The Way Things Really Ought to Be: Eucharist, Eschatology, and Culture

Peter J. Leithart

For more than half a millennium eucharistic theology conducted its investigations through a zoom lens. The zoom lens rose to dominance during medieval disputes about the real presence, and it was further entrenched during Protestant-Catholic disputes on transubstantiation and intramural Protestant conflicts. The “zoom lens” metaphor is doubly significant. First, and here the emphasis is on the “zoom” side of things, for centuries eucharistic theology limited its inquiries to only a fraction of what takes place in the sacrament. Specifically, debate focused on two issues: what does or does not happen to the bread and wine? and, what benefit does participation in the Eucharist bring to the individual participant? Second, shifting to the “lens” side of things, eucharistic theology was guided by a metaphorical equation of “seeing” and “knowing,” a pervasive metaphor in western philosophy at least since Descartes but one that shaped sacramental theology nearly from the beginning—“visible” words and all that. On this assumption, if the Eucharist does us any good, it is because it “teaches” us something, and if it teaches us something it is because it “shows” us something.

Liturgical renewal has challenged the zoom focus of the lens in many churches and considerably widened the scope of eucharistic discussion, but within American evangelicalism the zoom lens continues decisively to shape sacramental theology. For this assertion, I offer two bits of evidence, one textual, the other anecdotal. The textual evidence comes from a systematic theology written by Dr. James Montgomery Boice of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia. Four elements constitute a sacrament, Boice asserts: it is instituted and commanded by Christ, involves the use of material signs, is a means of grace, and seals and confirms the grace signified. Boice explains the Eucharist in three temporal dimensions: It points to the past atoning death of Jesus, a present personal relationship with Christ, and the future coming of Christ. In explaining the past dimension of the Supper, Boice digresses to reiterate the doctrine of substitutionary atonement; his discussion of the present dimension consists mainly of a summary of historical debates concerning the real presence; and the hope of Christ’s future coming is a comfort for the weary Christian and an encouragement to holiness. Boice’s account treats the Supper primarily as an aid to individual spirituality, without a hint of the communal dimensions of th...