



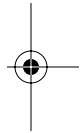
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WHAT ARE SACRAMENTS?

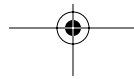


It is significant that in the doctrinal test so important to American fundamentalists for distinguishing between authentic Christianity and liberal heresy, the sacraments are never mentioned. . . . For most American Protestants, it is a neutral area, an extinct volcano representing no threat to either side. American Protestantism has to a great degree become de-sacramentalized.

PHILIP LEE, *AGAINST THE
PROTESTANT Gnostics*



Although we will begin discussing the nature of sacraments by looking at definitions, it will soon become clear that the real issue is not one of definition but of worldview. Whatever classic definition of the sacraments you might choose reveals dichotomies: matter and spirit, visible and invisible, physical and spiritual. It's not that there is no distinction between these aspects of reality but that the distinction opens up to a great chasm in our worldview that must somehow be overcome in order to recover our full Christian faith. It is part of my thesis that this apparent divide in Western Christianity is not a divide at all, but simply two sides of the same reality of God who "created all things, visible and invisible" and who took on our real humanity in Jesus Christ. What I hope to uncover is the essential unity in our understand-





ing and experience of God and our world—a unity that makes sacraments not a theological and philosophical puzzle, but a place where God meets us and where the spiritual and physical come together for our wholeness and our healing.

DEFINITIONS

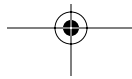
Throughout this book we will be using various terms that may seem slippery and malleable because of the many meanings they have had throughout history and the many nuances they possess in our various theological traditions. Yet it is necessary to understand each term in its historical and theological milieu.

Sacrament. Get out a Bible concordance, look up the word *sacrament*, and you will not find it. In the Bible you find the church baptizing and breaking bread, but the biblical writers do not analyze or label these activities as sacraments.

Where did we get the term sacrament? The Latin word *sacramentum* was originally a military term describing the oath of allegiance and obedience that a soldier solemnly pledged to his commander. Tertullian (b. about 160) first prominently used this term and applied it to the pledge of faith and allegiance made by candidates for baptism to their Lord.

But the term sacrament, or *sacramentum*, was also used in the Vulgate, the first Latin translation of the Bible. The Vulgate used it in still a different way, to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, or mystery, as in 1 Corinthians 15:51: "Listen, I will tell you a *mystery!* We will not all die, but we will all be changed." However, neither the Latin term *sacramentum* nor the Greek *mysterion* are ever actually applied to the sacraments in the Bible itself. Some scholars think it is possible that the term was later applied to the sacraments because of a vague resemblance they have to some of the mysteries in the Greek religions. Others think that it was simply because they too are "mysteries" of God's grace at work in the world.

Both John Calvin and Martin Luther pointed out that though they used the word *sacrament*, it is not found in Scripture and they did not employ it in its original Latin meaning. All this etymological slipperiness makes it a less-than-precise word to use, but at this stage in time, after a couple thousand years of repetitive usage, we appear to be





stuck with it. It is important to understand, however, that we will not arrive at a very precise understanding of the sacraments by delving into their etymology.

One of the earliest and most widely used definitions of the term sacrament comes from St. Augustine: "a visible form of an invisible grace." Twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor built on it. "What is a sacrament?" he asks. "A sign of a sacred thing," he answers. "Why is a sacrament called a sign of a sacred thing?" he asks. "Because by a visible reality seen externally, another invisible, interior reality is signified," he answers. But "what is the difference between a sign and a sacrament?" he asks. His reply underscores the notion of a sacrament as *effective* sign, the notion that made the technical definition of a sacrament finally possible: "While a sign can signify a thing but not confer it, a sacrament not only signifies but also efficaciously confers. A sacrament simultaneously signifies by institution, represents by similitude, and confers by sanctification."¹ Hugh's great contribution was to offer a distinction between what might be called a general sign, one thing merely pointing to another, and a sacramental sign, which also confers the reality to which the sign points. Here Hugh approaches the concept of symbol, which we shall soon explore.

