



9:01 Introduction

The sacraments aren't everything. But they are not nothing.

The sacraments aren't everything. Worth saying from the outset, Sacraments are not my hobby horse or major passion. Don't get the impression that because my first training time to encourage us as leaders is on the Sacraments, that I think this is the most important aspect of gospel ministry.

At the same time, **the sacraments are not nothing.** Don't think they aren't relevant.

The Bishop charged me at my commencement service a month ago:

Be a faithful minister of God's Holy Word and Sacraments and a faithful pastor under the great Shepherd of our souls.

Our Prayer Book's prayer for ordained leaders, is:

Give grace, heavenly Father, to all bishops and other ministers, that, by their life and teaching, they may set forth your true, life-giving word, and rightly and duly administer your holy sacraments

The right use of sacraments is put on par with teaching the Bible & modelling godliness. I'm inclined to think most of us incline to believing 'the sacraments aren't everything'. Some Christian sub-cultures do invest too much value in them. But I doubt that's us. I suspect we need to be reminded that the sacraments have an important place in Christian discipleship. They are not nothing.

Discuss with the person next to you: *How would your Christian walk be impacted, if we never practised Baptism & the Lord's Supper again?*

9:08

The Sacraments defined

Sacrament, as you probably guessed, is a Latin term. It means a holy rite in general, in particular a soldier's sacred oath of allegiance.

Some more helpful way of defining them:

'An effectual sign of grace performed at Christ's behest' (Yarnold)

Effectual – it actually does something. It impacts the recipient

Sign – it points to a reality. But it isn't itself the reality. Not being the reality doesn't mean it's meaningless. If you want to visit me, you haven't arrived if you stop & sit under the 'Gorrell Crescent'

Street sign. But that doesn't mean the sign is meaningless. It's a really helpful way of you accessing the reality of visiting my home.

Sign of grace – the reality the sacraments point to is God's work. **Sacraments are an enacted promise.** *'The water, bread & wine are objective realities outside us that embody the objective nature of the gospel promise'* (Tim Chester). The focal point of the sacraments is Christ's activity not ours. It is not primarily a sign of your faith or your belief. If you think of baptism or Lord's Supper as primarily signs that point to you or reveal things about you, I'd suggest you've got the sign pointing backwards. Sacraments are given so we'd look afresh at God's action in Christ – giving new birth into His Kingdom, through His sacrificial death on our behalf. The Sacraments are something you can hold on to that recall what God has done for you. They are to be received, because the focus is not to recall what you've done, but God's action. Many a baptism has been introduced as 'we're gathered because X has decided to get show his commitment to follow Jesus'. Such an introduction points the sign backwards & undermines assurance. Such an introduction points to my decision – so in times of doubt, I can only look at the strength of my faith. What the sacrament is meant to do, is point you to God's work – baptism is something in which you are passive... someone else declares you baptised & pushes you under water or sprinkles you. So in times of doubt you remember the sacrament of baptism, pointing not to your decision, but God's promise kept in Christ.

Performed at Christ's behest – The sacraments are practises that Jesus himself suggested. It's a slightly imperfect marker of what's in & out. We use it to exclude some things – like marriage. In Ephesians 5, Marriage is a sign of Christ's union with the church. But Jesus never commands us to marry – so we don't consider it a sacrament. However, in John 13, he tells his disciples to wash one another's feet – but we've not adopted it as a sacrament. It's an imperfect measure. But the point is, not only has Jesus been gracious to us – he's added a 'means of grace' – a way of re-accessing, experiencing & enjoying that grace.

'An effectual sign of grace performed at Christ's behest' (Yarnold)

Defined another way: **Article XXV - Of the Sacraments**

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

Milne puts it **The Sacraments communicate, seal & confirm possession of Christ's grace & the blessings of his covenant. Receiving, we've the chance to express faith & allegiance to God'**. They communicate, seal & confirm Christ's grace – they remind us how Jesus treats us. They define who is in & out of His people. They remind our new identity in the gospel. The Puritan, Stephen Charnock says *'The gospel sacraments seal the gospel promises', as a ring confirms the covenant of marriage'*. In 1 Peter 3, Peter says 'Baptism saves you' – in the way we might say exchanging rings makes you married. It's not magical - that a man could secretly slip ring on a woman & they're

instantly married. You can't splash water from the font on the unsuspecting to convert Wollongong on mass. Likewise, if the best man left the rings at home & the couple exchange rings later, the marriage is not discounted. The thief on the cross wasn't required to get down, be baptised, & then get back on the cross for Jesus to welcome him in paradise. Sacraments seal like a wedding ring – something you can point to, that confirms & reminds of a promise & act that you can't see.

