

AGAINST CHRISTIANITY; FOR THE SACRAMENTS By Rich Lusk

Before there was Peter Leithart, before there was Lesslie Newbigin, there was M. F. Sadler. Sadler was a nineteenth century Reformed Anglican. His works represent a high water mark in the history of Reformed Catholicity. Sadler wrote commentaries encompassing the whole of the NT, as well as several other works devoted to a biblical theology of the church, covenant, the means of grace, and salvation. This quotation is taken from his classic book *The Second Adam and the New Birth*.

Nothing has done more to destroy the true life of Christianity than the attempt to make it into a sort of philosophical system.

The tendency of much modern popular Theology is to exhibit Christianity as a sort of science, having its causes and effects ? moral and mental, of course, but still causes and effects ? connected according to certain known laws. The causes are, the exhibition of certain influential motives ? such as the love of God shown in the plan of redemption; the (natural) effects of these are the drawing of the heart and affections Godward, the implantation of a new principle, etc.

Now, all this is true; but being only part of the truth, when held alone, it is held wrongly, and therefore mischievously. For the doctrine of the Sacraments at once and for ever makes Christianity (humanly speaking) unphilosophical. It introduces a disturbing element, because a supernatural one; for it teaches us that there are in Christianity two ordinances which produce a religious effect not according to the laws of cause and effect with which we are acquainted. The Sacrament of Baptism grafts a person into Christ, not because there is anything in Baptism itself calculated to do so, but because of the will of God and the promise of Christ to be with His Church to the end of the world.

When a man heartily accepts the doctrine of Baptism as it is laid down in Holy Scripture, he must hold all Christianity to be supernatural. He believes that he is, in some inscrutable way, partaker of the nature of One who is now at the right hand of God; he believes also that his fellow-Christians are not merely his fellow-Christians because they hold the same body of truth which he holds ? as the

members of a political party may be united by holding the same opinions ? but he believes that both they and he have been grafted supernaturally into the Second Adam . . .

The teaching of the Church on Holy Baptism is also diametrically opposed to that spirit of rationalism which refuses to contemplate Christianity as in reality anything more than a human philosophy, or educational system, which, if it have not the same origin, at least has now the same mode of operation, in all respects as any other philosophical or educational system: any supernatural character which it may once have had having long since passed away, it must now work its work as any other system of opinions must do, by appealing to the reason, or imagination, or affections, of those brought within its influence.

Now the doctrine of Baptismal Grace is unquestionably opposed to any such limitation of the power of God in the matter of our salvation, for if we accept it we must, perforce, believe that each Christian, at the commencement of his discipleship, at his first entrance into the kingdom which Christ has established, receives some mysterious communication from Christ Himself, or is brought into a supernatural state of union with Him as the Second Adam.

Sadler's works (and others like them) are important to the project of Reformed Catholicity. Recovering a biblical theology of baptism is crucial to reclaiming catholicity because [a] baptism is the sacramental boundary marker of those who belong to Christ and have been grafted into his mystical body and bride; and [b] because a proper doctrine of baptism is indeed "supernatural" (for lack of a better term) and therefore curbs ideological, rationalistic, and scholastic tendencies in the Reformed world.

Those who tend to turn biblical religion into an abstract philosophy or a logical system are always hindered from pursuing catholicity because they insist almost exclusively upon full ideological agreement before admitting any cooperation with others who name the name of Christ. While the ideas and doctrines are important, Reformed Catholicity grows out of an understanding that all who are in Christ by virtue of baptism share a common *life*. That life includes an ideology, but it cannot be reduced to ideology. Our shared baptismal union with the risen

Christ obligates us to pursue unity at every level and in every fashion with one another.

By the way, Athanasius Press hopes to eventually republish some of Sadler's works. For more information on Athanasius Press, check out the website:

<http://www.athanasiuspress.org/inventory.html?invid=5>