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The Ordinances of the Church: Symbols? Sacraments? Mysteries?

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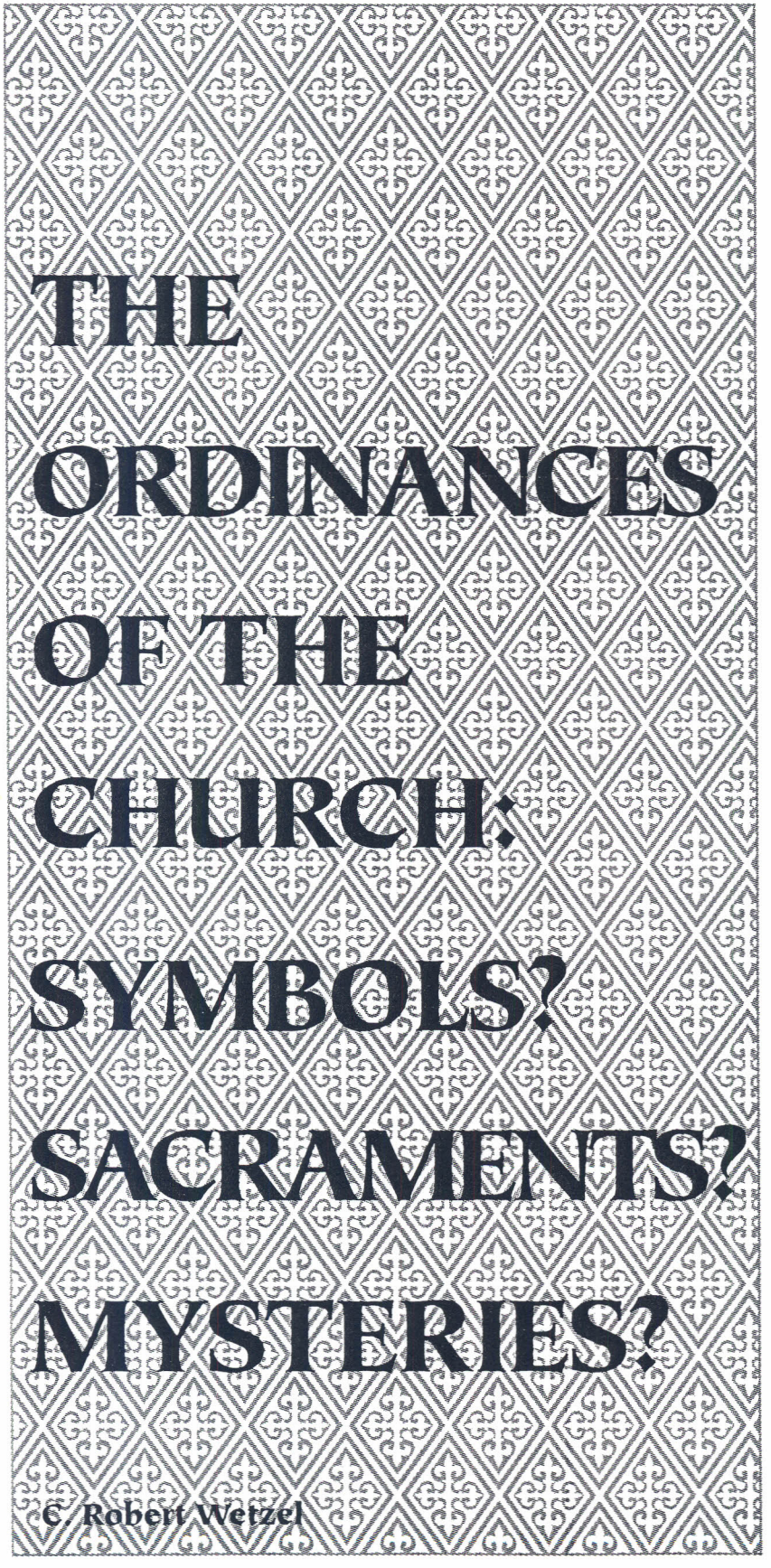

The featured preacher for the 1993 Rice-Sifke Institute of Preaching at Northwest Christian College was William Willimon. Dr. Willimon is the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, a Methodist preacher, and a gifted author. During a sermon on worship at NCC he discussed the Lord's Supper. He prefaced his remarks by saying, "You Disciples are absolutely right. This is basic. This is that toward which it all moves, the Table." Dr. Willimon's book *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* is exciting reading for those of us who are a part of the Stone-Campbell Movement. It is encouraging to see this concern for a more biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper. But more importantly, it is helpful to be instructed by some fresh perspectives that we may be missing because of our familiarity with the weekly observance of Communion.

