

On the Sacrament of Extreme Unction – By Martin Luther



Martin Luther

To this rite of anointing the sick our theologians have made two additions well worthy of themselves. One is, that they call it a sacrament; the other, that they make it extreme, so that it cannot be administered except to those who are in extreme peril of life. Perhaps— as they are keen dialecticians—they have so made it in relation to the first unction of baptism, and the two following ones of confirmation and orders. They have this, it is true, to throw in my teeth, that, on the authority of the Apostle James, there are in this case a promise and a sign, which two things, I have hitherto said, constitute a sacrament. He says: “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” (James v. 14, 15.) Here, they say, is the promise of remission of sins, and the sign of the oil.

I, however, say that if folly has ever been uttered, it has been uttered on this subject. I pass over the fact that many assert, and with great probability, that this epistle was not written by the Apostle James, and is not worthy of the apostolic spirit; although, whosoever it is, it has obtained authority by usage. Still, even if it were written by the Apostle James, I should say that it was not lawful for an apostle to institute a sacrament by his own authority; that is, to give a divine promise with a sign annexed to it. To do this belonged to Christ alone. Thus Paul says that he had received the sacrament of the Eucharist from the Lord; and that he was sent, not to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Nowhere, however, in the gospel do we read of this sacrament of extreme unction. But let us pass this over, and let us look to the words themselves of the Apostle, or of whoever was the author of this Epistle, and we shall at once see how those men have failed to observe their true meaning, who have thus increased the number of sacraments.

In the first place—if they think the saying of the Apostle true and worthy to be followed, by what authority do they change and resist it? Why do they make an extreme and special unction of that which the Apostle meant to be general? The Apostle did not mean it to be extreme, and to be administered only to those about to die. He says expressly: “Is any sick among you?” He does not say: “Is any dying?” Nor do I care what Dionysius’s Ecclesiastical Hierarchy may teach about this; the words of the Apostle are clear, on which he and they alike rest, though they do not follow them. Thus it is evident that, by no authority, but at their own discretion, they have made, out of the ill-

understood words of the Apostle, a sacrament and an extreme unction; thus wronging all the other sick, whom they have deprived on their own authority of that benefit of anointing which the Apostle appointed for them.

But it is even a finer argument, that the promise of the Apostle expressly says: "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." The Apostle commands the use of anointing and prayer for the very purpose that the sick man may be healed and raised up, that is, may not die, and that the unction may not be extreme. This is proved by the prayers which are used even at this day during the ceremony of anointing, and in which we ask that the sick man may be restored. They say, on the contrary, that unction should not be administered except to those on the point of departing; that is, that they may not be healed and raised up. If the matter were not so serious, who could refrain from laughing at such fine, apt, and sound comments on the words of the Apostle? Do we not manifestly detect here that sophistical folly which, in many other cases as well as in this, affirms what Scripture denies, and denies what it affirms? Shall we not render thanks to these distinguished teachers of ours? I have said rightly then, that nowhere have they displayed wilder folly than in this instance.

Further—if this unction is a sacrament, it must be beyond doubt an effectual sign (as they say) of that which it seals and promises. Now it promises health and restoration to the sick, as the words plainly show: "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." Who does not see, however, that this promise is seldom, or rather never fulfilled? Scarcely one among a thousand is restored; and even this no one believes to be effected by the sacrament, but by the help of nature or of medicine; while to the sacrament they attribute a contrary effect. What shall we say then? Either the Apostle is deceiving us in this promise, or this unction is not a sacrament; for a sacramental promise is sure, while this in most cases disappoints us. Nay—to recognise another example of the prudence and carefulness of these theologians—they will have it to be extreme unction in order that that promise may not stand; that is, that the sacrament may not be a sacrament. If the unction is extreme, it does not heal, but yields to the sickness; while if it heals, it cannot be extreme. Thus, according to the interpretation of these teachers, James must be understood to have contradicted himself, and to have instituted a sacrament, on purpose not to institute a sacrament; for they will have it to be extreme unction, in order that it may not be true that the sick are healed by it, which is what the Apostle ordained. If this is not madness, what, I ask, is madness?

The words of the Apostle: "Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (1 Tim. i. 7.), apply to these men; with so little judgment do they read and draw conclusions. With the same stupidity they have inferred the doctrine of auricular confession from the words of the Apostle James: "Confess your faults one to another." They do not even observe the command of the Apostle, that the elders of the Church should be called for, and that they should pray over the sick. Scarcely one priest is sent now, though the Apostle would have many to be present, not for the purpose of anointing, but for that of prayer; as he says: "The prayer of faith shall save the sick." Moreover, I am not sure that

he means priests to be understood in this case, since he says elders, that is, seniors in age. Now it does not follow that an elder must be a priest or a minister, and we may suspect that the Apostle intended that the sick should be visited by the men of greater age and weightier character in the Church, who should do this as a work of mercy, and heal the sick by the prayer of faith. At the same time it cannot be denied, that of old the churches were ruled by the older men, chosen for this purpose on account of their age and long experience of life, without the ordinations and consecrations now used.