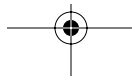
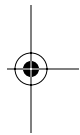
Calvin quotes Augustine's definition approvingly and then adds his own. A sacrament is "an outward sign by which the Lord seals to our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we, in turn, attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men."² Following Calvin, many of the major Reformed confessions use the terms *sign* and *seal* to describe the action of the sacraments. These terms come from Romans 4:11 where Paul is talking about circumcision as both a sign and seal to Abraham's faith. Sinclair Ferguson points out that while these terms are used for circumcision in that passage, they well describe the *modus operandi* of all covenant signs, including the sacraments, which are the covenant signs of the church.³

The terms *sign* and *seal* also help us understand the two fundamen-

¹Quoted in Michael G. Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1987), p. 33.

²John Calvin *Institutes* 4.14.1.

³Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 196.



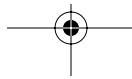
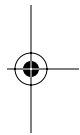


tal ways in which sacraments “work.” As signs they point beyond themselves: the physical realities of water, bread and wine unite us to Christ’s great redeeming work. They are also seals in that they convey to us the pledge, or guarantee, of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ. This is also what Hugh of St. Victor wanted to convey by insisting that sacramental signs not only point to their underlying sacred reality, but confer it.

Here, of course, we peer over the edge of the great divide that crosses the Protestant understanding of the sacraments. On the one side are those for whom the sacramental signs merely point to Christ and invite our faith in him but do not involve any action on God’s part. On the other side, God uses the signs to point us to Christ and bind us to him. Viewed another way, the issue is whether in the sacraments it is human beings who are doing something by their understanding and action, or it is God who is doing something by his gift and promise. This is the great sacramental divide from which, like the continental divide, the rivers of interpretation flow in one direction or the other. We will walk this divide many times in the course of our study.

This “great divide” between those who understand the sacraments primarily as human actions and those who understand them primarily as God’s actions is not widely understood. Protestants tend to locate the great sacramental divide between themselves and Roman Catholics, and Roman Catholics have encouraged this by their refusal to join in table fellowship with others by pointing to their distinctive doctrine of transubstantiation. But the real divide is between those who hold sacraments to be mere signs and nothing more, and those who hold them to be signs *and* seals, signs that bear and confirm God’s grace. Another way of stating the division is that on the one side the “ordinances,” as they are often called, are means of *expressing faith to God*, and on the other side, sacraments are a means of *receiving grace from God*.

Roman Catholics, along with most Reformed, Lutherans, Anglican/Episcopalians and Methodists are together on the side that teaches sacraments as being mainly God’s action, though they may sometimes skirmish about the exact way in which sacraments work. Those churches that have followed the Anabaptist tradition hold that sacraments are no more than signs by which people pledge their faith to





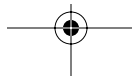
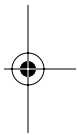
Christ and memorialize their redemption in Christ. This view is probably now the majority view among Protestants today, certainly those who call themselves evangelicals. The present evangelical renaissance is so pervasive in America, at least, that even in my own solidly Calvinist and historically sacramentalist tradition, I find that most ordinary members, and not a few office bearers and pastors, articulate a more Anabaptist than Calvinist view of the sacraments. This may partly be due to the power and persuasiveness of the evangelical media, but as we shall see, it has some deep historical and philosophical roots as well.

Sign and symbol. Everyone who discusses the sacraments from whatever theological point of view uses the word *sign*. Sign means the outward “thing,” the material element of the sacrament—water, bread and wine—as it points to the sacred reality. But sacraments are a particular kind of sign that might more accurately be called a *symbol*.

In ordinary language the two words *sign* and *symbol* are used nearly interchangeably. In fact, they have quite different meanings. A sign, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a “mark or device having some special meaning or import attached to it, or serving to distinguish the thing on which it is put.” A sign, like a road sign, for example, merely points out the meaning of that to which it points. A symbol is a more complex idea. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it “stands for, represents, or denotes something else . . . especially a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial.” Etymologically, *symbol* comes from Greek words which mean “together” and “throw,” thus, to bring together. Symbols do not merely point from one thing to another, they join two things. Paul Tillich’s famous distinction still serves us well in their application to the sacraments, “While the sign bears no necessary relation to that to which it points, the symbol participates in the reality of that for which it stands.”⁴

Flannery O’Connor relates an incident in one of her letters that points to the problem some people have with the conjunction of symbol and sacrament. In a conversation with novelist Mary McCarthy,

⁴Quoted in John E. Burkhardt, “The Meaning and Mystery of the Sacraments,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 29, no. 1 (1995): 7.





