
Sacraments – An Essay

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1. Introduction

The Sacraments are amongst the most visible forms of outward expression in Christianity, coming as they do with significant variations, both in number and in practice. This essay will examine their theological and historical background, and their significance in the ongoing life of the church. We also focus on the two main sacraments as practised in Protestant Christianity, viz. Baptism and Holy Communion.

2. Sacraments - Definitions and History

The early church recognised a number of rites or practices which in some way expressed the 'mystery' (Greek: *mysterion*) of the Christian faith. McGrath points out that from an early stage, a connection was made between the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and the mystery of God's saving work in Christ.¹ Tertullian (c. 160-220) translated the Greek term into Latin, by using *sacramentum*, a word which in a secular sense meant an oath of allegiance, for example the sort that a soldier might make to his commanding officer.

The 4th century theologian Augustine of Hippo defined a sacrament as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace”. Despite this definition, there was no widespread agreement as to the number of rites that could properly be called sacraments. It was not until the 12th century, with the work of Peter Lombard (1100-1160), that the sacraments were systemised and their total number listed as seven. These were Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Marriage, Holy Orders, Penance and Unction. All of these, it was argued were instituted by Christ² and remain (with differences in terminology for some of them), the sacraments of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches (both Eastern and Oriental), though in Orthodoxy the list is not fixed at seven.

1. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, p509.

2. As stated and confirmed by, for example, The Council of Trent (1545-1563).

The Protestant Reformation resulted in these seven being reduced to just two (with a few exceptions)³. These were Baptism and Holy Communion, with both having the explicit command of Christ in scripture (Matthew 28:19-20 for Baptism and Luke 22:19-20 for Holy Communion). Some Protestant groups preferentially use the term *ordinance* to refer to the sacraments, in the sense that they were ordained or commanded by Christ directly.

We see this transition from seven to two in the works of Martin Luther (1483-1546). His emphasis on a visible physical sign of God's promises formed the backdrop to his rationale for only permitting two sacraments; having originally allowed penance as a sacrament, but later rejecting it. Luther's argument was that "...only in these two [Baptism and the Bread] do we find the divinely instituted sign and the promise of the forgiveness of sins."⁴

John Calvin (1509-1564) offered his own definition of the Sacraments in the *Institutes*, arguing that the sacraments are visible signs affirming the promises of God:

*We have determined, therefore, that sacraments are truly named the testimonies of God's grace and seals of the good will that he feels toward us, which by attesting that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith.*⁵

3. Sacraments - Efficacy and Mode of Operation

Augustine pointed out the connection between sacramental signs and grace. However, several different perspectives on this relationship arose out of the Reformation. To begin with, the classic position as held by the Roman Catholic Church states that the sacraments give grace directly, of their own power. They are thus "channels of grace" and effectively communicate the grace that they signify.

3. Amongst Protestants, the Salvation Army and the Quakers are non-sacramental.
4. Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.
5. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, Chapter 14.

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. ⁶

An essential principle is that grace is received *ex opere operato* (Latin: 'from the work done'), that is, irrespective of the virtue or those who administer or receive the sacraments. However, for this grace to be received freely, recipients should receive the sacraments with "proper disposition".

During the Reformation period, this Catholic view came to be challenged by Luther amongst others, who increasingly began to talk of faith as being an essential requirement to receiving grace. Some other Protestants preferred to talk of the Sacraments as being "symbols" rather than the "means" of grace. Grudem discusses a Protestant/Catholic difference on the means of grace:

[Sacraments are viewed] as "means of salvation" that make people more fit to receive justification from God. But on a Protestant view, the means of grace are simply an additional blessing within the Christian life... ⁷

4. Sacraments in Action I – Baptism

The rite of Baptism (from the Greek *baptizo*: 'immerse' or 'cleanse') is practised by the majority of Christian denominations, having its origins in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 and application in, for example Acts 2:38 where it is mentioned alongside repentance. Christians are however divided on the purpose and also the practice of baptism.

6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1131.

7. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p952.

The Roman Catholic view is that Baptism effects saving ('sanctifying') grace to the recipient, and the remission of "...all punishments of sins, both eternal and temporal." ⁸ Baptism brings about spiritual birth or 'regeneration' directly and also joins one to the body of Christ, the church. It is also essential for salvation. In Orthodoxy, Baptism is "...the beginning of Christian life, the entrance into the wholeness of the Church." ⁹

The Lutheran view is broadly similar to the Roman Catholic, but faith is an essential prerequisite. Indeed Baptism works by strengthening faith and is a means of grace. Luther summarised it as follows: "In Baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised." ¹⁰

The Reformed and Presbyterian view is that Baptism as a "sign and seal of the covenant". ¹¹ John Calvin argued that the theme of baptism is incorporation into the faith and discipline of the church.

