional will) the salvation of all men, and has made adequate provision for their salvation in the Church with its sacramental system: but he commits the actual

work of the Church and its sacramental system to the operation of the second causes through which the application of grace through the Church and its sacramental system is effected. As this system of second causes has not been instituted with a view to the conveying of the sacraments to particular men or to the withholding of them from particular men, but belongs to his general provision for the government of the world, the actual distribution of the grace of God through the Church and the sacraments lies outside the government of his gracious will. Those who are saved by obtaining the sacraments, and those who are lost by missing the sacraments, are saved or are lost therefore, not by the divine appointment, but by the natural working of second causes. God's antecedent conditional will that all should be saved, that is, on the condition of their receiving grace through the sacraments distributed under the government of second causes, is supplanted by a consequent absolute will of salvation, therefore, only in the case of those who, he foresees, will under the government of second causes, actually receive the sacraments and the grace which is conveyed by them. Thus, it is supposed, God is relieved from all responsibility with regard to the inequality of the distribution of saving grace. By his antecedent conditional will he wills the salvation of all. That all are not saved is due to the failure of some to receive the requisite grace through the sacraments. And their failure to receive the sacraments and the grace conveyed in them is due solely to the action of the second causes to which the distribution of the sacraments has been committed, that is, to the working of a general cause, quite independent of God's antecedent will of salvation. This seems to satisfy the minds of the sacerdotal reasoners. To the outsider it seems to mean only that God, having made certain general provisions for salvation, commits the salvation of men to the working of the general system of second causes; that is to say, he declines to be concerned personally about the salvation of men and leaves men to "nature" for the chances of their salvation.

The whole matter is very precisely expounded by an acute Jesuit writer, William Humphrey S. J., with particular reference to the special case of infants dying unbaptized (and, therefore, inevitably lost), which is looked upon apparently as a peculiarly hard case, requiring very careful treatment. It will repay us to follow his exposition.

The order of thought," he tells us, "is as follows. Consequent on preision of original sin, and the infection of the whole human race therewith, through the free transgression of Adam, its progenitor and head, God in his mercy wills the restoration of the whole human race. To this end he destines from eternity, and promises, and sends in the fulness of time, his Incarnate Son, with nature assumed from the same human race. He wills that this Incarnate Son, who is the Christ, should exhibit full satisfaction for all sins. This satisfaction, as foreseen, he accepts. At the appointed time, the Christ actually offers it for all human sins. 'God sent his Son that the world should be saved by him.' 'He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.' In the restored human race all are comprehended, even those who die in infancy, before use of reason. In the will of redemption all these infants, therefore, are comprehended. In the divine will that accepts the satisfaction, and in the human will of Christ which offers satisfaction, for all human sins, there is also an acceptance and offering of satisfaction for the original sin wherewith all these infants are infected. Hence, in view and in virtue of the merits and blood-shedding of Christ, God institutes for all these infants a sacrament, by means of which there might be applied to every one of them the merits and satisfaction of Christ. All these provisions have, by their nature, been ordained by God for the salvation of infants.

A will of salvation which is such as this is, is no mere complacence in the goodness of the object regarded by itself; and, in this case, complacence in the goodness of salvation. It is on the part of

God, an active and operative will of the salvation of infants. To all and every one of them this will of redemption is related.

God wills to effect application of the sacrament of baptism, not by himself immediately, but by means of second causes; and through these second causes not to all infants by absolute will, but to all infants in so far as second causes, disposed in accordance with his universal and ordinary providence, do act under it.

Among these second causes are, in the first place, the free wills of human beings, on which application of the sacrament, in the case at least of very many infants, is dependent. These human wills God anticipates, excites and inclines by his precepts, counsels, and aids, both of the natural order and of the supernatural order. He thus provides that through the diligence and solicitude of those concerned; through their obedience and cooperation with grace received; through congruous merits and good works; through the alms-deeds and the prayers especially of the parents, and of those to whose guardianship the little ones have been confided, and through the apostolic labors of his ministers, the infants should be brought to the grace of baptism. As in the natural order, so also in the supernatural order of sanctification and eternal salvation, God wills to provide for infants through other human beings, and in accordance with the demands of the general laws of divine providence.

In this way the divine will of salvation acts on the wills of men to procure the salvation of at least many infants who, nevertheless, by fault of men are not saved. With regard to these infants, the antecedent will of God is an active will, that they should be saved; although it is not absolute, but under condition, that men on their part should second the divine will, as they can and ought to do, and although, consequently on contrary action on the part of men, God permits death in original sin, and, on prevision of this, does not will with a consequent will the salvation of those infants.

