

A Baptist Theology of Communion

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In the English-speaking world, people writing about the Baptist idea of the church usually claim that Baptists hold to a view of ‘the gathered church’. Perhaps an equivalent in German would be ‘Kirche als Versammlung der Gläubigen’. I think that in both languages the image of ‘gathering’ is to stand in opposition to the idea that a person can be just ‘counted’ into a church, because they were born in a particular region or church jurisdiction. To that extent the term ‘gathered church’ is useful.

But in English the term can mean two things, and I’m afraid that many Baptists take it in the wrong sense. It *could* mean that the church is made by people gathering together in a voluntary way: they *choose* to gather, they *choose* to come together into a congregation. Perhaps the German term ‘Freiwilligkeitsgemeinde’ catches something of this meaning. Now, of course, there’s a truth in this: in a Baptist church its members do gather freely; they are not compelled to do so. There was a time in England, centuries ago, when the law of the land *required* its citizens to attend Holy Communion in the Parish Church of England once a month, on pain of a fine or imprisonment. Baptists resisted this in the name of the freedom of belief. But the church is, at root, gathered in a different sense from a voluntary society. It has *been* gathered by Someone. That is, it has been called together, *summoned* by Someone, and that Someone is not the pastor but Christ himself.¹ When a man

1 See, for example, the General Baptist *An Orthodox Creed, Or A Protestant Confession of Faith*, (London: 1679), Arts. XXIX and XXXI, in W.L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 318–19: churches are ‘gathered by special grace, and the powerful and internal work of the Spirit [...] completely gathered according to the mind of Christ’; cf. the Particular Baptist *Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations Of Christians* (London: 1677), ch. XXVI.6, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 286: ‘according to the appointment of Christ’.

or woman becomes a member of a Baptist church they believe that they have been called by Christ to join this congregation, and they are being obedient.

I didn't begin this piece with a reflection on words just to offer exact definitions. I'm not making a Baptist dictionary, I assure you. I began this way to make clear that the basis of a Baptist theology of Communion is the initiative taken by Christ as the Lord of the Church to gather his people. The church is not a voluntary society like any other club, but the people of God, drawn together by God in Christ. This gathering *by Christ* has been understood over the years by Baptists through three ideas that I want to put before you, and Christ is central in all of them. They are covenant, fellowship, and body. First, covenant.

1 Church as covenant

Baptists were among the groups of Christian believers in the wake of the Protestant Reformation who adopted a view of the church that can be called “covenantal”. This distinctive ecclesiology has often been neglected by historians of the period but it should be regarded as the important “fourth strand” of the Reformation, alongside Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican forms of the church. The idea that churches were to be created by people “covenanting together”, or coming into agreement with each other was based on the belief that the mediator of the new covenant, Jesus Christ, stood in the midst of them. Covenanting, in the *particular* Baptist form that was worked out in early days, is responsible for what is recognizable as the distinctive “flavour” of a Baptist church wherever one might meet it in the world today, despite the differences that flourish between, and within, national groups. This is the case whether or not the actual term “covenant” is used – and let us admit that it is now often forgotten – or even whether it is properly understood. The shape and the influence of covenant remain in Baptist genes.

“Covenant”, of course, was a widely-shared Reformation theme: for Luther – and more especially for Calvin – God had made an eternal covenant of grace with human beings for their salvation. This had priority over any covenant based on religious law, and it had finally become visible in the “new covenant” established through Christ. But some Reformation groups such as Baptists did something quite original: they took the biblical idea of covenant and worked it out in terms of the actual form and structure of the church “on the ground”. They

were convinced that the existing Catholic Church had violated its covenant with God, and that the newly reformed churches had either followed suit or were in danger of doing so; so they particularized the covenant as a relationship between God and *distinct local congregations*. Each church was to be gathered by a covenant, and so was to “walk together”. This covenant was two-fold, or we may picture it as having a horizontal and a vertical direction at once: it was made by members with each other and with God.²

