

The Sacraments

1) Sacraments

Introduction

“Sacramentum” was a Latin word for a sacred oath, a holy pledge that a new soldier made to the Roman army when joining the ranks. Church father Tertullian began using this word in the early 3rd century for the sacred acts in the Christian church (McGrath, 2007: 420). That word stuck until today and that is how we today will talk about the Sacraments. If you will think on your way home tonight that “even with all that discussion on the Sacraments, they still remain a mystery to me,” then we did not add too much of our own rationale to this topic. No matter how hard we try, the Sacraments do not fully open to our reason. We have to humble ourselves before God and receive them by faith. The Eastern Orthodox Church uses the word “mystery” for their sacred acts after the New Testament Greek word “mysterion” - “hidden” - “secret” or “mystery.” Sacraments are sacred mysteries.

What is the purpose of the sacraments?

Faith comes first as a gift already at mother’s womb or through the gospel Word. Then God confirms and strengthens it through the Word and Sacraments. In Sacraments God’s Word is joined to the visible element so that we are assured how real God’s grace toward us is. Martin Luther puts the Instruments of Grace in a correct order, exclaiming, *The Word of God is the greatest, most necessary, and most important thing in Christendom. For the Sacraments cannot be without the Word, but the Word may well be without the Sacraments.* (Plass, 1959: 913, 918) According to Luther, even if the administering minister does not have saving faith, God nevertheless makes the sacrament by joining His Word to the elements (Plass, 1959: 918). The covenant of good conscience is made in baptism and body and the blood of Jesus is given at communion. Although the minister does that which we can physically see and hear in the Sacrament, it is the Triune God who shows his good will towards us in them. (AC, 1530: Article XIII)

May our hearts be refreshed and thankfulness take over our cold hearts as we marvel at God’s goodness to us through the Sacraments. I love the song of loons on a calm lake. Maybe you have heard it? Everyone from Minnesota has heard it! One approach would be to go catch the loon, kill it, dissect it, and do detailed research into the anatomy of its voice production. The other approach is to sit on the boat, listen, marvel, and be touched by its song. Dear Brothers and sisters, it is right and necessary that we discuss the doctrine of the Sacraments as we will today. And we should always be diligent students of God’s Word. But let us not lose sight of this that faith is not a collection of facts (Plass, 1959: 468). It is a gift of God. It opens our eyes and ears, it changes our heart. It allows us to receive the Sacraments not as a technical analysis but as something beautiful just as we hear the beautiful song of a loon on a calm lake. Let us listen in awe God’s marvelous works!

What is the Role of Sacraments in the Salvation of the Soul?

Luther discusses this with the help of Jesus’ baptismal command: *Thus Christ says: "He that believe and is baptised, shall be saved. He that does not believe shall be damned." He shows us in this word that faith*

is so necessary a part of the sacrament that it can save even without the sacrament. For which reason He did not see fit to say: "He that does not believe, and is not baptised..." (BC, 1520) Believers often remember an old saying that is in line with the teaching in the baptismal command: "Mere lack of the Sacraments does not condemn, but contempt for them does."

What Should Be a Sacrament?

In the New Testament narratives the new converts who believed the gospel were baptized. The believers gathered in homes for the Lord's Supper first daily, then once a week on the day of the Lord's resurrection, Sunday. Over time the Church began to call some holy acts as Sacraments. During the first millennium, the number of sacraments grew to seven. Luther and other reformers in the 16th century held on to the Sola Scriptura principle: The Bible is the highest authority in life and faith. They desired to seek for the old paths of the Scriptures and agreed on the basis of Scriptures that in order for a holy act to be a Sacrament:

- 1) It must be commanded by Christ, and
- 2) In the holy act, a physical element must be connected to the Word of God. (Plass, 1959: 1235)

How many Sacraments do We Lutherans Have?

During the early phases of the Reformation, a third Sacrament was considered in addition to baptism and communion. It was Penance. Its name comes from Matt 4:17 where Jesus says: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand..." The Latin Vulgate, the only authorized translation in the Papal church for many centuries at the time of Luther, reads: *Poenitentiam agite - Do penance.* (LT, 1517) This formed the foundation for the Church's Sacrament of Penance, which we can think of as believer's daily repentance. Luther soon dropped Penance as a sacrament as it had no physical sign attached to it and also realizing that the correct parts of it already belonged to baptism. In his Large Catechism of 1529, he wrote: *Baptism, both in its power and signification, comprehends also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance, as it is really nothing else than Baptism. For what else is repentance but an earnest attack upon the old man that his lusts be restrained and entering upon a new life? Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism, which not only signifies such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For therein are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong.* (LC, 1529: Holy Baptism)

Ever since confirmation school I have pondered: Why is the chapter on Confession right by the Sacraments in the Small Catechism? (SC, 1529) The background on the third sacrament has shed some light on it. Confession was deemed very important and was placed into Luther's ABC book of faith. Dr. Martin lived of the gospel like you and me. He once spoke in a sermon: *The devil would have slain me long ago if confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubts and false matters which a man cannot settle by himself... So he takes a brother aside and tells him his trouble. What harm does it do him to humble himself a little before his neighbor and put himself to shame? When you receive a word of comfort from him, accept and believe that word as if you heard it from God himself.* (Plass, 1959: 330) We still believe that the focus in Confession is not in enumerating sins or elaborating on the depth of our remorse but rather receiving the forgiveness by faith.