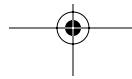
she felt “set up” when McCarthy explained that she now thought of the Eucharist as a symbol rather than her childhood understanding of transubstantiation. And if it was a symbol, McCarthy went on, it was a pretty good one at that. O'Connor responded, “If it's a symbol, to h___ with it.”⁵ O'Connor's truly devout Catholicism might have opened a bit if she had been ready to explore how the Eucharist was a “pretty good” symbol, after all.

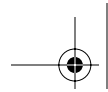
The Vietnam War Memorial may serve as a good example of how symbolism works. This starkly imaginative memorial does more than merely point to a war and convey certain facts about it. The names engraved in black granite don't merely give information about those who died in the war—they bring us into the experience. That's why it is surrounded by an eerie silence, while visitors communicate in hushed whispers as they place flowers, write notes and trace names. The very design of the memorial, gouging the turf, listing the nearly countless names, brings visitors back to the experience of a war that gouged our national psyche, aroused our deepest passions and engendered a sense of great loss. While deeply symbolic, it is not a “mere” symbol; it conveys the searing reality of the whole experience of Vietnam.

Michael Lawler illustrates the distinction of sign and symbol with lovemaking: “Making love . . . is a symbol and not a simple sign, for it does not just proclaim the presence of love but also realizes and celebrates that love in representation. So present is love in the ritual of love-making that the ritual, indeed, *is* the love. And because it is the love, the ritual not only makes love present but also incites men and women to appropriate loving action and reaction.”⁶ It's interesting that even contemporary Roman Catholic sacramental theologians are much more willing to speak of sacraments in terms of their symbolic action. Sacramental theologians Rahner, Schillibeeckx, Lawler, Vorgrimler and Chauvet all speak of the symbolic power and action of the sacraments. In fact, the category of the symbolic becomes a fresh way in which they can discuss the real presence of Christ and the real action of the sacraments without the freight of the Aristotelian category of substance.

⁵John W. Healey, “Symbols Are Not Just Symbols,” *America*, December 23, 2000, p. 14.

⁶Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament*, p. 17.





At certain crucial points in his explanation of sacraments, Calvin uses the word *symbol* in much the same way. For Calvin the sacraments were more than signs. They “participate in the reality” of that for which they stand. So Calvin writes,

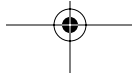
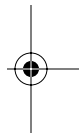
From the physical things set forth in the sacrament we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things. Thus when the bread is given as a *symbol* of Christ’s body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps life in our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth as a *symbol* of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ’s blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.⁷

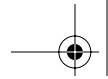
For Calvin, the physical and natural properties of bread and wine, their ability to strengthen and gladden for example, become part of the symbolic action of the sacrament. The symbols participate in the reality for which they stand. This symbolic connection depends on the ability of the physical sign to bear the spiritual reality, which is why we use bread and wine rather than carrots and Coke.

Brian Gerrish helps us to understand how Calvin and Zwingli could seem to be talking the same language of religious symbol but each be saying something quite different. For Calvin, God uses sacraments as a means to communicate what they symbolize. He constantly reiterates that God does not deceive us when he offers the sacramental gifts to us. For Zwingli, on the other hand, it was precisely the “symbolic” language of the sacraments that enabled him to use their biblically realistic language without meaning it realistically. Zwingli tells us that no one can speak so grandly of the sacraments as to give him any offense, provided the symbolical language was taken for what it is, and no more. For him symbols were always merely symbols. Calvin’s position is exactly the opposite. *Because* God uses sacraments as symbols, they *therefore* bestow what they symbolize. “More correctly, because sacraments are divinely appointed signs, and God does not lie, therefore the Spirit uses them to confer what they symbolize.”⁸

⁷Calvin *Institutes* 4.17.3 (italics mine).