First and central to the idea of covenant is what we might call a vertical dimension – the rule of Christ, who calls a church into covenant, so that it gathers in obedience to him. Taking up the Reformation stress on Christ as *‘prophet, priest and king’*, and faced by the claims of a state-sanctioned ecclesiastical authority, first Separatists in England and then Baptists claimed that it was the risen Christ, present in the midst of the congregation in the authority of his threefold office who gave his people the ‘seal’ of the covenant; this in turn gave the congregation the right to celebrate the sacraments (as priests), to call some to the ministry of the word (as prophets) and to exercise a mutual discipline among each other (so sharing the kingly role of Christ).³

Intersecting with the ‘vertical’ dimension of covenant with God in Christ is the ‘horizontal’ dimension of the members’ commitment to each other. In Baptist history, it was a pact undertaken and signed when a particular local church was founded, and subsequently made by new members on entering it. They promised both to ‘give themselves up to God’ *and* to ‘give themselves up to each other’; to ‘walk in the ways of the Lord’ *and* ‘to walk together’; to obey the ‘rules of Christ’ *and* to ‘watch over each other’. The horizontal dimension is well expressed by the covenant made at Gainsborough in 1606 or 1607 by that congregation of English Separatists who were shortly to travel into religious exile in Amsterdam; these were in 1609 going to adopt the practice of believers’ baptism and form the first (‘General’) Baptist church. As William Bradford recalled the event years later in America, the members:

‘joined them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known

² See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces. Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 24–31.

³ *Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland* (1611), art. 9, repr. in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 119; *Confession of Faith of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists*, (1644), arts. 10, 13, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 66; *Confession of Faith* (1677), ch. VIII, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 260.

unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.⁴

The early Baptist John Smyth inherited this two-directional theology of covenant from English Separatists, and something similar can be seen, in a separate development, among continental Anabaptists. However, at this point he took a bold and innovative step. He saw that the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of covenant must mean that God's eternal covenant of grace is actually *identified* with the covenant-making of a local congregation. While still a Separatist minister in England, Smyth had defined the ecclesial covenant in terms he had received from former Separatists, neatly summarizing the two dimensions of covenant: he wrote,

'A visible communion of Saints is of two, three or more Saints joined together by covenant with God & themselves [...].'⁵

By the time of his residence in Amsterdam, however, he had gone further: he wrote, 'We say the Church or two or three faithful people Separated from the world and joined together in a true covenant, have both Christ, *the* covenant, & promises...'⁶ Clearly, 'the' covenant referred to here, in contrast to 'a' covenant, is the eternal covenant of gracious salvation, containing all God's promises. When people are joined in 'a' covenant, they have *the* covenant itself. John Smyth is envisaging a physical act of covenant-making, and this is clear from his assertion elsewhere that 'the outward part of the true forme of the true visible church is a vowe, promise, oath, or covenant betwixt God and the Saints'.⁷

Thus, when a local church makes covenant its members are entering, or entering more deeply, into the new covenant in which they are redeemed by Christ. In the covenant promise of the local congregation the eternal covenant of grace is actualized here and now in a particular time and place in history.⁸ It doesn't matter whether there is an actual covenant *document*, or whether it is believed that the covenant is simply made in the act of baptism; the Baptist theology of community is covenantal.

4 William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* Vol. 1, 1620–1647 (repr. Mass. Historical Society, Boston, 1912), 20–22. I have modernized the spelling in all seventeenth-century texts.

5 John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church* (1607), in W. T. Whitley (ed.), *The Works of John Smyth* (2 volumes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), I, 252.

6 Smyth, *Paralleles, Censures, Observations*, in Whitley, *Works* II, 403.

7 John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences*, in Whitley, *Works*, I, 254.

8 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 128.

