Peter Phillips has commented that “Although Paul Tillich has surprisingly little to say of the sacraments as they are traditionally understood in Christian discourse…his thought is richly sacramental.”¹ Nowhere is Tillich’s “surprisingly little to say” more obvious than in his Systematic Theology, where a mere eight pages of an approximately seven hundred-page work are devoted to explicitly discussing sacramentology. However, precisely this brevity of treatment belies sacramentology’s immense import for the whole of Tillich’s thought. As Maxwell Johnson understands matters – seeking to lay the groundwork for ecumenical progress between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches – one does not find in Tillich a robust sacramentology, but “a sacramental approach that is used as the basis for an entire system of thought.”² To make his case, Johnson attends to aspects of Tillich’s work that are especially pertinent to his ecumenical horizon, such as the sacramental conceptions resident in Tillich’s account of symbols, christology (Jesus as the Christ is the Ursakrament), and ecclesiology (the church as a sacrament of the Spiritual Community). This study will probe more deeply, however, providing an overview of Tillich’s account of the sacraments in the third volume of his Systematic Theology and passing through his account of symbols to discern the way in which Tillich’s ontology is shaped by sacramental thinking. With this explication in place, we will

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prosecute an avenue of critical engagement with Tillich concerned with the problem of the relation between – to use Hans Frei’s terms – “identity” and “presence” resident within Tillich’s system in general and his account of symbols in particular.

TILLICH ON THE SACRAMENTS

The sacraments appear in Tillich’s Systematic Theology at the heart of where human spirit and divine Spirit intersect. Before speaking of this intersection and the sacraments’ role in it, however, something must be said concerning human spirit and divine Spirit. Tillich understands the former to be the penultimate dimension of life’s multidimensional unity, surpassed only by the dimension of history. The spirit dimension emerges from the psychological dimension through the actualization of a person’s essentially given centeredness. This actualization occurs in the moral encounter between a self and the other, where the self is drawn beyond its own confines and yet achieves its own self-integration through the exercise of freedom as limited by destiny. “Morality is,” in this way, “the constitutive function of spirit.”

Human spirit, then, characterizes human life as it exists in both individual integrity and communal integration. It is the dimension of morality, culture, and religion.

However, morality, culture, and religion are not – in Tillich’s terms – “unambiguous.” Each aspect of the spiritual dimension contains within itself a seed of anxiety that sets humanity on the quest for what Tillich calls “Unambiguous Life” in the third of his Systematic Theology volumes, and “New Being” in the second. The heart of ambiguity residing in each of these three aspects of life is a variation on the split between subject and object, a split that plagues the realm of existence as estrangement from the ground of being. In the aspect of morality, this split takes the form of failure to perfectly characterize interpersonal relations by love (agape), which Tillich

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understands to be one’s participation in another’s personal center and, consequently, the acceptance of the other’s particularities in their integrity and continued existence.\(^4\) In other words, the subject / object split is transcended in the context of interpersonal relations.

Unambiguous Life is not something that can be achieved from the side of ambiguous life, however. It is made manifest in and to ambiguous life, albeit always in a fragmentary form, from without. Divine Spirit enters the picture precisely at this juncture, for it is the divine Spirit that grasps human spirit, driving it ecstatically beyond itself and into the manifestation of unambiguous life. Tillich calls this manifestation “Spiritual Presence,” and “ecstasy” is the condition of human life grasped by this presence and elevated to self-transcendence without the loss of particularity. That is, the divine Spirit commandeers human spirit and achieves a “union of subject and object…in which the independent existence of each is overcome; new unity is created.”\(^5\) For Tillich, this commandeering requires a medium, and the sacraments are the media through which this commandeering occurs.