Leslie Newbigin is an internationally known missiologist and theologian. From 1937 to 1972, he served in India under the English Presbyterian Church. Since returning to Britain he has initiated a mission to his own culture called "The Gospel and Our Culture." While working in India he was heavily involved in the merger of denominations that became the Church of South India. Because of Anglican involvement in this merger, the new church had "bishops," and Leslie Newbigin became Bishop Newbigin. When he returned to England, where no such merger had taken place, he had to choose whether he would take up membership in the Anglican Church or the Presbyterian Church. His first loyalty was to the church that had originally sent him to India. (It had subsequently merged with the Congregational Church to become the United Reformed Church.) Had he chosen to identify with the

Anglican Church, he would have been recognized as a bishop in the Church of England. He admits that he gave serious consideration to becoming an Anglican, but it was not the title of bishop that attracted him. Rather, he says in his autobiography, "We had come to rely upon the weekly celebration of the Eucharist and the absence of this in the URC was not easy to accept."[1]

Such examples are numerous. There is a growing appreciation for the centrality of the Lord's Supper in worship and the decisiveness of believers' baptism—yes, believers' baptism by immersion. Interestingly enough, these awarenesses often arise out of experience with the Lord's Supper and baptism, not out of polemical arguments. During our time in Birmingham, England, working with Springdale College, we developed a good relationship with the Chinese Christian Fellowship. This was a nondenominational group that felt quite at ease with what we were doing at Springdale. They, too, simply wanted to be the church revealed in the Scriptures. And thus we began to get students from this group. Their sponsor was an English Baptist by the name of John Aston. He was affectionately known by the Chinese young people as an egg. He was white on the outside but yellow on the inside, unlike those Chinese who tried too hard to be English. They were bananas, yellow on the outside but white on the inside.

John, in his pastoral concern for the Chinese young people, wanted to get better acquainted with Springdale. He wanted to check us out. We had him over for dinner one evening, and in the politest possible way he asked us a series of doctrinal questions. All was going well. And then he asked, "How do you people understand the purpose of baptism?" This, of course, is where we have always foundered with our Baptist friends. I responded, "John, we simply take Acts 2:38 literally. We understand baptism to be for the remission of sins." He smiled and said, "I didn't used to believe that, until I started working with the Chinese community." Quite puzzled, I asked, "How is that?" He then explained.

John Aston said that it had been his experience that the non-Christian parents raised no objection to their young people's participating in Christian activities *up to the point of baptism*. It was then that protests were made, and they often forbade the son or daughter to be baptized. John explained that these non-Christian Chinese were seeing a decisiveness and a significance in baptism that he had not seen before. It was at the point of baptism that the old person died and a new person was born. Being born again was not simply an inner experience. It had something to do with the act of baptism.

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The Stone-Campbell Movement has made a substantial contribution in drawing the attention of the Christian world to the biblical teaching concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. Such a recognition is not an occasion for gloating or self-satisfaction. We have been made stewards of a certain understanding, and it is our responsibility to share that stewardship. We have not always been good stewards. And humility requires that we recognize that our understanding has been and is often flawed and limited. Furthermore, we are hardly the only ones in the Christian world who are concerned about being biblically sound. That is why, historically, the Stone-Campbell Movement has not seen itself as a "church" or "denomination" but rather a movement within the church. Inclinations to sectarianism and legalism have always been contrary to our best principles and counterproductive to achieving our goals.

As the narratives above illustrate, we have every reason to be grateful for the heritage of insights we have in the Stone-Campbell Movement. Those who have gone before us have shared these insights with the Christian world with some degree of success. But as the Reformers both of the sixteenth century and the nineteenth century knew, reformation is the ongoing task of the church. Reformation is the ongoing task of the church because God has no grandchildren. What is understood and practiced by one generation of believers may degenerate to form without understanding in the next and may completely disappear in subsequent generations.