Now, let's go to the Scripture! But let's take with us memory work from an earlier quote by Luther: *If you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism.* Let's check if it aligns with the Apostles' teaching.

2) Baptism: Life-long Sacrament of Good Conscience and God's Promise to Save

Was there a Predecessor to Baptism?

Baptism's Old Testament predecessor was the covenant of circumcision. The cut was done once the baby was 8 days old. Surely the sign of circumcision would not go away. But the true lifelong impact was not in the sign but in the covenant relationship with God and in believing God's promise. In the same way in baptism, the focus should be on the life in the covenant, keeping faith and a good conscience and believing God's promise to save into eternal life everyone who stays in the covenant fellowship.

What did Apostle Paul Teach about Baptism?

The primacy of the gospel was clear to Paul. He claimed: "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect" (1. Cor 1:17). The simple sermon of the gospel was the great Apostle's primary tool. He remembered, though that he had baptized some people. His other point to Corinthians was: Do not elevate the person of the baptizer. You are baptized in the name of Jesus, not Paul, Peter, or Apollos. We note here that baptism in the name of Jesus is also a baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

John baptized by completely submerging the person and then pulling him above the water. It is no wonder then that he was once baptizing in a place called Aenon according to the Bible "because there was much water there." (Joh. 3:23) This mode of baptism completely under water is evident in Paul's descriptions of the baptism. He speaks of "burying" and "raising up" as the steps of the baptism. Being plunged under water is "being buried to death" and being pulled above water is "being raised up to life." This happens first in a physical way, as a sign, during the initiation into the covenant, the baptism ceremony. But this is to continually happen in life through a life of repentance, in newness of life. Paul writes in Romans 6:

"How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ... For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:1-4, 10-14).

What Paul is teaching here is our memory work from Luther: *If you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism. According to Luther: Putting to death the old Adam, and after that the resurrection of the new man, both of which must take place in us all our lives, so that a truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever to be continued.* (LC, 1529)

In Romans 6 Paul also speaks about the promise of the covenant. Eventually all those who remain in the covenant of a good conscience will be raised up in the resurrection of life.

In Galatians 3, Paul teaches that the social group barriers are broken as we have all put on the same Christ in baptism. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28).

The author of the letter to the Colossians speaks of baptism in Chapter 2. That narrative gives a similar picture of baptism as Romans 6 but it has a special emphasis in walking in Christ. The Colossians portion gives a warning for us to not put our faith in philosophy or in science but in Christ instead!

What Words did Jesus Speak to Institute Baptism?

40 days after the Easter, right before ascending to Heaven, Jesus commanded His own:

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15-16).

Matthew records the following from that speech: "Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt 18:18-20). Jesus' word "teach" in verse 19: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" is more precisely translated as "make disciples."

We can conclude 4 key points from Jesus' baptismal command:

- 1) Make disciples to Jesus through the gospel of forgiveness of sins.
- 2) Baptize anyone who believes but has not been baptized yet.
- 3) Once converts are baptized into the covenant, they are to be taught how to live in that covenant. Life in the covenant of baptism is life according to the teachings of Jesus.
- 4) Jesus will be with His own until the end.

What Did the Early Christians Think of Jesus' Baptismal Command?

Peter is speaking a sermon in the house of a heathen, a Roman centurion. After he proclaims the public absolution, much the same way as we hear here at Summer Services, Luke records in the Acts: "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. ... Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord" (Acts 10: 44, 46-48). Peter paid attention to the order of Jesus' command: First faith, then baptism. This was real! Cornelius' place was not the only place where the oral gospel brought the Holy Spirit to the hearts of the listeners! That is why Paul can write to the Romans, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

Paul's eyewitness account on the power of the gospel in the Word and the meaning of baptism was highly personal. He was once blinded for 3 days after Jesus appeared to him. Believing Ananias approached him in his misery, put his hands upon him and declared: "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 9:17). Luke writes how "immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith" (Acts 9:18). Then, Ananias said: "And now why

tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Already believing, Paul was instructed to be baptized. In that baptismal covenant he was to continue to wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord. It seems that his focus on the primacy of the gospel is a clear testimony of the great Apostle's understanding of what personally gave him faith.