I am therefore of opinion that this is the same anointing as that used by the Apostles, of whom it is written: "They anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them." (Mark vi. 13.) It was a rite of the primitive Church, long since obsolete, by which they did miracles for the sick; just as Christ says of them that believe: "They shall take up serpents; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." (Mark xvi. 18.) It is astonishing that they have not made sacraments out of these words also; since they have a like virtue and promise with those words of James. This pretended extreme unction, then, is not a sacrament, but a counsel of the Apostle James, taken, as I have said, from the Gospel of Mark; and one which any one who will may follow. I do not think that it was applied to all sick persons, for the Church glories in her infirmities, and thinks death a gain; but only to those who bore their sickness impatiently and with little faith, and whom the Lord therefore left, that on them the miraculous power and the efficacy of faith might be conspicuously shown.

James, indeed, has carefully and intentionally provided against this very mistake, in that he connects the promise of healing and of remission of sins, not with the anointing, but with the prayer of faith; for he says: "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." (James v. 15.) Now a sacrament does not require prayer or faith on the part of him who administers it, for even a wicked man may baptize and consecrate the elements without prayer; but it rests solely on the promise and institution of God, and requires faith on the part of him who receives it. But where is the prayer of faith in our employment of extreme unction at the present day? Who prays over the sick man with such faith as not to doubt of his restoration? Such is the prayer of faith which James here describes; that prayer of which he had said at the beginning of the epistle: "Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering;" and of which Christ says: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." (Mark xi. 24.)

There is no doubt at all that, if even at the present day such prayer were made over the sick—that is, by grave and holy elders, and with full faith—as many as we would might be healed. For what cannot faith do? We, however, leave out of sight that faith which apostolic authority requires in the very first place; and moreover by elders, that is, men superior to the rest in age and in faith, we understand the common herd of priests. Furthermore, out of a daily or free anointing we make an extreme unction; and lastly, we not only do not ask and obtain that result of healing promised by the Apostle, but we empty the promise of its meaning by an opposite result. Nevertheless we boast that this sacrament, or rather figment, of ours, is founded on and proved by

the teaching of the Apostle, from which it is as widely separated as pole from pole. Oh, what theologians!

Therefore, without condemning this our sacrament of extreme unction, I steadily deny that it is that which is enjoined by the Apostle James, of which neither the form, nor the practice, nor the efficacy, nor the purpose, agrees with ours. We will reckon it, however, among those sacraments which are of our own appointing, such as the consecration and sprinkling of salt and water. We cannot deny that, as the Apostle Paul teaches us, every creature is sanctified by the word of God and prayer; and so we do not deny that remission and peace are bestowed through extreme unction; not because it is a sacrament divinely instituted, but because he who receives it believes that he obtains these benefits. For the faith of the receiver does not err, however much the minister may err. For if he who baptizes or absolves in jest—that is, does not absolve at all, as far as the minister's part is concerned—yet does really absolve or baptize, if there be faith on the part of the absolved or baptized person, how much more does he who administers extreme unction bestow peace; even though in reality he bestows no peace, if we look to his ministry, since there is no sacrament. The faith of the person anointed receives that blessing which he who anointed him either could not, or did not intend, to give. It is enough that the person anointed hears and believes the word; for whatever we believe that we shall receive, that we do really receive, whatever the minister may do or not do, whether he play a part, or be in jest. For the saying of Christ holds good: "All things are possible to him that believeth;" and again: "As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee." Our sophists, however, make no mention of this faith in treating of the sacraments, but give their whole minds to frivolous discussions on the virtues of the sacraments themselves; ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

It has been of advantage, however, that this unction has been made extreme, for, thanks to this, it has been of all sacraments the least harassed and enslaved by tyranny and thirst for gain; and this one mercy has been left to the dying, that they are free to be anointed, even if they have not confessed or communicated. Whereas if it had continued to be of daily employment, especially if it had also healed the sick, even if it had not taken away sins, of how many worlds would not the pontiffs by this time have been masters—they who, on the strength of the one sacrament of penance, and by the power of the keys, and through the sacrament of orders, have become such mighty emperors and princes? But now it is a fortunate thing that, as they despise the prayer of faith, so they heal no sick, and, out of an old rite, have formed for themselves a new sacrament.