Furthermore, reformation is the ongoing task of the church because our understanding of the eternal

Word of God is conditioned by the culture in which we, as Christians, find ourselves. Culture includes a people's history, traditions, values, worldview, language, epistemology, and much more. It was only 130 years ago in our own country that many Christians were justifying the practice of slavery from the lack of any specific command in the New Testament forbidding it. We American Christians look at Anglicans and wonder how they can justify a state church. Many British Christians look at us and wonder how we can justify displaying an American flag in some of our church buildings. Frankly, I think both practices are flawed. But more germane to what I intend to say about baptism and the Lord's Supper, the language we use and our understanding of how that language functions will differ from one culture to another, and there will be changes within a given culture from one generation to another. Try convincing a modern scientist that Aristotle's logic is adequate for the practice of modern science. For Christians, the Word of God is eternal and unchanging, but the language Christians use to talk about the divine Word is in flux.

Yes, we of the Stone-Campbell Movement are blessed with a history that has given us some valuable insights concerning the place of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the life of the church. But we must resist the temptation to believe that the way we have formulated these insights is complete or even adequate—adequate for us or for those in the church at large with whom we would share our insights. With these preliminary considerations in mind, let us turn more directly to the problem at hand.

The title of this paper suggests a problem: How shall we talk about baptism and the Lord's Supper? What term do we use when we want to refer to both baptism and the Lord's Supper? It seems straightforward enough to call baptism "baptism" and the Lord's Supper "the Lord's Supper" (*kuriakon deipon*, 1 Cor 11:20), "Communion" (*koinonia*, 1 Cor 10:16), "the Lord's table" (*kuriou trapeza,* 1 Cor 10:21), or, as the British Churches of Christ prefer, "the breaking of bread" (*klasei tou artou,* Acts 2:42). But what collective noun refers to both practices? Much of the Christian world would simply say "the sacraments." Our preference is indicated in the way the title of this paper is structured. We are more inclined to use the term "ordinances." There is no question mark behind the term "ordinances" in the title—only after "symbols," "sacraments," and "mysteries." Were this topic being discussed among Lutherans, the title might have been "The Sacraments: Ordinances? Symbols? Mysteries?"

We seem to be dealing with a problem of terminology. It is as though there is something distinctive about the practice of baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper. This distinction separates them from other practices and observances of the church and hence requires a special collective noun to designate them. As we read the New Testament we see that the church—by command and example—preached, sang hymns, prayed, read Scripture, taught, pastored, witnessed, fed and clothed the needy, tended the sick, consoled the bereaved, and much more. And yet baptism and the Lord's Supper seem to have struck Christians as somehow different from these other practices of the church. They were in a class by themselves, and classes need terms to designate them. And so fairly early in the history of the church, one begins to read references to "the mysteries" (from *mustêrion*) or, if in a Latin church, "sacraments" (from the Latin *sacramentum*). By the time of Augustine in the fifth century, the notion of the two sacraments is fairly well established.[2] Thus historically, the church has used terms like "the ordinances," "sacraments," and "mysteries" to give baptism and the Lord's Supper this distinctiveness.

The problem with which we are concerned is not just one of language or terminology. The language that we use expresses our understanding, and our understanding informs our practice. If the problem were solely one of terminology, then we ought not to be worrying about it. If our only objection to terms like "sacrament," "Eucharist," and "mystery" is that we have not been accustomed to using them and hence they sound strange to us—that is, they are foreign to our tradition—then we had better recognize that familiarity is not orthodoxy nor is unfamiliarity

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necessarily heresy. The Christian who bases his participation in worship on how comfortable its language and surroundings are should consider how the unbeliever feels when he or she first comes into a Christian worship service. With all that familiarity has to commend itself, it is not the standard of biblical truth.