Tillich’s explicit discussion of the sacraments here in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* is exceptionally brief, as has been mentioned, and lacks discussion of the particular Christian sacraments. What Tillich does discuss is the relationship between word and sacrament, and the derivative issue of in what sense one can speak of an “inner” word. On the relationship between word and sacrament, Tillich admits a certain precedence to sacrament insofar as physical objects belong to a more fundamental dimension of life than does language, but it is finally word that is superior since “the experience of sacramental reality belongs to the


Reflected here is Tillich’s conviction that language is absolutely basic to human existence, at least with reference to the spiritual dimension. Language is the first consequence of the moral encounter that constitutes the spiritual dimension of life in humanity. Such an encounter necessitates acts of communication and denotation, which are language’s function. Far from reducing the sacraments to language, however, Tillich understands language to function in a sacramental mode. Language arises from humanity’s encounter with the other, and becomes the means through which it interacts with the other; that is, it mediates between the self and the other. Thus, Tillich is able to write in his discussion of the sacraments that the divine Spirit’s commandeering of human spirit is always mediated “either by the silent presence of the object...or by the vocal self-expression of a subject,” and he goes on to include the linguistic shape of human thought under this principle.

A sacramental principle is precisely what Tillich’s discussion of the sacraments supplies, and attending to how this principle functions elsewhere in Tillich’s system – even where it is not named explicitly – illuminates the vast extent of its import. A great expansion occurs, for instance, when Tillich links the concepts of sacrament and symbol by speaking of a “sacramental symbol.” This designation establishes sacraments as a subset in the class of symbols, and the distinction seems to be simply that sacraments are those symbols associated with religious ritual activity. The argument can be made, however, that Tillich’s understanding of symbols is highly sacramental in nature. Early in his system, Tillich describes symbols as “indirect” reference “to...
something beyond itself;” but this reference functions on the basis of an internal relation between symbol and symbolized, where “the symbol participates in the reality of that for which it stands,” rather than on the basis of an external relation such as that between sign and signified.\textsuperscript{10} Such an account of indirect reference and participation is clearly in keeping with Tillich’s own position on the sacraments, as well as with the mainline of traditional Protestant and Roman Catholic sacramentology. Thus, Tillich writes, “A sacramental symbol…participates in the power of what it symbolizes, and therefore, it can be a medium of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{11}

How does Tillich understand this ‘sacramental’ participation of symbol in the symbolized? On what is it founded? It is here that sacramental thinking is found at the heart of Tillich’s ontology. Tillich’s ontology is fairly straightforward, and is characterized by something of an exitus-reditus pattern. Humanity – indeed, all finite existence – is essentially united with the ground of being or being-itself (God), but is existentially estranged. It is this condition of existential estrangement that gives rise to the subject / object split, which is the recapitulation in the finite sphere of the estrangement between finite beings and their ground of being. As has already been discussed, this estrangement is transcended when the divine Spirit grasps human spirit and elevates the later beyond the subject / object split by reuniting it with its ground of being in a unity that is not simply restoration of a primal state but the active overcoming of estrangement. Of course, all of this is predicated upon certain moves that Tillich makes in his doctrine of God, such as introducing the root of the subject / object split into God’s own being

\textsuperscript{10} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 1.239.
\textsuperscript{11} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 3.123. For more on the distinction between sign and symbol, see Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 1.239. Tillich further links the notions of sacrament and symbol when he admonishes his readers to understand the symbol of God as “Father” in its “sacramental depth.” Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 1.240-1. Ulrich Reetz explains that there is a “close connection” between the concepts of sacrament and symbol in Tillich’s thought, and that these concepts can appear as synonyms for each other. Ulrich Reetz, \textit{Das Sakramentale in Der Theologie Paul Tillichs} (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1974), 82-3.
through the joining of “creative and abysmal ground of being,” and anchored by christological affirmations, such as understanding Jesus as the Christ as “the bearer of the New Being.”¹²