Besides the wills of the human beings, which are in the moral order, and are free; there are also second causes of the physical order, and these are not free. These causes contribute, in accordance with the common and ordinary laws of providence, to render bestowal of baptism either possible or impossible. The course of these causes, and the universal laws by which they are governed, God, consequently to original sin, wills to remain such as they now are. God has not restored the preternatural state of immortality, even after the redemption of the human race by Christ had been decreed and effected. Hence, in accordance with the ordinary course of these laws, there follows the death of many infants before use of reason; and this sometimes independently of all exercise of will, and free action, of human beings.

With this natural course of events, there is thoroughly consistent an antecedent conditional will in God of the salvation of all these infants. The condition under which he wills the application to them of baptism is-so far as the general order, which has been justly and wisely instituted, permits.

If God had willed this order of physical causes of itself to the end that infants should die in original sin he certainly could not be said to will the salvation of these infants. God has not however instituted that order to this end nor does he so direct it by his will. He wills it for other ends, and those most wise ends.

Hence, God does not directly intend the consequent death of infants in sin. He only permits it, in as much as he does not will to hinder, for all infants, the natural demands of physical laws, by a change of the general order, or through continual miracles.

Such a permission proves only, that there is not in God an absolute will of the salvation of these infants. It in no way proves that there is not in God a conditional will of the salvation of all of them.

In short, God wills the salvation of all infants who die in original sin by an antecedent will, in accordance with his common providence. In his common providence God predefines for everything a certain end, he conceives and prepares sufficient means in order to the obtaining of that end, he leaves everything to use these means, in accordance with the demand of its nature. That is to say, he leaves natural and necessary causes to act naturally and necessarily, contingent causes to act contingently, and free causes to act freely.

But enough! The whole scheme is now certainly before us; and the whole scheme (generalizing from the particular instance treated) obviously is just this: that God has made sufficient provision for the salvation of all men, placed this provision in the world under the government of the ordinary course of nature, and left the actual salvation of men to work itself out in accordance with this ordinary course of nature. It is a kind of Deistic conception of the plan of salvation: God introduces into the concourse of causes by which the world is governed a new set of causes, working confluently in with them, making for salvation, and then leaves to the inter-working of these two sets of causes the grinding out of the actual results. He will not "change the general order"; and he will not inwork in the general order by "continuous miracles." He just commits salvation to the general order as actually established. This obviously is at best to attribute the salvation of the individual to God, only in the sense in which you attribute to God every other event which befalls him; it takes place under the operation of general laws. There is no special supernaturalism in his salvation, though he be saved by the operation of specially supernatural instrumentalities inserted into the order of the world. God retires behind his works, and man, if he be saved at all, is saved by law.

If we ask therefore why, on this scheme, one man is saved rather than another, we must answer, Because the sacraments come to one and not to the other. If we ask why the sacraments come to one rather than to another, we must answer, Because the general order of providence, wisely and justly instituted for the government of the world, permits them to come to the one and not to the other; and the free agents involved, under the command of God, freely concur to that end in the one case and not in the other. If we ask whether it is not God who has so disposed providence as to produce these precise effects, we must answer, No, for the general order of providence was instituted for the general wise government of the world and these particular effects are merely incidental to it. If we press on and ask, Could not God have so arranged his general providence as to have produced better results, and could he not so govern the world as to secure all else he wished and yet the salvation of men in greater numbers and with more particularity of choice on his part, we are dumb. For there is a manifest subjection of God's activities here to the working of the instrumentalities which he has ordained; there is a manifest subordination of God in his operations to second causes; or, to put it in another way, there is a manifest removal of man in the matter of his salvation from the direct control of God and the commitment of him instead to the tender mercies of a mechanism.