Perhaps the easiest definition to hold on to:

'As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means' (JI Packer)

The sacraments strengthen our faith by correlating Christian belief with our senses. It takes what we've heard proclaimed in the gospel, & allows us in a very tangible & kinaesthetic way, to participate in what God has done for us in Christ.

Christ gives the sacraments to correlate Christian belief with our senses because he knows at least 3 things about us:

Embodied... God didn't make us purely spiritual. He made us physical – although He Himself is Spirit. God condescends to communicate in ways that we can receive. Like we might kneel down to the same height & speak in simpler language to a child so they better understand, God accommodates our 'embodied nature'. He doesn't communicate with us by simply a voice in the Head. He uses the audio & the visible. Creation itself in Psalm 19 declare the glory of God. The plagues of the Exodus were that Israelite & Egyptian alike would know the LORD. Through John's gospel, he calls 'signs' what we call miracles or works. The ultimate in God communicating is the incarnation itself. God – who is Spirit – took on our flesh. Jesus says if you've seen Him, you've seen the Father. Sacraments fall in the same line of God knowing we are embodied, so communicating to help us in our reality & limitations.

Forgetful... God knows His people are quick to forget all He's done. There's a pattern in Scripture of using the visible to jog our memories. In 'Come Thou Fount' we sing 'Here I raise my Ebenezer'. We sing it & hardly anyone knows what that line means – but we love the other lines! Ebenezer means 'stone of help'. It's a reference to 1 Samuel 7. After driving back the Philistine army, Samuel took a stone – monument size - & raised it in the place where they had their final victory. A marker of how far the Lord helped them. The stone was raised & named – so that future generations wouldn't forget. God knows we need reminders. We need the audible to be visible too. Most obviously, remembrance is the foundation of the Passover meal. The Passover gave the excuse to retell the story of redemption – that God's people would never forget. They were to keep doing it, because we're prone to forgetting & new generations need to see & hear of God's grace.

Communal... The visible & tangible force participation in a way that hearing doesn't. A whole congregation can sit in a building as one person speaks - & there's no real way of telling who is

receiving what's said & who isn't. Hearing is – to all observation – completely passive. But if I ask you to come forward or stand up – the visible forces participation. It makes clear who has & has not received what's spoken. The gospel itself defines a community – Christ's people are automatically part of the church the moment they believe. There is no such thing as a 'solo Christian'. Individualism has no place in true faith. This community stands against those who don't believe. In one sense, the act of gathering draws a line. But our gatherings are designed to be open. Outsiders – not yet believers – are expected to be among us in 1 Corinthians. The sacraments – being visible & tangible – make clear who God's people are in a way that simply listening & attending don't. Again, it's not perfect. People can falsely participate. But the explanation & warnings help define God's community in clearer ways than without.

'As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means'. Knowing we are embodied, forgetful & communal, Christ gives us 2 sacraments: Baptism & the Lord's Supper.

Baptism

What aspect of the gospel does Baptism make visible?

Baptism is a public exhibition of Union with Christ. Baptism makes visible the new identity we have in Christ. It is a sign of God's grace that we've died to the old self & Christ is alive in us (& we in Him).

Baptism itself is simply a word for washing, cleansing, plunging or immersion.

We take it as a Sacrament from Jesus' final words in Matthew:

'As you go, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, of the Son & of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded'.

What Jesus means by that is richer than we might expect.

John has a Baptism for repentance & the forgiveness of sins. It's an easy model to grasp – an external washing symbolising an internal cleansing. John promises the coming one will do far more than simply wash the outside. He's baptise with the Holy Spirit. In other words, a whole new life will come in. Picking up Ezekiel's prophecy, it's the removal of our stony, rebellious hearts – the core of who we are – to have a new heart that is responsive to God.

But most uses of the word in the New Testament go for the metaphoric understanding of the word baptism. Frequently the one being baptised doesn't even get wet. The form we take involves water – though the water itself & amount isn't the point. It's the spiritual reality that the water points to that matters. In 1 Corinthians 10v2, the Israelites in Moses time were baptised in the cloud & sea - & stayed dry! What their baptism pointed to – thousands of years before the cross – was their union with Christ (10v3).