Let it suffice to have said thus much concerning these four sacraments. I know how much it will displease those who think that we are to enquire about the number and use of the sacraments, not from the holy Scriptures, but from the See of Rome; as if the See of Rome had given us those sacraments, and had not rather received them from the schools of the Universities; to which, without controversy, it owes all that it has. The tyranny of the popes would never have stood so high if it had not received so much help from the Universities; for among all the principal sees, there is scarcely any other

which has had so few learned bishops. It is by force, fraud, and superstition alone that it has prevailed over the rest; and those who occupied that see a thousand years ago are so widely diverse from those who have grown into power in the interim, that we are compelled to say that either the one or the other were not pontiffs of Rome.

There are besides some other things, which it may seem that we might reckon among sacraments—all those things, namely, to which a divine promise has been made, such as prayer, the word, the cross. For Christ has promised in many places to hear those that pray; especially in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, where he invites us to prayer by many parables. Of the word he says: "Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it." (Luke xi. 28.) And who can reckon up how often he promises succour and glory to those who are in tribulation, suffering, and humiliation? Nay, who can count up all the promises of God? For it is the whole object of all Scripture to lead us to faith; on the one side urging us with commandments and threatenings, on the other side inviting us by promises and consolations. Indeed all Scripture consists of either commandments or promises. Its commandments humble the proud by their requirements; its promises lift up the humble by their remissions of sin.

It has seemed best, however, to consider as sacraments, properly so called, those promises which have signs annexed to them. The rest, as they are not attached to signs, are simple promises. It follows that, if we speak with perfect accuracy, there are only two sacraments in the Church of God, Baptism and the Bread; since it is in these alone that we see both a sign divinely instituted and a promise of remission of sins. The sacrament of penance, which I have reckoned along with these two, is without any visible and divinely appointed sign; and is nothing else, as I have said, than a way and means of return to baptism. Not even the schoolmen can say that penitence agrees with their definition; since they themselves ascribe to every sacrament a visible sign, which enables the senses to apprehend the form of that effect which the sacrament works invisibly. Now penitence or absolution has no such sign; and therefore they will be compelled by their own definition either to say that penitence is not one of the sacraments, and thus to diminish their number, or else to bring forward another definition of a sacrament.

Baptism, however, which we have assigned to the whole of life, will properly suffice for all the sacraments which we are to use in life; while the bread is truly the sacrament of the dying and departing, since in it we commemorate the departure of Christ from this world, that we may imitate Him. Let us then so distribute these two sacraments that baptism may be allotted to the beginning and to the whole course of life, and the bread to its end and to death; and let the Christian, while in this vile body, exercise himself in both, until, being fully baptized and strengthened, he shall pass out of this world, as one born into a new and eternal life, and destined to eat with Christ in the kingdom of his Father, as he promised at the Last Supper, saying: "I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God shall come." (Luke xxii. 18.) Thus it is evident that Christ instituted the sacrament of the bread that we might receive the life which is

to come; and then, when the purpose of each sacrament shall have been fulfilled, both baptism and the bread will cease.

I shall here make an end of this essay, which I readily and joyfully offer to all pious persons, who long to understand Scripture in its sincere meaning, and to learn the genuine use of the sacraments. It is a gift of no slight importance to “know the things that are freely given to us of God,” and to know in what manner we ought to use those gifts. For if we are instructed in this judgment of the Spirit, we shall not deceive ourselves by leaning on those things which are opposed to it. Whereas our theologians have not only nowhere given us the knowledge of these two things, but have even darkened them, as if of set purpose, I, if I have not given that knowledge, have at least succeeded in not darkening it, and have given others an inducement to think out something better. It has at least been my endeavour to explain the meaning of both sacraments, but we cannot all do all things. On those impious men, however, who in their obstinate tyranny press on us their own teachings as if they were God’s, I thrust these things freely and confidently, caring not at all for their ignorance and violence. And yet even to them I will wish sounder sense, and will not despise their efforts, but will only distinguish them from those which are legitimate and really Christian.

I hear a report that fresh bulls and papal curses are being prepared against me, by which I am to be urged to recant, or else be declared a heretic. If this is true, I wish this little book to be a part of my future recantation, that they may not complain that their tyranny has puffed itself up in vain. The remaining part I shall shortly publish, Christ being my helper, and that of such a sort as the See of Rome has never yet seen or heard, thus abundantly testifying my obedience in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hostis Herodes impie,

Christum venire quid times?

Non arripit mortalia

Qui regna dat cœlestia.