On Pentecost, Peter was preaching another sermon on repentance. Whoever gladly received his word, was baptized. God added "unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue and his house believed and they were baptized (Acts 18:8). Lydia, a seller of purple believed. She was baptized along with her family (Acts 16:14-15). The same thing happened to the jail guard and his family. Do you remember the narrative when Peter and Paul were chained deep inside the prison? In their misery, what did they do? They had song services. It is never a bad time to have song services! It must have been quite the experience to the jail guard: From deep despair of self-destruction to believing the gospel! He and his family were then baptized. (Acts 16:30-33) After hearing that the Eunuch of Ethiopia was able to believe, Philip baptized him in the river. (Acts 8:36-38)

The Early Christians took Jesus' baptismal command seriously! Whoever was able to be baptized with the Holy Ghost through believing the gospel was then baptized with water in Jesus to die for sin and live a Godly life with a good conscience. In some instances the water baptism was connected very closely in time to the conversion, believing the gospel. There might have been only a few minutes in between these two separate events and so it is not surprising that receiving faith through the gospel and entering into the covenant with God through baptism, were sometimes lumped together in some early Christians' minds. That delusion can overtake us today also if we do not pay close attention to the detail in the Scriptures.

What did Peter Teach about Baptism?

While Paul talks about battling sin and living a Godly life when discussing baptism, it is no surprise that the just Peter, when briefly mentioning baptism in the portion of his letter that focuses on good morals such as humility, modesty, caring for marriage etc., talks specifically about conscience.

"When once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1. Pet. 3:20-21).

This part of his letter is difficult to follow. But suffice it to say that Peter uses the example of Noah to make his point. He says that water saved the 8 souls. He does not mention that the water also destroyed everyone else. His point seems to be in comforting those who believe. What was floating above the water? It was the ark! Everyone who believed was in the ark and was saved. Ark is a picture of the kingdom of God. Remember that Jesus had promised: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt 6:33). Peter proceeds to mention that baptism saves us. It is immediately followed by a clarification that certainly was necessary for the recipients of the letter in various areas, whether of Jewish heritage or not. It is not the cleansing of the flesh that saves in baptism. We could think he is speaking to the people of Jewish heritage that were used to the various ritual baths for cleansing of flesh. Or Peter could also be making a reference to something else that we don't know. But none of that is what saves in baptism. What saves is the answer of a good conscience toward God! Even in baptism, it is faith that saves. That is what we learnt earlier from Jesus' words. Peter and Paul agree that saving faith can be kept in a good conscience. Living in the covenant of baptism is living in the covenant of good conscience. Power to that comes from God.

Conclusion on baptism:

- 1) Faith comes by hearing.
- 2) Baptism is much more than the ceremony. The ceremony is the sign and initiation into a lifelong covenant. God's promise in baptism is to save those who believe.
- 3) Not by the lacking of a sacrament, but by the despising of a sacrament is one damned.
- 4) Luther Memory work: "If you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism" In our language: Keep faith and a good conscience and you remain in the covenant of baptism.
- 5) The way we are used to caring for matters with the gospel of forgiveness of sin belongs to the "walk in baptism." Let us not be ashamed of the very core of the gospel.

3) Holy Communion – Meal and Fellowship that Gives Strength on the Journey

Since we discussed baptism at length, we will consider Holy Communion only briefly here.

With What Words did Jesus Institute Communion?

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

"And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed and brake it, and gave it to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it" (Mark 14:22-24).

"And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

What do We Receive in Communion?

Catholics believe that during Eucharist the substance of the elements change so that the substance is flesh and blood. This transformation is called trans-substantiation. The Swiss reformed tradition went to other extreme that is pleasing to reason: The meal is just a remembrance meal with signs of Jesus body and blood consumed. Luther's view and our view is that in a way that doesn't ever open to our understanding, the body and blood of Christ are present in the bread and wine. (Gritsch, 2010)

Believers have often referred to the Swebelius Catechism's simple and clear teaching on Holy Communion. Let us consider it now. The following section has some direct quotes from it:

What benefit is there in the Lord's Communion for us?

*Our faith is strengthened and assured of the forgiveness of sins.
We become united with Christ, so that He is in us and we in Him.
Our faith in the resurrection to eternal life is strengthened.*

Matt. 26:28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for the remission of sins.

Gal. 2:20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

How should we conduct ourselves as we proceed to the Lord's table?

When we have received absolution by the office of preaching, we should—

- 1. Step forth in true repentance, putting away all foreign and worldly thoughts;*
- 2. While partaking of the sacrament, conduct ourselves in godly, sober, and meek manner, remembering that we are not communicating with man but with God.*
- 3. When we leave, we should rejoice in spirit over God's renewed grace, and praise Him from our heart for this, retaining good intention and will to walk in the new life.*

Who are the proper and acceptable guests to the Lord's Supper?

Only the believers; be their faith weak or strong, only that it is right and living.

Who are the unacceptable guest at the Lord's Supper?

All who do not have living faith upon Jesus, their Savior. (SCa)

Dear brothers and sisters! With our natural eyes, we see the elements in communion, but in faith we receive Christ's body and blood.

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