⁸Brian Gerrish, “The Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 248-49.



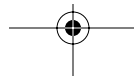


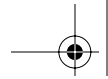
While we speak of the Christian sacraments in connection with the world of sign and symbol, they are also unique in that they function to communicate the very presence and power of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is what makes them sacraments, and this separates them from all other symbolic relationships. Christ chooses to touch us with these symbols in a unique way.

Rite and ritual. The terms *rite* and *ritual* are also used in relationship to the sacraments, both positively and negatively, both as descriptive and as pejorative terms, depending on what end of the theological spectrum you come from. Yet these terms can be very helpful in describing precisely what we are doing in sacramental worship. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *rite* is a "formal procedure or act in a religious or other solemn observance." We may speak, therefore, of the rite of baptism when we are talking about what actually happens in a church when baptism is performed. A *ritual*, on the other hand, is described as something pertaining to a rite, "a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service." In other words, the ritual is the specific actions and words of a rite.

It is important to realize that in speaking of a rite or a ritual we are not just talking about those churches that have prescribed liturgies in a book. There are some Christian communities that would claim to have no rites or rituals and would despise what they call ritualism. I have a friend who is very well acquainted with the Vineyard Churches and their founders. While their sacramental life is quite thin, every Sunday the congregation brings food for a huge and joyful dinner after the service. My friend sees this as a ritual that is integral to their life and worship, although they are horrified by the term and would deny that any kind of ritual is happening. When any Christian community from any theological tradition baptizes someone, for example, it is a rite and a certain ritual is followed, whether or not it is prescribed in a book.

The reality that symbols convey comes to be understood and experienced within a *symbolic action*. That symbolic action is known technically as a ritual. In rituals, symbolic meanings are enacted. When we baptize a person, the ritual of immersion or pouring water in the name of the Holy Trinity conveys the symbolic meaning to the individual being baptized and the community. In the ritual of baptism, the water





and the words and actions that surround it symbolize the (real) joining of the baptized person to Christ in his death and resurrection, and the cleansing of his or her sin and new identity in Christ.

The importance of rites and the rituals by which we perform them has long been clear to anthropologists, and theologians are beginning to catch on. Our lives are filled with rituals, from birthdays to Christmas celebrations. We rely on these ritual actions to bring order, continuity, and meaning to our existence. As Tom Howard puts it, "We mortal creatures come at reality ceremonially."⁹ We are not speaking here only of some "High Mass," but of occasions as ordinary as Sunday dinner or as special as a wedding. A wedding is a good example. Why do we go through all the trouble of the bridal gown, the flowers, the ceremonial march down the aisle? It's not just so much encrusted tradition. The ceremony helps us to see more clearly what is really happening. It's the ideal couple, the man and the woman, who are joined together in a sacred bond before God and human society. "Things come at us in a blur and a tumble generally, but in [a ceremonial act] things are more focused and set in harmonious order."¹⁰ The sacraments always come to us packaged in ritual and rite. We don't just dunk or sprinkle, we don't just eat and drink; we perform these sacraments with certain words and gestures. We enact our redemption ritually, just as a man and a woman enact the fundamental commitments and claims of love in their wedding ceremony. All churches and traditions do this. Someone has suggested that "praise and worship" songs are the sacraments of evangelicalism, just as the altar call was in an earlier era.

In an era in which liturgy and ritual has become increasingly sidelined, evangelicals especially need to recognize the importance of ritual action and symbols in Christian worship. As one anthropologist specializing the importance of ritual graphically puts it, "If you would spay or geld religion, first remove its rituals, its generative and regenerative processes. For religion is not cognitive system, a set of dogmas alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning."¹¹

⁹Thomas Howard, "Imagination, Rites, and Mystery: Why Did Christ Institute Sacraments?" *Reformed Journal* 29 (March 1979): 19.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Victor Turner quoted in Burkhardt, "Meaning and Mystery," p. 3.