For present purposes, the important thing to note is that the primal essential unity between finite beings and the ground of being persist even under the conditions of existential estrangement. As Tillich frequently affirms, “everything finite participates in being-itself…Otherwise it would not have the power of being. It would be swallowed by nonbeing.”¹³ What Tillich leaves us with, then, is an estrangement in the midst of a greater and more fundamental participation that is ordered toward a final, transcendent reunification. It is this fundamental participation amidst estrangement of finite existence in its ground of being that underpins Tillich’s account of a symbol’s indirect participation in what it symbolizes, especially when a symbol’s referent is the divine as is the case with sacramental symbols. Indeed, Tillich raises to himself the question of whether aspects of finite existence are able to serve as symbols of the infinite, answering that they can “because that which is infinite is being-itself and…everything participates in being itself.”¹⁴ When symbols symbolize finite reality, the participatory relationship is a finite recapitulation of this more basic relationship. Such an account aligns well with Jean Richard’s claim that religious and sacramental symbols are the paradigmatic sort of symbol for Tillich, and that it is in such symbols that all symbols find their ontological explication.¹⁵ Thus, a pivotal aspect of Tillich’s ontology is found to be predicated upon the sacramental pattern of indirect participation.

What does all this mean for Tillich’s account of the sacraments besides showing that a sacramental pattern of thinking is of both extensive and intensive import for his system as a

¹² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.238 and 2.121, respectively.
¹⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.239.
whole? The most important conclusion concerning sacramentology is that, on Tillich’s account, anything can be a sacrament. If a sacrament must participate in that which it symbolizes – or to put it in different terms, in that which it serves as a medium – and all finite reality participates in the ground of being, then all finite reality is potentially sacramental. As Tillich himself affirms, “No part of encountered reality is excluded beforehand from the possibility that it might become sacramental material.”

The assumption in this logic is that the divine Spirit and the ground of being or being-itself are equivalents, for is the Spiritual Presence which the sacraments serve as media. While there is not a simple identity here, being-itself and Spiritual Presence are two aspects of how Tillich conceives the divine reality. This is suggested when he describes the divine Spirit in terms reminiscent of those use with reference to being-itself, calling it life’s “dimension of depth” in the sense that it is “the dimension in which all dimensions are rooted and negated and affirmed.” It is very interesting to compare this three-fold pattern of “rooted,” “negated,” and “affirmed” to the three volumes of Tillich’s Systematic Theology. The first volume deals with the way in with finite reality is “rooted” in the ground of being, the second volume explicates the “negation” of finite reality’s estranged existence through the bringing of New Being by Jesus as the Christ, and the third volume “affirms” finite reality as the Spiritual Presence drives it into self-transcendence beyond the ambiguities of estranged existence. The trinitarian pattern found here is not insignificant, and it reflects Tillich’s own comment that “the trinitarian symbols are dialectical; they reflect the dialects of life, namely the movement of separation and reunion.”

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17 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.113.
18 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.284.
Spiritual Presence, then, is the aspect of divine reality that grasps human reality and drives it into self-transcendence, and it does so through the media of the sacraments. All of finite reality is potentially sacramental on the basis of its participation in being-itself, even if this participation is provisionally disrupted by the conditions of estranged existence. What then determines which aspects of finite reality become actually sacramental?

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY AND PRESENCE

Having explicated the basic contours of Tillich’s sacramentology and its place in his system as a whole, a more critical line of inquiry will now be pursued. This line is tied up with the relationship of “identity” and “presence” in Tillich’s system in general and his sacramentology in particular, and the question of how actual sacraments are born and die factors here. Hans Frei uses the pairing of identity and presence to describe how it is that we encounter Jesus Christ in the biblical narrative and the church’s sacraments. Frei is willing to admit that “a temporal distinction must be made between Jesus’ identity as a historical person and his presence to us in his Spirit,” but he maintains adamantly that “We must speak about the identity of Jesus before we can talk about the presence of his Spirit.”19 This ordering is important, and it is not set aside by Frei’s claim that “identity is given in unity with…presence.”20 Identity and presence are encountered as a unity because they are the presence and identity of a person and because they are encountered only through this person’s self-giving. This is true in a special way of God and Jesus Christ, but it is also true in a mundane way for human beings. It is only through personal interaction (presence) that one truly knows the other (identity); this is the insight governing the unity of presence and identity. However, unless one knows the other (identity), personal

20 Frei, The Identity of Jesus Christ, 84.
interaction (presence) has marginal significance at best; this is the insight governing the ordering of identity above presence. Tillich, on the other hand, seems to devalue the category of identity even while elevating that of presence.