This covenantal understanding has an important result on the relation between a single local church and other churches with which it holds fellowship. According to the London Confession of 1644 there is a relation of trust between the local congregation and the other churches with which it is associated. The seven churches, scattered throughout London, confess in article 47 that

‘although the particular Congregations be distinct and several Bodies, every one a compact and knit City in itself; yet are they all to walk by *one and the same* Rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help of one another in all needful affairs of the Church, as members of *one* body in the *common* faith under Christ their only head.’⁹

Each congregation makes decisions for its own faith and life, and yet together they are members of ‘one body’, observing ‘one and the same Rule’. The Rule is that of Christ, not an ecclesial rule or canon law defining areas of authority, and is discerned on the basis of scripture when congregations assemble together. This tension can only be lived within by mutual trust.

Because Christ rules in the local congregation, it has a liberty that cannot be infringed by any external ecclesial power. But this is not an unrestricted or undisciplined freedom; it is *not* what is often called “autonomy”, which is an idea that arose among Southern Baptists in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Since Christ also rules in assemblies of churches when they gather, the local church meeting *must* give serious attention to the way that this wider association has discerned the mind of Christ, to be ready to trust fellow churches, and to have good reason if it is to challenge their proposals.¹⁰ Of course, a single church meeting is still free to recognize that there are good reasons *not* to confirm wider decisions, but there will be an *expectation* that churches together have been seeking the purpose of the Christ who rules among them. I might quote here a document about the associating of churches accepted by the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1998: it reads,

‘no local church is complete of itself and does well to seek for that of Christ which is expressed in the wider body [...] To fulfil the mission of Christ, churches have to do it together that they may make up for each other’s lacks and set forth the whole Christ.’¹¹

9 *Confession of Faith* (1644), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168–69.

10 On early Baptists here, see White, *English Separatist Tradition*, 28.

11 Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Relating and Resourcing: The Report of the Task Group on Associating*, unpublished Council Paper, 4.

2 Church as fellowship

So we now move on from the church as covenant, to the church as fellowship. This is one translation into English of the New Testament Greek word *koinonia*, and another translation is the word you have given me for the title of this paper: communion.

Baptists should, and often do, create a warm and accepting ethos in the congregation, where people can share their personal experiences with each other, share their joys and sympathize with their sadnesses. This is often expressed in church meals – eating together – or singing together in choirs. We sometimes think this is all that fellowship means, but of course it runs much deeper than this. It is nothing less than sharing in a *divine* fellowship, participating in the *koinonia* of love that we call the Holy Trinity.

I mean the vision of God as three persons, each *hypostasis* a distinct reality because of its relationships to the other two, and united in a communion (*koinonia*) of life so intimate that we are confronted by one Lord. I do not mean a kind of mathematical puzzle in which God is supposedly one individual and three individuals at the same time. This was never the understanding of Trinity among the church Fathers. They are trying to express the nature of God as complex personality, as an interweaving (*perichoresis*) of relationships, as movements of a giving and receiving within the life of God which is love.¹² We cannot objectify such a communion of relationships; we cannot paint it or schematize it as a diagram or etch it into a stained glass window. Language of God as Trinity is not a language of observation in which we say ‘so that’s what God looks like!’ It is a language of participation in which we say: ‘so that’s why we can share in God! Just as Christ gathers the church by being the mediator of the covenant, so Christ gathers the church into the fellowship of the triune God. It is through Christ’s indwelling in the Father and the Holy Spirit than we also can dwell in God.

This theology of communion is not of course distinctively Baptist. It is a common language in ecumenical conversations today. But what is more particular Baptist is the conviction that we enter more deeply into this communion through the baptism of believing disciples. All Christian churches baptize into the name of the Trinity, which is not just a formula: it means being immersed into the flowing movements of love that are the triune God. The baptism of believers, however, gives

12 For an exposition of this idea, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 34–36.

this a special depth by bringing together the salvific activity of God, renewing human life, and the human response of faith. And here we are back on the ground of covenant again. A fusion of *koinonia* and covenant in the act of baptism is, I suggest, a distinctively Baptist theology of the church.