The explanation of Christianity in terms of sacerdotalism is unfortunately not confined in our day to the old unreformed Church from which Protestantism broke forth, precisely that it might escape from dependence on the Church rather than on God alone in the matter of salvation. A very influential, (perhaps presently the most influential, and certainly to the onlooker, the most conspicuous) party in the great Protestant Church of England, and, following it, large parties in its daughter Churches, have revived it in more or less completeness of expression and certainly with no hesitancy of assertion. It is common nowadays to hear men referred by Anglican writers to the Church rather than directly to God for salvation; and to have the Church defined for them as the "extension of the incarnation." "To anyone who thinks carefully, and believes in the Incarnation," we are told by an influential clergyman of the Church of England, with all the accent of conviction, "it is evident that the Church, the Body of Christ, ever united with her divine Head, holds in herself the forces of his life," and therefore is "equipped," not merely to speak for its Lord, but prevalently "to apply to the individual soul the grace won for his Church by our blessed Redeemer, and residing in that Body because ever united to the Head." The whole sacerdotal system is wrapped up in that statement. The Church, Mr. Darwell Stone tells us, is a visible society, the work of which is twofold, corresponding to the work of the Lord, as expressed in John 1:17: "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ": "the Church, as his mystical body and his organ in the world, is the teacher of truth and the storehouse of grace." "Since the day of Pentecost the day of creation of the Christian Church," he further explains, "the ordinary way in which God bestows grace on the souls of men is through the glorified humanity of our Lord, and the work of God the Holy Ghost. The closest means of union with the glorified humanity of Christ, and the most immediate mode of contact with God the Holy Ghost, are in the mystical body of Christ, that is the Church, and are open to men in the use of the sacraments. Thus the Christian Church is the channel of grace." From this beginning Mr. Stone goes on to expound the sacerdotal system in a manner indistinguishable from its ordinary exposition in the Church of Rome.

We will ask, however, an American divine to explain to us the sacerdotal system as it has come to be taught in the Protestant Episcopal Churches. "Man," we read in Dr. A. G. Mortimer's "Catholic Faith and Practice," "having fallen before God's loving purpose could be fulfilled, he must be redeemed, bought back from his bondage, delivered from his sin, reunited once more to God, so that the Divine Life might flow again in his weakened nature" (p. 65). "By his life and death Christ made satisfaction for the sins of all men, that is, sufficient for all mankind, for through the Atonement sufficient grace is given to every soul for its salvation; but grace, though sufficient, if neglected, becomes of no avail" (p. 82) "The Incarnation and the Atonement affected humanity as a race only. Some means, therefore, was needed to transmit the priceless gifts which flowed from them to the individuals of which the race was comprised, not only at the time when our Lord was on earth, but to the end of the world. For this need, therefore, our Lord founded the Church" (p.84). "Thus the Church became the living agent by which the graces and blessings, which flowed from Christ were dispensed to each individual soul which would appropriate them" (p.84). "The Church claims not only to be the teacher of the truth and the guide in morals, but . . . the dispenser of that grace which enables us to fulfil her laws" (p. 100), "the dispenser of that grace which alone can enable man to believe what is true, to do what is right, and to attain his true end, to serve God acceptably here, and to live with God happily hereafter" (p. 114). "The chief means of grace are the Sacraments" (p. 120). "They are the channels by which the spiritual gift is conveyed to our souls. . . . The Christian Sacraments, therefore, do not merely signify grace; they actually confer it. Hence they are called 'effectual' signs of grace. Their action is ex opere operato" (p. 122). "Baptism is absolutely necessary to salvation, for a person can have no life who has not been born. This is called the

'necessitas medii,' since Baptism is the means by which the supernatural life is given to the soul and the individual is incorporated into Christ." "Without the help of (the Eucharist), salvation would be so difficult to attain as to be practically impossible" (p. 127). Here obviously is as express a sacerdotalism as that of the Church of Rome itself, from which, indeed, it has been simply borrowed. The Church has completely taken the place of the Spirit of God as the proximate source of grace, and the action of the divine Spirit in applying salvation is postponed to and made subject to the operations of the Church through its ordinances. Thus the soul is removed from immediate dependence on God and taught rather to come to the Church and to expect all endowments of grace directly from it.

A modified and much milder form of sacerdotalism is inherent in Confessional Lutheranism, and is continually rising to more or less prominence in certain phases of Lutheran thought, thus creating a high church party in the Lutheran Church also. It has been the boast of Lutheranism that it represents, in distinction from Calvinism, a "conservative" reformation. The boast is justified, as on other grounds, so also on this, that it has incorporated into its confessional system the essence of the sacerdotalism which characterized the teaching of the old Church. Confessional Lutheranism, like Romanism, teaches that the grace of salvation is conveyed to men in the means of grace, otherwise not. But it makes certain modifications in the sacerdotal teaching which it took over from the old Church, and these modifications are of such a far-reaching character as to transform the whole system. We do not commonly hear in Lutheran sacerdotalism much of "the Church," which is the very cor cordis of Roman sacerdotalism: what we hear of instead is "the means of grace." Among these means of grace" the main stress is not laid upon the sacraments, but on "the Word," which is defined as the chief "means of grace." And the means of grace are not represented as acting *ex opere operato* but it is constantly declared that they are effective only to faith. I do not say the scheme is a consistent one: in point of fact it is honeycombed with inconsistencies. But it remains sufficiently sacerdotal to confine the activities of saving grace to the means of grace, that is to say, to the Word and sacraments, and thus to interpose the means of grace between the sinner and his God. The central evil of sacerdotalism is therefore present in this scheme in its full manifestation, and wherever it is fully operative we find men exalting the means of grace and more or less forgetting the true agent of all gracious operations, the Holy Spirit himself, in their absorption with the instrumentalities through which alone he is supposed to work. It is in a truly religious interest, therefore, that the Reformed, as over against the Lutherans, insist with energy that, important as are the means of grace, and honored as they must be by us because honored by God the Holy Spirit as the instruments by and through which he works grace in the hearts of men, yet after all the grace which he works by and through them he works himself not out of them but immediately out of himself, *extrinsecus accedens*.