With specific reference to Jesus Christ, Frei affirms that it is he who is present to us through the Holy Spirit. There is a unity here insofar as the Spirit is Jesus’ for Frei, but there is also a distinction between what might be called the mode of identity (Jesus) and the mode of presence (Spirit). For Tillich, the identity of Jesus is subsumed by the presence of the Spirit to such a degree that this distinction becomes tenuous at best. Consider Tillich’s comment about the relationship between christology and pneumatology: “christology is not complete without pneumatology…because ‘the Christ is the Spirit’ and the actualization of the New Being in history is the work of the Spirit.”21 This is a statement of unity between the Christ and the Spirit, but it is one that emphasizes the side of the Spirit by defining that which the Christ accomplished – the primal and paradigmatic “actualization of the New Being in history” – as the Spirit’s work. Such a move is in keeping with Tillich’s reflections on Spirit christology, where he argues that what makes Jesus the Christ is that the Spirit “possesses and drives his individual spirit.”22 It is from this vantage point that Tillich’s observation that “the Spirit…made [Jesus of Nazareth] the Christ and…became his Spirit” must be interpreted.23 The movement flows from the Spirit to Jesus, and thus the emphasis falls clearly upon the side presence rather than on that of identity.

One could not say, however, that the aspect of identity has no part to play in the matrix of Tillich’s christological and pneumatological thought. When discussing the relationship between fact and reception, which is itself a gloss on that between christology and pneumatology, Tillich is clear that there must have been a “personal life in which existential estrangement [was]

22 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.146.
23 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.147. Italics added.
overcome,” for the reception of Jesus as the Christ and bearer of the New Being requires such an overcoming; but, at the same time, whatever overcoming of estrangement occurred in Jesus would not have been the “final manifestation of the New Being itself” had it not been received as such.24 There is, then, an element of christological identity that lies behind Spiritual presence and is inseparable from it. However, although Tillich believes that there is an historical event that lies behind Spiritual presence, he is rather vague as to the content of that event. While wanting to maintain that existential estrangement was overcome in a personal life, he is not willing to tie this overcoming to the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth: “Faith cannot even guarantee the name ‘Jesus’ in respect to him who was the Christ.”25

By introducing the possibility that the bearer of the New Being could have been someone other than Jesus of Nazareth, someone shrouded in the fog of history, Tillich functionally vacates his christological pole of personal identity. Neither is this accidental, for such vacation of personal identity plays a part in Tillich’s account of how estrangement is overcome and New Being inaugurated. This is most clear in his discussion of revelation and of Jesus as the Christ as final revelation. Revelation is, for Tillich, “the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately…the ground of our being.”26 Where such revelation occurs, divine Spirit drives human spirit beyond the conditions of existential estrangement and into reunion with the manifest ground of being. When it comes to talking about Jesus as the Christ as final revelation, it is clear that the significance of Jesus’ identity is found in its very insignificance. For final revelation becomes such when the “medium of revelation…overcomes its own finite conditions by sacrificing them, and itself with them” so as to become “completely transparent” to the

24 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 2.98 and 99, respectively.
25 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 2.107.
26 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 1.110.
ground of being. This, Tillich argues, is precisely what Jesus did on the cross, such that the revelation communicated through him is free from all the particulars of his finite existence.

What is important about the christological aspect of identity here is that it gives way utterly to the pneumatological aspect of presence: “Only through his continuous acceptance of the cross has he become the ‘Spirit’ who has surrendered himself as flesh, namely, as a historical individual.” Thus, once again, one finds a statement of unity between christological identity and pneumatological presence but with the emphasis so soundly on the latter side that identity has ceased to perform any positive function or carry any particular content.