Like Anabaptists, Baptists have identified covenant-making with the baptism of believing disciples. The restriction of baptism to these disciples defines the distinctive form of covenantal ecclesiology to which Baptists hold, in which baptism normally marks the entry into the covenant community and through which the covenant of God with a particular church is re-affirmed and enlarged. Among many General Baptists, after John Smyth, baptism in fact replaced the signing of a covenant document rather than being complementary to it; Thomas Grantham, for example, called it ‘the Baptismal Covenant.’¹³ Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican Christian churches have retained infant baptism from the Catholic tradition, largely on the grounds that infants are to be included in the covenant by virtue of the faith of their parents (arguing from the rite of circumcision in the ‘old covenant’); but Baptists have insisted that a covenanted church requires all its members to be disciples of an age to be able to make covenant promises on their own account.

This should not be taken to mean that a person’s profession of *faith* exhausts the meaning of baptism. Baptists have envisaged the act of baptism as usually but not essentially by *immersion* in order to set forth the imagery of dying and rising with Christ; and this is a place where divine grace and human faith meet.¹⁴ The baptismal water is a place in the material world that can become a meeting-place with the crucified and risen Christ who is the maker of the new covenant.¹⁵ In fact, in the seventeenth century, the terms ‘sacrament’ and ‘ordinance’ were often used interchangeably by Baptists,¹⁶ the latter term emphasizing that the actions referred to were instituted by Christ himself.

The depth of covenant theology envisaged by Smyth and other early Baptists was that here eternal and local covenant came together

13 Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus: Or, The Ancient Christian Religion* (London: Francis Smith, 1688), 23–27.

14 Baptist Union, *Believing and Being Baptized*, A Discussion Document by the Doctrine and Worship Committee (London: Baptist Union Publications, 1996), 17–20.

15 George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 305.

16 See *Orthodox Creed* (1679) in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 317 [art. 27]; Thomas Lambe, *A Confutation of Infants Baptisme* (London: 1643), 35–39; Benjamin Keach, *Tropologia. A Key to Open Scripture-Metaphors* (London: Enoch Prosser, 1683), 425.

into one focus. This leads to the Baptist conviction that baptism is not only about the person baptized being made a member of the church of Christ, as is found in the baptismal theology of all other Christian churches. In Baptist understanding the church itself is being *constituted* through this act. Not only is the person baptised being gathered *into* the church, but the *church* is being gathered.¹⁷ Whenever someone is baptized, the church is being re-gathered, and its covenant is being renewed, as it is expanded through the new members. Thus baptism is not an individual, but a corporate event. Here covenant is integrated with fellowship, *koinonia*: the church through baptism is being gathered by Christ into the eternal fellowship of the triune God.

This also means that fellowship in divine *koinonia* joined with a covenantal theology is a firm basis for ecumenical partnerships. If the local church shares in the *koinonia* of the Trinity, abiding in the communion of God, this means that in spite of separation the various churches are already in communion. This is a new note that has been struck in recent years in ecumenical conversations, a conviction that churches are not ‘out of communion’ – they cannot be if they exist in God’s communion. But, as a Faith and Order study group puts it, they can be said to share ‘an existing though imperfect communion’ or a ‘degree of communion’.¹⁸

The same insight comes from thinking of the act of covenanting. Here we are concerned with God’s *eternal* covenant of grace with *all* who have faith, and so baptism must be into the church *universal*. In Baptist understanding of the church, the church universal (and in this sense, ‘catholic’) only exists in its particular forms in local churches, but the universal is not reducible to the local. The local church is *fully* the church, but it is not *wholly* the church. We have already seen that ‘covenant’ holds the local and wider forms of churches gathering together within a tension of trust. This ecclesiology is also very close to some contemporary Roman Catholic thought which envisages a *perichoresis* or co-inherence between the universal and the local church.¹⁹ The covenantal vision means that, in principle, a local Baptist church *could* relate to churches of other Christian confessions in the same way

17 Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, Book IV, Treatise 1, The Tenth Argument Maintained, 41–42.