All of the groups mentioned thus far, practice Baptism of infants (*paedobaptism*). For example those who stress Baptism as initiation into the covenant argue that it is inclusive. Luther justified the practice by arguing that it was "pleasing to Christ.. that God sanctifies many of them who have been thus baptised, and has given them the Holy Ghost." ¹²

The practice of paedobaptism was challenged by the Anabaptists and those on the radical wing of the Reformation, who argued that the rite was only applicable to those who were able to make a conscious profession of faith and repentance. Baptism is thus a witness or testimony to an individual's experience of faith and has no objective effect on the person baptised.

8. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p355.

9. Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes*, p27.

10. Luther, *Small Catechism*, IV, Baptism.

11. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, 176-7.

12. Luther, *Large Catechism*, XIII, Infant Baptism.

5. Sacraments in Action II - Holy Communion

The sacrament of Holy Communion is also known by several different names such as Eucharist, Lord's Supper, Divine Liturgy and the Mass. The New Testament gives varying details of the institution of Holy Communion by Christ himself (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22: 19-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). In contrast to Baptism, which as a sacrament is normally non-repeatable, there are varying degrees of repetition of Holy Communion, ranging from daily (as in the Catholic Church) to more infrequent celebrations (such as in some Reformed churches).

As with Baptism, there is widespread diversity in both the practice and significance of the sacrament and the divergent understandings have proved an obstacle in some cases to a common celebration between churches. Yet most parties would probably agree that the rite confers some kind of spiritual benefit to those who receive it.

In the Catholic Church, the term 'Eucharist' (Greek: *eucharistía*, 'thanksgiving') or 'Holy Sacrifice of the Mass' or simply 'Mass' is generally used for the rite. The full wording expresses the Catholic view that the sacrament 're-presents' or makes present the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. This sacrifice is the same as that on Calvary, albeit in an unbloody manner.¹³ The Mass is also in a sense a renewal of the new covenant between God and Man.¹⁴ Roman Catholic belief emphasises the true and literal presence of Christ in the communion elements (bread and wine). Upon consecration by the priest, the elements change completely into the actual body and blood of Christ, a view known as the *Real Presence* of Christ in the Eucharist and a process known as *transubstantiation*.

We may summarise the Catholic view of the Eucharist as “spiritual food for the soul; it strengthens [the] participant and frees from venial sins.”¹⁵

13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1366-7.

14. Vatican II, *Constitution On the Sacred Liturgy*, 10.

15. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* p125.

In Orthodoxy, the rite is generally known as the 'Divine Liturgy'. Like Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy affirms the real presence of Christ, without any explicit attempt to explain it, thus consistent with the Orthodox view of the sacraments as 'Mysteries'.

A number of differing views regarding the purpose of the sacrament came to be formulated as a result of the Reformation. To begin with, Luther put forward an alternative view, popularly known as *consubstantiation*, which indicates that on consecration, the elements do not change completely into the body and blood of Christ, rather he is present 'in, with and under' them. Lutheran theology often refers to this as a *sacramental union* and in keeping with Luther's view, regards faith as essential for those who receive the sacrament.

The Swiss Reformer Ulrich (or Huldrych) Zwingli (1484-1531) interpreted Christ's words in Matthew 26:26 ('This is my body') in a non literal manner. Zwingli argued that the word 'is' should actually be interpreted to mean 'signifies', a view known as *memorialism*. This view regards the sacrament as commemoration of Christ's death and a reminder of the benefits it brings. It is also a 'remembrance' and not a 'sacrifice'.

A further view was held by John Calvin, who took a mediating position between Luther and Zwingli. Calvin regarded Christ as being spiritually, not literally present in the elements. For Calvin, we truly partake of Christ, not in a physical sense, but spiritually, through faith. Calvin's view is sometimes known as *virtualism*.

Despite these varying interpretations, we note the words of 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Thus we see the sacrament pointing backwards in remembrance, but also pointing forward in anticipation.

This idea of anticipation of future events is also seen in, as McGrath points out, the "Marriage Supper of the Lamb." (Revelation 19:9) and expressed in the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), who regarded the sacrament as a foretaste of heaven.¹⁶

16. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, p432.

6. Conclusion

There is widespread diversity of practice and theological understanding of the Sacraments amongst the different Christian denominations. For many, they are the means by which God imparts grace and strengthens faith in those who participate in them, while others view them as symbolic, reminders or testimonies of what has gone before.

The issue of living a complete Christian life without the Sacraments is also relevant. The Catholic view that the Sacraments are necessary for salvation has often been countered by the Protestant view that 'faith alone' (*sola fide*) is the sole means by which one would receive salvation. Yet despite this, many would still regard the sacraments as imparting spiritual benefits to those who receive them worthily.

The two sacraments are normally practised in Protestantism contain some of the fundamental truths of the gospel as articulated by Paul in Romans 6:4-5:

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Finally, the Sacraments bear witness to the covenant relationship between God and his people.

The sacraments incorporate believers into the visible people of God and sustain them in that relationship... Their significance is impaired in a divided church, but they stand as a witness to the catholic and undivided character of the people of God...¹⁷

17 *New Dictionary of Theology*, 'Sacrament', p607.

7. Bibliography

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