This sacrifice of identity at the feet of presence is recapitulated in Tillich’s sacramentology with reference to the development of his thought on the question of how sacraments and symbols are born and die. Tillich freely concedes that there may come a time when certain religious symbols and sacraments lose their power to serve as fitting instruments of the commandeering work of the divine Spirit. In fact, this is precisely what he thinks occurred with reference to the five sacraments rejection by Protestants during the Reformation. Tillich discusses this phenomenon with reference to symbols generally in his discussion of Christ’s resurrection, noting that symbols ought not to be cast aside by theologians until they have died in the church as a whole; rather, they ought to be reinterpreted. Once they have died, however, they need not be retained since “The New Being” – or, to transpose into the language of the third volume, the commandeering work of the divine Spirit – “is not dependent on the special symbols in which it is expressed. It has the power to be free from every form in which it appears.”

27 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 1.133.
28 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 1.136.
29 Cf. Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.124.
30 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 2.165.
Such a comment not only provides insight into why the death of particular symbols and sacraments is to be expected, it also suggests the way in which such particular symbols and sacraments are born. To recapitulate a previous discussion, everything in the finite order is potentially a sacrament because of its essential participation in being-itself. But, within the sphere of existential estrangement, nothing is a sacrament. Essential unity is veiled by existential estrangement, but – as was noted earlier – this is an estrangement within the bounds of a greater unity. The divine Spirit overcomes this estrangement and reintroduces a transcendent unity through the manifestation of Unambiguous Life. This manifestation occurs through finite media, namely, the sacraments. In the most general sense, then, sacraments are born when the divine Spirit drives human spirit into self-transcendence.

At this general level of analysis the emphasis clearly falls on presence as opposed to identity. In Tillich’s discussion of the relation between christological identity and pneumatological presence, the particularities of the former were seen to be largely insignificant for the latter. The same pattern holds here with reference to the particularities of individual sacraments and the sacramental principle. This becomes clearer when the development of Tillich’s sacramentology is considered, especially with reference to his address entitled “Nature and Sacrament” which predates the third volume of his Systematic Theology by over thirty years.31 Tillich is concerned in this address with the possibility that the sacraments as a whole might die within Protestantism, and he is sure that Protestantism would quickly follow suit should this occur. This death is already happening, it seems to Tillich, insofar as the sacraments

are no longer understood to be rooted in a powerful conception of nature. Instead, he finds them built upon the shifting sands of nominalism. Tillich’s discussion in this essay of nature and an intrinsic suitability for sacramental service resident within the potential sacramental media per se is his way of rejecting what he understands to be an entirely arbitrary connection between sacrament and referent.

These two aspects of Tillich’s argument in “Nature and Sacrament,” the role of nature and the fear of an arbitrary relation between sacrament and referent, are early versions of the moves made in his Systematic Theology with reference to his participatory ontology and distinction between sign and sacrament in favor of the latter. However, while these moves are functionally equivalent, they are not materially equivalent. This is especially true with reference to Tillich’s later participatory ontology and his earlier conception of nature’s power, and the difference lies in the value of a sacrament’s particulars. Tillich’s later view locates the sacramental potential of finite reality in that reality’s participation in being itself, but the earlier view locates sacramental potential not in such a general ontological condition but in the particular power of particular aspects of nature. So in Tillich’s discussion of baptism, for instance, he writes that “A special character or quality, a power of its own, is attributed to water. By virtue of this natural power, water is suited to become the bearer of a sacral power and thus also to become a sacramental element.” By paying attention to the particular elements of particular sacraments and talking about the particular natural power of those elements, Tillich here balances the concept of presence with attention to identity.

Such attention to identity is further seen when Tillich discusses in “Nature and Sacrament” the way in which sacraments are born. For the Tillich of this period at least, the

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question about the birth of particular sacraments is not tied to a general account of the divine Spirit’s activity, as it is in the Systematic Theology; rather, it is a question of the particularities of history. As Tillich says, “for a Christian the idea of a purely natural sacrament is unacceptable” since nature is ambiguous outside of a relationship with salvation history. It is only by being brought into relationship with this history that nature is freed from its demonic elements and made capable of bearing sacramental power. Thus, “Sacraments cannot be created arbitrarily; they originate only by virtue of historical fate.”