We of the Stone-Campbell Movement have a tradition of wanting to call "Bible things by Bible names,"[3] as Alexander Campbell himself said. He once prefaced an extensive quotation from John Brown's *Dictionary of the Bible* by cautioning: "The reader will perceive that there are many impurities in his style; and, although his speech betrays that he has been in Ashdod, still, his arguments are weighty and powerful."[4] Hence it is not surprising that in a discussion of the Lord's Supper, Campbell seems to classify the terms "sacrament" and "Eucharist" as the language of Ashdod, since these terms arose in the post-apostolic church. Campbell explains, "As the calling of Bible things by Bible names is an important item in the present reformation, we may here take occasion to remark, that both 'the Sacrament' and 'the Eucharist' are of human origin."[5] Campbell goes on to explain the Latin origin of the term "sacrament," that is, *sacramentum,* which referred to the oath taken by a Roman soldier to his commander and country. Although the term was to take on broader theological meanings in the church, its original use stressed the oath or pledge of allegiance that one is making to the Lord when participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper. The term "Eucharist," favored by the Greek church, comes from the Greek term *eucharisteô,* "to thank; to give thanks." It is a form of this word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11:24: "And when he had *given thanks* he broke it and said, 'This is my body. . . . '" Hence, to refer to the Lord's Supper as the Eucharist is simply stressing another dimension of its meaning, namely, an occasion of thanksgiving.

Campbell prefers the term "ordinances" when speaking collectively of the Lord's Supper and baptism. Although the term "ordinance" (*dikaiôma)* is a biblical word, it does not appear in Scripture as a collective noun *referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Dikaiôma* carries the idea of a regulation or a requirement. It can refer to a righteous deed or judgment. And in Romans 5:16, it is usually translated "acquittal" or "justification." Nowhere is there talk about the "ordinances of the church" as a way of referring to the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In fact, there is no place in the New Testament in which baptism and the Lord's Supper are discussed together as though there were something distinctive that set them apart from other practices of the church. Alas, we have all been to Ashdod. And we, Campbell's children, struggle along with much of the church at large to divest ourselves of those Philistine trappings which are a part of our history and culture. The alternative is to baptize these accoutrements of Philistia and make them our own.

Divest or baptize: this has always been the question for the church as it confronts the culture in which it finds itself. For example, we have divested ourselves of the "Constantinian Settlement," the alliance between church and state. But, on the other hand, we have been content with the baptism of two pagan holidays, christening them Christmas and Easter. We, like most of the Christian world, have to a large degree accepted the motto of Justin Martyr: "Whatever is well spoken belongs to us." Or perhaps we have adapted it to read, "Whatever serves us well we will rename it and call it our own."

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How do we deal with the problem at hand? We could follow the minimalist tradition in the Stone-Campbell Movement. By minimalist, I have in mind that stream of our tradition which rejects everything in the faith and practice of the church for which there is not a specific command or precedent. The silences of Scripture are as much of a "thou shalt not" as are the specific prohibitions of Scripture. Such a view is a form of attempted ultimate divestment. It is a hermeneutic that has led to endless divisions.

Following the minimalist tradition, we could resolve the problem posed by the title of this paper by out-Campbelling Campbell. Noting his accommodated use of the term "ordinance," we could reject it along with "symbol," "sacrament," and "mystery." We could simply reject

the need for a collective noun to designate the Lord's Supper and baptism. Interestingly enough, when I discussed this topic with my adult Bible school class at the Downtown Christian Church in Johnson City, there were those who were as unacquainted with the term "ordinance" as they were with "sacrament." They were not advocating a minimalist hermeneutic. They had not even heard of the argument. They had simply grown up in Christian Churches that talked about baptism and the Lord's Supper, but never seemed to call them "ordinances." One person who was well acquainted with the term "ordinance" reflected that the church she grew up in was always served by Bible college students. She surmised that being fresh out of classroom lectures and discussions, the students regularly blessed the congregation with their newly found theological understandings.

The minimalist view, separated from an unhappy reliance on the notion that the silences of Scripture are prohibitive, has much to commend itself. As is evident from Scripture, the church of the New Testament seems to have gotten along without finding a collective noun to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper. And, judging from what members of my Bible school class tell me, many Christian Churches today are getting along without such a term.

And yet there are inadequacies with the minimalist view. It was neither an accident nor a propensity to heresy that led the early church to recognize something distinctive about baptism and the Lord's Supper, something that separated them from other practices of the church. The Stone-Campbell Movement has recognized something of this distinctiveness in the place it has given the Lord's Supper in worship. Yes, there is singing, reading, exhorting, and praying. But the occasion that brings the church together is the "breaking of bread." As Willimon observed, "This is that toward which it all moves." The Scriptural accounts of the Lord's Supper all testify to the fact that there is somehow a special communing with the Lord and with each other that takes place there.