18 *The Church, Local and Universal. A Study Commissioned and Received by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches* (Faith and Order Paper 150; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 10.

19 E.g. Walter Kasper, ‘On the Church’, *The Tablet* 255 (June 23, 2001): 927–30.

as to other Baptist churches, as long as they were willing to live in covenant with it. Covenant can go on expanding. After all, every church exists within the *communio* of the triune God. Differences over baptism should not prevent the expression of this communion; in ecumenical discussions the Baptist participants have proposed that they can recognize the baptism of infants when it is part of a *whole process* of initiation into Christ which includes – at some point – a personally-owned confession of faith.²⁰

This theology of communion also has the capacity to break down barriers between the church and the secular world, since a theology of the *koinonia* of the Trinity can include the whole of the creation. God's act of creation can be envisaged as God's making room for all created beings within the interweaving fellowship of the divine life. The church has its essential part to play within this wide kingdom of God. Since the preaching of the Word and the exercise of the sacraments have the power to draw believers more deeply into the *koinonia* of God, the church is indispensable in the mission of God; but the church can share in this mission with the confidence that God is already at work in the whole world.

3 Church as body (of Christ)

Along with covenant and *koinonia*, there is a third image of the church, 'the body of Christ', and Baptists take a particular perspective on this, as I want to say. There is, however, much that Baptist thought has in common with all Christian theology.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul focuses on the image of the body of Christ. The daring manner with which the early Christian community used this title, and the startling claim it makes, has perhaps been dulled by over-familiarity. The early Christians were not just describing themselves by analogy as a 'body' of people – as we might speak today of soldiers as 'a fine body of men and women'. They were

²⁰ See *Conversations Around the World. The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005), 44–48; *Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism*. Leuenberg Documents 9 (Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag Lembeck, 2005), 19–22; *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity. Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation* (London: Church House Publishing 2005), 31–57; *The Word of God in the Life of the Church. A Report of International Conversations Between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006–2010*, repr. in: *American Baptist Quarterly* 31 (1): 68–72.

asserting that they were the body of a particular person – Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth who was now the risen Lord of the universe. They were venturing to say that people could touch and handle the risen Christ by touching the outstretched hands of the church. As Christ was once to be seen on the streets of Nazareth and Jerusalem, so he is visible in the Christian congregation (1Jn 1:1–4). He lives out his life through all his members. Body is about visibility.

In the New Testament writings, the phrase ‘body of Christ’ has three meanings – the risen and glorious body of Jesus who was crucified, the community of the church, and the eucharistic bread in which the community shares. We should probably regard these forms of the body as interweaving, overlapping and conditioning each other rather than being simply the same thing.

Baptists have insisted that the *local* company of believers, and not just the universal church, can be called the ‘body of Christ’. Wherever two or three are gathered together, wherever the body of the communion bread is broken (1Cor 10:16–17), there is the body of Christ. But the local congregation is always a manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven, as our reflections on both *koinonia* and covenant have told us. The local congregation derives from the one body which is Christ; again we have the principle that the church is gathered by Christ, and this means that his body pre-exists the local form of the body.