Baptism is mostly used of dying & rising to new life – not simply cleansing from sin. So Jesus speaks of his own baptism in Mark 10. He's not referring back to what he received from John in Mark 1 when the heavens opened & declared Him the Son with whom the Father is pleased. In Mark 10, the baptism he speaks of is the cross & resurrection. His disciples think they can do the same baptism. Jesus says – yes – you will! You will be baptised like me. Not getting wet. But dying & rising to new life.

Romans 6v4 *'We are buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in newness of life.'*

Plugging that back into Jesus' words in Matthew 28, we're commissioned to 'immerse' the nations in the names of the triune God. Disciples are new people, who no longer have their old identity – but are so baptised, or plunged – in God, that they are redefined. Their name – their identity, is now in the Father, Son & Spirit. The focus of baptism isn't so much on us & our faith, but a sign & testimony to God & His gracious work. Baptism is a sign of inner cleansing & the remission of sins (Acts 22v16; 1 Corinthians 6v11; Ephesians 5v25-27). Baptism testifies to the Holy Spirit's regeneration, His gift of new life (Titus 3v5) & ongoing presence that guarantees eternal life (1 Corinthians 12v13). The focus isn't on us & our faith – because salvation isn't a work, but a gift – that united to Christ all that's His is ours (Romans 6v3-7). To be baptised in the name of the Father & the Son & the Holy Spirit is to be placed under the control & direction of the Triune God.

The sacrament of baptism then is far richer than making visible that our sins are washed away. It makes visible God's grace in giving us a whole new identity in Christ. Our old self is dead. Our life is now hid with Christ. Of course, it is still just a sign. Baptism doesn't force the hand of the Spirit. Acts is helpful in that way. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is poured out & the gospel is heard in people's heart language. They respond to the gospel & Peter encourage them to get visible sign of new identity: 'Repent & be baptised'. In Acts 10, Gentile believers receive the Holy Spirit – they are re-born – then Peter realises they shouldn't have the sign of new identity withheld. So they are baptised after having the reality. In Acts 19, some who knew of John's baptism hear about Jesus from Paul. They are baptised – then the Holy Spirit comes on them. Acts underlines that the sign is not the same as the reality. The Holy Spirit's hand cannot be forced. But the sign throughout is that of New birth.

Who is it for?

Baptism is for the church to declare who is in Union with Christ. Applying this sacrament is a one off. If it was just a sign of washing sin away, we might want to re-do it in the way we regularly confess our sins. But because it points to a new identity, we don't have to re-do it. Just like in a family, we might apologise to others for failing them, but we don't need to reissue birth certificates constantly – because they didn't lose their status & identity – even if they acted out of line with that family identity.

Baptism is a one-off sign of God's grace giving us a new identity in Christ. The old is dead. The new has come. Our 39 articles put it this way:

Article XXVII - Of Baptism

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

Lots we could draw from it. At least:

- Baptism is MORE than a sign of profession, but a sign of regeneration. Again, the focus of sacraments is God's activity, not human. It points to Christ's work. Not ours.
- Baptism is a mark of difference. It is meant to define the children of God from those who are only born once. Baptism is given to those the church receives as fellow members.

The articles touch on the most controversial aspect in modern church culture – the baptism of young children. Let me be clear: this is not a salvation issue. God works amongst those who administer baptism to children & among those who refrain.

In terms of application & wading into some of the complexity, here are some reasons for the baptism of young children:

- Baptism is primarily a sign of God's grace, not a sign of my faith. The focus is not on my confession, but His salvation. Baptism doesn't force the hand of God. It could be given to a child who wanders from the faith. It could just as equally be given to a 35 year old, who professes faith, then 5 years later 'falls away'. Tying the sign & reality too tightly has seen some Christians withhold baptism until the death-bed – so it's not given 'incorrectly'. That thinking is the end product of 'reversing where the sign points'.
- A Biblical worldview of humanity is 'persons-in-relationship' – not the radical individualism of modern Western culture. Recently, we've come to be persuaded that our identity is self-defined (You be you). It's both chaotic & dangerous & wrong. Who we are is not created by my profession alone. My profession is only a part of who I am. Identity is formed by connection to others – especially family - & from the transcendent. God Himself. It's why in Acts 2v39, the offer of baptism can be made to you & your children. It's why in Acts 16v34, the Philippians gaoler's whole household are baptised. A more collective & corporate understanding of who we are means that the sign of being one of Christ's is not withheld any more than citizenship of Australia to a newborn. It's a received identity. It's why the vast majority of believers across the world & across generations have baptised their children – only modern westerners have resisted.
- God is sovereign in salvation. When Jesus welcomes the children to him in Luke 18, it's the word for infants. I don't think this is mere rhetoric. Grace is not constrained by human capacity. So God works in John the Baptist in the womb. Psalm 51 speaks of being sinful from