Similarly, we, along with much of the historical church, have recognized something unique about the act of Christian baptism. Many things may happen in the conversion process: hearing, reflecting, discussing, experiencing guilt, repenting, confessing Christ as Lord, praying, etc. But, as John Aston observed, there is something decisive and conclusive about the act of baptism. And thus I do not think that Campbell was wrong in trying to find a term that recognized that baptism and the Lord's Supper had a special meaning for the church distinctive from all of its other practices. My only disagreement with Campbell is that he did not see that his accommodated use of the term "ordinance" *(dikaiôma)* to designate baptism and the Lord's Supper is no different than the accommodated use of the term "mystery" *(mustêrion)* by the second-century church and certain Christian traditions today. It is this Greek term that gets transliterated into Latin as *sacramentum*. Like the term "ordinance," the term "mystery" is a biblical term, but it is never used as a collective noun referring to both baptism and the Lord's Supper. And yet, one can see how it might have invited such a use because of the way it is used in Ephesians and Colossians in speaking of "the mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4; Col 4:3), "the mystery of God, namely Christ" (Col 2:2), "mystery of his will" (Eph 1:9), etc.[6]

Campbell, as well as most reformers, must often be understood in terms of what he was against, not simply what he was for. Calling baptism and the Lord's Supper "ordinances" was not just a matter of telling us what they were. It was also telling us what Campbell and other reformers were against. During the sixteenth century, many reformers had used the term "ordinance" in preference to "sacrament" and "mystery," primarily because of the doctrine of the sacraments that had developed in the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Growing up in a Reformed (Presbyterian) tradition, Campbell would have been quite accustomed to using the term "ordinance."

Many, if not most, in the Stone-Campbell Movement would be quite comfortable in using Zwingli's description of the Lord's Supper. For him it was a "symbolic" action on the part of Jesus, and he "ordains" that Christians imitate this act as a way of remembering his death. Zwingli's use of the word "symbol" here must be understood in terms of his disagreement with the medieval Roman Catholic notion of the "real presence" of Christ in the bread and the wine. Too often, the philosophically complex notion of transubstantiation had led to a belief in a kind of

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priestly magic in which the celebrant effects some mystical change in the elements by the recitation of a liturgy. It also had led to stories of the consecrated bread's being seen to be bleeding. Zwingli's language is a challenge to both notions. The Lord's Supper is not a matter of priestly magic; Christ simply ordains (commands) his followers to remember his death. The bread and the wine do not somehow become the actual body and blood of Christ; they are "only" symbols that invite us to call to mind his sacrifice.

Even his fellow reformer John Calvin felt that Zwingli had reacted too strongly to the medieval distortion of the Lord's Supper. Although he had no problem with Zwingli's terminology, Calvin argued that Zwingli had overlooked the significance of the role of the participant in the Lord's Supper. The symbolism of the Lord's Supper is based not only on what Jesus has done, but also on what the participants do. The Lord's Supper is a remembrance, but it is equally a communion (participation) with the body and blood of Christ.

It is good to remember as one reads Alexander Campbell that his roots were in the Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland. And that church was staunchly Calvinistic and anti-Catholic. The tragic Irish wars between Protestants and Catholics would have been a part of Campbell's cultural inheritance, just as they have been kept alive today in that divided country. Campbell, as we all appreciate, attempted to divest himself of the "language of Ashdod" in his exegetical studies of the New Testament. But it is still clear that he is more comfortable with the word "ordinance," a term with a good Presbyterian pedigree, than he is with the word "sacrament" and its Roman Catholic association. As I have noted earlier, if you want to hold Campbell's feet to the fire of minimalism, both terms have their origin in Ashdod. But I am not inclined to do so. I would rather explore the richness of the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper that these terms affirm, as opposed to what they negate.