There are three aspects of the working of the sacerdotal system which must be kept clearly in view, if we wish to appraise with any accuracy the injury to the religious interests which it inevitably works. These have been more or less expressly alluded to already, but it seems desirable to call particular attention to them formally and together.

In the first place, the sacerdotal system separates the soul from direct contact with and immediate dependence upon God the Holy Spirit as the source of all its gracious activities. It interposes between the soul and the source of all grace a body of instrumentalities, on which it tempts it to depend; and it thus betrays the soul into a mechanical conception of salvation. The Church, the means of grace, take the place of God the Holy Spirit in the thought of the Christian, and he thus

loses all the joy and power which come from conscious direct communion with God. It makes every difference to the religious life, and every difference to the comfort and assurance of the religious hope, whether we are consciously dependent upon instrumentalities of grace, or upon God the Lord himself, experienced as personally present to our souls, working salvation in his loving grace. The two types of piety, fostered by dependence on instrumentalities of grace and by conscious communion with God the Holy Spirit as a personal Saviour, are utterly different, and the difference from the point of view of vital religion is not favorable to sacerdotalism. It is the interests of vital religion, therefore, that the Protestant spirit repudiates sacerdotalism. And it is this repudiation which constitutes the very essence of evangelicalism. Precisely what evangelical religion means is immediate dependence of the soul on God and on God alone for salvation.

In the second place, sacerdotalism deals with God the Holy Spirit, the source of all grace, in utter neglect of his personality, as if he were a natural force, operating, not when and where and how he pleases, but uniformly and regularly wherever his activities are released. It speaks of the Church as the "institute of salvation," or even as "the storehouse of salvation" with apparently complete unconsciousness that thus it is speaking of salvation as something which may be accumulated or stored for use as it may be needed. The conception is not essentially different from that of storing electricity, say, in a Leyden jar, whence it can be drawn upon for use. How dreadful the conception is may be intimated by simply speaking of it with frankness under its true forms of expression: it is equivalent to saying that saving grace, God the Holy Spirit, is kept on tap, and released at the Church's will to do the work required of it. It would probably be no exaggeration to say that no heresy could be more gross than that heresy which conceives the operations of God the Holy Spirit under the forms of the action of an impersonal, natural force. And yet it is quite obvious that at bottom this is the conception which underlies the sacerdotal system. The Church, the means of grace, contain in them the Holy Spirit as a salvation-working power which operates whenever and wherever it, we can scarcely say he, is applied.

And this obviously involves, in the third place, the subjection of the Holy Spirit in his gracious operations to the control of men. Instead of the Church and the sacraments, the means of grace, being conceived, as they are represented in the Scriptures, and as they must be thought of in all healthful religious conceptions of them, as instrumentalities which the Holy Spirit uses in working salvation, the Holy Spirit is made an instrument which the Church, the means of grace, use in working salvation. The initiative is placed in the Church, the means of grace, and the Holy Spirit is placed at their disposal. He goes where they convey him; he works when they release him for work; his operations wait on their permission; and apart from their direction and control he can work no salvation. It ought to be unnecessary to say that this is a degrading conception of the modes of activity of the Holy Spirit. Its affinities are not with religion in any worthy sense of that word, which implies personal relations with a personal God, but with magic. At bottom, it conceives of the divine operations as at the disposal of man, who uses God for his own ends; and utterly forgets that rather God must be conceived as using man for his ends.

It is to break away from all this and to turn to God the Holy Spirit in humble dependence upon him as our gracious Saviour, our personal Lord and our holy Governor and Leader, that evangelicalism refuses to have anything to do with sacerdotalism and turns from all the instrumentalities of salvation to put its sole trust in the personal Saviour of the soul.