conception & Psalm 71 speaks of praising God from his mother's womb. Grace is not constrained by capacity. This has all sorts of implications & comfort for ministry to the mentally disabled; for engaging with bereaved parents & for how we do children's ministry.

- To sum up: we baptise infants, because we consider the children of our church as fellow members – not outsiders. They are young disciples to be trained in the faith – not outsiders who must join before they are considered fellow heirs of the kingdom.

How does it stir up faith?

Baptism stirs faith – because it reminds you who you really are. Being 'just a sign', baptism itself doesn't save anyone. The thief on the cross who turned in faith to Christ entered paradise without the sign (Luke 23). Simon Magus received the sign but lacked a regenerate heart (Acts 8v13-14). But even as a 'mere sign' – it has the power to strengthen faith. As **Article XXV** (25) says of the sacraments:

'Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.'

The sign doesn't force God's hand – but it powerfully & tangibly testifies to God's grace in saving sinners. Baptism reminds you God has remade you in Christ. In a baptism service, even those not receiving the sign at that time are encouraged by the public testimony of God's willingness to give new life in Christ. The Apostles remind churches of their baptism to both comfort & challenge them. 1 Corinthians 12v12-14, Galatians 3v26-29, Colossians 2v11-12 & 1 Peter 3v18-22 – believers are reminded of their baptism, their new identity, as what should shape their life & thinking.

Discussion: How has your faith been stirred & Christian walk blessed by the sacrament of baptism?

The Lord's Supper

What aspect of the gospel does the Lord's Supper make visible?

If baptism is the public exhibition of Union with Christ, ***The Lord's Supper is the exhibition & expression of Communion with Christ.*** Union being a constant state, a one-off identity shift.

Communion being a repeated experience & expression of that Union. Union is one way. Communion is two-way

It's grounded in Jesus' words of institution, cited in 1 Corinthians 11v26 'Whenever you eat this bread or drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. Whenever. Jesus anticipates repetition. Every time we are experiencing & expressing afresh his once for all achievement at the cross.

The Lord's Supper makes visible the redemption won by Jesus' death. In all 4 gospels, Jesus' final meal is a reinterpretation of the Passover. Jesus takes the redemption of Israel from Egypt & applies it to Himself. His broken body & blood take the place of the firstborn, the lamb. He saves not just from slavery, but sin & death.

But it's not only about our communion with Christ. The Lord's Supper is about our communion as church family. In 1 Corinthians, the failure to 'recognise the body of Christ' as they share this meal is about their failure to love each other. They are coming to the table selfishly & individualistically. Some are well fed, others go hungry. It's part of a whole church life in Corinth of pride & self-interest. In the flow of 1 Corinthians, Paul moves from chapter 10's warning to learn from God's judgement of his people who received salvation but were unchanged; to talk about freedom to do what blesses others; to their divisions when they gather – focussed on the Lord's Supper; to their diversity as Christ's body & then the great way of 'love' in chapter 13.

So the 39 articles put it:

Article XXVIII - Of the Lord's Supper

The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.

Communion has a horizontal & vertical axis. In our practise, when we remain seated, receive, then eat & drink together, we are highlighting the horizontal: our communion as Christ's body. When we come forward to receive from the one place, we are highlighting the vertical: our communion with Christ who died for us.

This Communion is a moment, that relocates us in Christ. JI Packer helpfully summarises the 3 levels of meaning for us who participate:

- First, it has a PAST reference to Christ's death, which we remember.

- Second, it has a PRESENT reference to our corporate feeding on him by faith, with implications for how we treat our fellow believers (1 Cor 11:20-22)
- Third, it has a FUTURE reference as we look ahead to Christ's return and are encouraged by it.