It is true that there are also hints in these pages of the later and more general direction in which Tillich would go – for instance, he notes that the particularity of sacraments is a consequence of humanity’s estrangement from the universal ground of being – but it is also clear that there is far more attention paid to the concrete particularities involved in the sacraments than would later be paid. This is because Tillich wants to say here that sacramental particularities must be connected to christological particularity if they are to be liberated to serve as sacraments. In other words, identity is seen as necessary for the establishment of presence.

Identity does not serve such a function for Tillich’s sacramentology in his Systematic Theology. In this later work, sacramental identity is relegated to the margin, much as was christological identity. It is true that Tillich wants to tie these two identities together inasmuch as he establishes christological identity as the criterion of sacramental identity:

“In so far as the Spiritual Community actualizes New Being in Jesus as the Christ no sacramental act can take place in it which is not subject to the criterion of that reality on

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which the community is based… The sacramental acts through which the Spirit of the New Being in Christ is mediated must refer to the historical and doctrinal symbols in which revelatory experiences leading to the central revelation have been expressed.”

Although this passage sounds very promising when first encountered with reference to the role of identity in the sacraments, it does not amount to much. What this passage finally says is this: Christian churches ought to practice sacraments that are identifiably Christian. Furthermore, judgments about the “Christianity” of particular sacraments serve a critical function, not a constitutive function. That is, such judgments are a way to determine which media of the Spirit ought to be made a part of regular communal worship, but they do not play a part in establishing such media as media. Indeed, as if to further drive home this point, Tillich makes it very clear that particular sacraments do not “follow necessarily from the nature of the church.”

Because sacramental identity does not play such a constitutive role, and because the particular sacraments are related to Jesus as Christ and the manifestation of divine Spirit in a less than necessary way, the particularities of a sacrament — the aspect of identity — have little recognizable bearing on their function as media of Spiritual presence. As was suggested at the beginning of this section, an overemphasis on presence to the neglect of identity leads to a situation where one may well have congress with the other, but only in such a way that the other remains fundamentally unknown, at least at a cognitive if not at an affective level. The value of the presence in question is consequently called into question. This pattern, seen already in Tillich’s account of the sacraments and in how he conceives of the relationship between christology and pneumatology, is endemic to his system. Indeed, it reaches even into his explicit discussion of the knowledge of God insofar as he states that all knowledge of God is “symbolic knowledge” that “participates in the reality which is symbolized” but which also “negates itself

36 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.123.
37 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3.189.
in its literal meaning.” This pattern is precisely that found at work in Tillich’s discussion of the sacrifice of all the particularities of Jesus to the New Being which he carried. Something must remain on the literal side of these symbols – that is, on the side of their particular identities – if the presence they bear is to be anything more than merely affective, but this is precisely what Tillich denies. For him, the negation is total.

Peter Phillips is on to something important along these lines when he likens Tillich’s understanding of truth to Kant’s account of aesthetic judgments in his third critique. For Tillich, there seems to be a sense in which the ground of being is intimately tied up with that which is beautiful. However, whereas Kant understood the beautiful as that “which is cognized without a concept” and gives rise to a “state of a free play of the faculties of cognition” such that

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38 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2.9. The position Tillich articulates here, that all knowledge of and speech about God is symbolic, appears to radically differ from that he advanced in the first volume of his system. There he states that there is one “completely unsymbolic statement” possible with reference to God, namely, “that God is being-itself or the absolute.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.239. Although Tillich seems to make non-symbolic statements about God after leveling this moratorium on doing so – for instance, Tillich says that “Agape characterizes the divine life itself, symbolically and essentially” (3.138) – that does not mean this moratorium should be taken lightly.