So we shouldn’t think of many small bodies being added together to make up one large body, by a kind of spiritual arithmetic. Rather, the small bodies exist as an ‘outcropping’ of the whole body. Separate churches already relate together because the body of Christ exists *before* us, and we are called to enter it. Sometimes Baptists have thought that the universal church is an ‘invisible’ communion of the redeemed, and that the body of Christ becomes visible only on the local level. But other Baptist theologians past and present have understood that the universal body of Christ is also the visible church, as Christ takes visible form in the world through the bodies of all living believers, at various levels of human society.²¹

As well as affirming that the local church is fully (but not exclusively) the body of Christ, a Baptist theology of community has other distinctive things to say. One contribution is to affirm that, since a local

21 *Orthodox Creed* (1679), art. XXIX, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 318; Daniel Turner, *A Compendium of Social Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: John Ward, 1778), 2–4.

church is the body of Christ, authority in the church is a matter of discerning the mind of Christ in his body. This is the place of the church meeting, where each member can play a part in finding the mind – or purpose – of Christ for the life and mission of the church. But it is this very principle that should make Baptists very open to listening to others. The church meeting is not about preserving independency, or showing how self-sufficient a local church might be, but is about finding the mind of Christ. This is a proper quest for the body of Christ gathered together, wherever it might be. In church meeting members should thus take very seriously the decisions and the advice of its own regional association and national (union or convention) councils and assemblies. Churches gathered together by Christ are also seeking his mind.

In turn this openness of the local church to associations of Baptist churches is easily extendable to ecumenical councils in which the church has a representative part. The church meeting cannot be imposed upon by outside church authorities, but this is because the final authority, according to Baptist understanding, is not the church meeting but Christ himself present in the meeting. And the same Christ is present to make himself visible in his body not only in the local congregation but in wider assemblies.

Another implication of the local church as fully, but not exclusively, the body of Christ lies in another sense of ‘communion’ – that is, Holy Communion, also called the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper. Baptists do not restrict the presence of Christ to the bread and the wine, although they have historically believed that Christ *uses* the bread and wine to meet with his disciples in a special way, to deepen their relation with him and to nourish their life. This is what early Baptist churches called a ‘spiritual feeding’ on Christ. But it has been distinctive of Baptists to stress the overlap between the ‘body of Christ’ as held forth in bread, and the ‘body of Christ’ lived as the congregation. In some way, sharing in the Lord’s Supper deepens not only the relationship of Christ with the individual believer, but the presence of Christ in his gathered people. The real presence of Christ is manifested in the community of the church, as it becomes more truly the body of Christ broken for the life of the world.

This was an insight firmly grasped by Huldrych Zwingli, despite the popular view that he held to a ‘mere memorialism’. When he commented on the words of Paul in 1Cor 10:17 that ‘we who are many are one body because we all eat of the same bread’, he affirmed that ‘We

eat bread so that we are made into one bread [...] What we become by this eating [...] is the body of Christ.²² Baptist writings on the Lord's Supper commonly slide from the meaning 'communion with Christ' to 'communion with each other'.²³

We can sum up a Baptist theology of the community with a picture. In many older English Baptist chapels, the table for the Lord's Supper had a drawer in it, and in the drawer was the church minute book, keeping a record of the life of the congregation and its decisions. Members had often come a long way for morning worship, and after the Lord's Supper there would be a common meal, and then a church meeting. The church book recorded their covenant together, or at least it contained all the names of those received into covenant. Fellowship was expressed in the meal, and in the worship where they knew a sharing in the life of the *koinonia* of the triune God. They had shared in the body of Christ in communion, and now the body of Christ would become visible in themselves as they talked together, referred to scripture and looked for the mind of Christ for them. This was a congregation that, in its covenant, its *koinonia* and its body knew that it was inter-dependent with other congregations. Christ had gathered them, as Christ gathered other churches. They rested on the truth of the words of Christ himself, that 'where two or three gather together, there am I in the midst of them.'

22 Zwingli, Letter to Matthew Alber, 16 November 1524, trans. in H. Wayne Pipkin (ed.), *Huldrych Zwingli. Writings* (2 volumes; Allison Park: Pickwick, 1984), vol. 2, 141.

23 E.g. *The Orthodox Creed*, art. XXXIII, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 321: 'pledge of communion with him, as also of our communion and union each with other, in the participation of this holy sacrament.'