Over time, believers have wrestled with what exactly is happening when we commune this way.

- Roman Catholicism denies the once for all work of Christ in their practice. They contend that there is a genuine change in substance. The bread becomes Christ (transubstantiation). The priest elevates the host (from the Latin for sacrificial victim) for the congregation to worship. In their thinking Christ is truly re-sacrificed, not merely remembered. This position must be rejected as unbiblical & blasphemous.
- Among the Protestants, the Lord's Supper was a key battle ground in reclaiming the gospel. Milne summarises the positions well:

- o Lutheran: Luther rejected 'transubstantiation' and argued that the body & blood of Christ are present 'in' & 'under' the elements of the bread & wine. There is no change in the substance of the elements; but as the communicants physically partake of them they actually receive the glorified body of Christ which is everywhere present. Thus there is a true presence of Christ in the Supper, localised in the elements, which do not change their nature.
- o Zwinglian: This position is that the Supper is merely symbolic. It vividly reminds the communicant of what Christ has done for him or her on the cross and calls for a rededication of life to God in the light of Calvary. Christ is present only in the sense and to the degree that he is always present to the believer through the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- o Reformed: Calvin argued that Christ is truly partaken of in the Supper when the communicant comes in true faith. While it is the whole Christ, flesh & Spirit, who is partaken of, stress fell on the spiritual and mystical aspects of communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit, the church is lifted up in the Supper to experience fellowship with her glorified head and Lord and to feed on him for the nourishing of her faith.

- As you wrestle through those positions, I offer you Thomas Cranmer's words:
 - o *Christ is present in his sacraments, just as he is present in His word when he works mightily through it in the hearts of the hearers. By this we do not mean that Christ is physically present in the voice or sound of the speaker (whose sound perishes as soon as the words are spoken). Instead, by this we mean that Christ works through His word, using the voice of the speaker, as his instrument. In the same way, he also uses his sacraments, by which he works, and therefore can be said to be present in them.*

Key in all these, is 'remembrance'. Jesus uses the word - & it's a powerful word. Remembrance takes a past event & makes it a present reality. There's nothing 'mere' about remembrance. To remember

is to re-live. Memory turns past experience into present reality. To remember something of your past – is not just recalling how you felt, but feeling it all over again. It's the bittersweet joy of leafing through the family photo album. Memory powerfully reapplies the past experience & shapes both your present & future. So 1 Corinthians 11v26 puts it: *'whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'* It's not 'mere' remembrance – it's a visible word. The gospel is proclaimed & we are publicly declaring our trust in Christ. Because there is nothing 'mere' about remembrance, in 11v27 to do it wrongly is a sin. 11v28, we actively remember having examined ourselves. Leon Morris explains: *'There is a very gift of the Saviour in the sacrament, none the less real for being essentially spiritual'*. Done wrongly it's dangerously bringing judgement upon yourself.

Who is it for? *The Lord's Supper is the exhibition of Communion with Christ.* As such, it is only for believers. Even more, it's only for believers in right relationship with Christ & one another. So the period of examination is not just in the brief pause as the elements are handed out. We should examine ourselves before we come to church & sort any issues out. If you are out of fellowship with someone at church – you should not partake of communion until it's resolved.

Perhaps more obviously, it's for believers – not unbelievers. So we don't celebrate it at an evangelistic event. We also don't go to the other extreme of limiting who comes to receive. It's my duty to administer properly by explaining what the sacrament is. It's not my duty to know the heart & determine who should receive.

How does it stir up faith?

The Lord's Supper clarifies both what Christ has done & who has received him. It is strangely evangelistic. At a conference this week, we talked about how our Christian culture doesn't give much opportunity to decide for Christ. We don't do altar calls. We don't have a regular sermon point that invites you to become a Christian.

Slow-witted as I am, I forgot communion. The Lord's Supper is done weekly at one service, monthly at the rest. It functions as both comfort & strengthening for the long-term believer. It challenges the outsider to make a decision for Christ – given all He's done. Tim Chester describes this invitation beautifully:

'Communion offer the possibility of re-enchanting our world – a moment of transcendence, a meeting of heaven & earth, a glimpse beyond the immanent frame that would otherwise enclose our view of the world. God's immanence in the world through the Spirit in Communion points us beyond this material world to the transcendence of God'.

Discuss with the person next to you: How has your faith been stirred & Christian walk blessed by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?