However, it must be asked more carefully to what degree has Tillich’s position shifted between the first and second volumes of his system. Tillich addresses the question of symbolic knowledge of God in his response to a collection of essays dealing with his work published shortly after the appearance of the first volume of his system. He argues that for symbolic knowledge to be knowledge, the symbolic realm must be delineated by a non-symbolic statement. The non-symbolic statement he offers is that found in the first volume of his system: God is being-itself. Paul Tillich, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, *Library of Living Theology* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), 334. Turning again to the passage in the second volume of his system, we find much the same view in place. Tillich writes here that one non-symbolic statement concerning God must be made lest “we would fall into a circular argument.” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2.9. However, he has changed his mind about what is the one non-symbolic statement that must be made: whereas previously this statement affirmed that God is being-itself, now the one non-symbolic statement about God is that “everything we say about God is symbolic” (ibid). What one finds here, then, is that Tillich has not changed his general understanding of how symbolic knowledge works. He has, however, changed his mind about how much non-symbolic knowledge of God is necessary. It may well be that this assertion of God’s unknowability in nonsymbolic terms provides for saying a great many things about God derivatively – i.e., what is necessarily true of God if this is the only non-symbolic thing that we can say about God? – but such statements will never in themselves be anything more than symbolic.

the usual functioning of these faculties and their production of concepts is transcended,\textsuperscript{40} Tillich understands it in terms of transcending the split between subject and object by encounter with the ground of being. All of this is illustrated by Tillich’s own account of his experience upon seeing Sandro Botticelli’s \textit{Madonna with Singing Angels} (1477 CE) for the first time:

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken. That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion.\textsuperscript{41}

What is even more significant for the purposes of this study than the immense import that Tillich assigns to this experience is that the unquestionably Christian particularities of this specific work of art seem to have no bearing upon the truth or meaning that Tillich found therein.

CONCLUSION

In all this, the conclusion that one comes to is that what is important for Tillich is – as has already been said – a general principle of sacramentality rather than particular sacraments. This sense is only heightened by attention to the dynamics of identity and presence in his work. His overemphasis on presence prevents his sacramentology in particular and his system as a whole from providing an account of identity sufficient to render the abundance of presence meaningful.


In trying to avoid a system dominated by ineffectual signs, Tillich has erred at the other end of the spectrum by establishing naked symbols – symbols brimful of power and presence but lacking in knowledge and identity. Especially insofar as this pattern is found not only in Tillich’s sacramentology but in his discussion of the knowledge of God and of how christology and pneumatology relate, the situation might be phrased thus: Tillich’s position provides ample opportunity for one to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength, but the love of God with one’s mind is inadequately provided for.\textsuperscript{42} This is not to say that Tillich himself did not love God with all his mind. The \textit{Systematic Theology} and all Tillich’s other writings testify to the contrary. However, the system he devised undermines the very endeavor that occupied so much of his time and energy.

With reference again specifically to the sacraments, and in closing, it must be reiterated that identity cannot be shorn from presence without the loss of meaningfulness. The sacraments are not arbitrary acts that the church has recognized as media of the Spirit’s very real yet indistinct presence. Rather, they are particular actions commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ for the benefit of the church and the furtherance of its mission in the world. The importance of this connection to the particularities of Jesus cannot be underscored enough, for it is from these particularities that the church receives its identity, mission, and – ultimately – its knowledge of God. It was seen above that Tillich is not willing to tie faith to the particular name of Jesus, but this is precisely where the church must stand or fall, for:

\begin{quote}
“God has highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Luke 10.27: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (NASB).

\textsuperscript{43} Philippians 2.9-11, NASB. For Tillich’s comment concerning the name “Jesus,” see Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 2.107. Putnam shares the present essay’s judgment insofar as he contends that Tillich needs some
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foundation for the sacraments in Jesus as the Christ as well as in nature. Cf. Leon J. Putnam, "Tillich on the Sacraments," *Theology and Life* 8, no. 2 (1965), 115.