In trying to make clear what we were against, we have limited the depth of richness in the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Those of us in the Stone-Campbell Movement have labored to make the Lord's Supper the central act of worship in the weekly meeting of the church. Yet it would be amply clear to any casual observer that, in most of our congregations, it is not. The central act is usually preaching—another reformed tradition. The Lord's Supper is too often a five- to ten-minute prelude or postlude to the thirty-minute sermon. Why this contradiction? Scripture and apostolic precedent argue for the centrality of the Lord's Supper; limiting our understanding of the Lord's Supper to the language of "ordinance" and "symbol" does not. If in fact the Lord's Supper is only a symbolic act that we have been "ordered" to observe, then the five- to ten-minute "quick in and quick out" Communion service is probably quite acceptable. Take, for example, persons who want to leave for the family picnic earlier than 12:00 P.M. They come in for Communion but discreetly slip away before the sermon. They have done what has been ordained, what they have been "ordered" to do. Sermons are important and worthwhile, but it is not absolutely necessary to listen to one every week. I am on dangerous ground here. I cannot judge what these persons are understanding and experiencing as they participate in the Lord's Supper. The experience may be as rich as anyone could hope for it to be. But *if* it is only being done because it has been ordered, then they may be understanding the Lord's Supper in the worst sense of the word "sacrament," that is, as something that conveys the grace of God quite apart from the willingness or the ability of the communicant to receive it.[7] More likely, they are understanding what they are doing as the fulfillment of a law: God orders it; I have done it. The word "ordinance" does invite a legal model of understanding.

I would suggest that we and other reformers, in trying to make clear what we were against, have limited the depth of richness in the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper. There was a good reason why the early church came to refer to these two decisive acts by a single term. Baptism marked a person's birth into the family of God, the church; the Lord's Supper was sustenance for God's children. That we could become members of the family of God is the "mystery" that

God has disclosed through Christ.[8] Surely when we experience baptism or gather around the Lord's table, there will always be a sense of awe and wonder at the working of God's grace. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are "sacraments," both in the original sense of the Latin word, that is, an oath of allegiance, and in the later liturgical sense, namely, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."[9] It is difficult to maintain a doctrine of baptism for the remission of sins without seeing baptism as fitting within this definition of "sacrament."

We are indebted to British Churches of Christ scholar William Robinson, who consciously developed a theology of the sacraments. His understanding adds richness to our own practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper. At the same time, he spoke in a language that enabled him to give witness to the broader Christian world of what we were about as a movement within the church. Byron Lambert, in his Westwood Christian Foundation lectures, provides not only a helpful perspective on our own history, but also an excellent introduction to Robinson's thought on the sacraments.[10] And the master's thesis of Anthony Calvert has done us an enormous service in assessing and directing us to the writings of William Robinson.[11]

Since I began this presentation by adding one more question mark to the three that were already a part of the title of this paper, let me conclude by answering all of those questions. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are "ordinances" in that they are acts ordered by God. But they are more than ordinances. They are "symbols" or emblems in that they serve as vivid reminders of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Christ and our participation in his body. They are "sacraments" in that through our willing participation in these acts we experience the grace of God. They are "mysteries" in that we shall forever stand in awe and wonder at how the very Creator of this world has shown his love to us in his only begotten son, Jesus Christ. Yes, baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances, symbols, sacraments, and mysteries. They are all of these and more. And we would do well to spend a lifetime exploring and opening ourselves to the richness of what God is saying to us in these decisive events in the life of the church.

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Notes

[1]Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985), 243.

[2]It was not until the medieval period that the Latin church expanded the number of sacraments to seven.

[3]Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (reprint, Nashville: The Gospel Advocate, 1980), 272.

[4]Ibid., 280.

[5]Ibid., 272.

[6]Markus Barth speculates that such passages may have been used in early liturgies associated with the observance of the Lord's Supper, and hence the term "mystery" developed a familiar association with the Lord's Supper. See his *Discovering the Lord's Supper* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

[7]It is this understanding of sacrament that is associated with the practice of infant baptism. God's grace is conveyed quite apart from the baby's understanding of what is happening or his willingness to receive it.

[8]See Colossians 1:25–27, where Paul speaks of "the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

[9]This definition is attributed to Augustine, but the formulation is found in *The Common Book of Prayer*. See C. O. Buchanan's article, "Sacrament," in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1988).

[10]Byron C. Lambert, "The Restoration of the Lord's Supper and the Sacramental Principle; with Special Reference to the Thought of William Robinson" (Second Annual Restoration Lectures, Westwood Christian Foundation, Los Angeles, 1992).

[11]Anthony Calvert, "The Published Works of William Robinson: An Interpretive, Annotated Bibliography of a Catholic Evangelical" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Birmingham [England], 1984).