

# “The Sacraments”

Luke 22:14-30

5/7/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Since the Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, most Protestant churches (the Presbyterians being among them) have taught there are two sacraments: Baptism and Communion.<sup>1</sup> The last time people in our denomination were surveyed, however, they found a lot of misunderstanding about the sacraments.<sup>2</sup> The results were surprising.

Over half of those responding thought that marriage was also a Presbyterian sacrament. As many as a quarter of the Elders surveyed believed confirmation (or joining the church) was a sacrament. Another quarter of our church leaders thought the same for ordination. Ten percent thought that our sacraments included funerals and confession of sins.

Later, in the questionnaire, it was stated that Presbyterians have only two sacraments: Baptism and Communion. But when asked if these other rituals should be considered as sacraments, 48% of the Elders thought marriage should and over a third believed ordination and confirmation should also be included.

Once, I included a question on the sacraments in a congregational poll (of a former church in which I served) and less than half of them knew which two sacraments Presbyterians observed. But these are not life-threatening questions anyway.

Here’s a question for you. What are the requirements for baptism in our denomination?

At least one parent must be an *active* member for their child to be baptized. This is because our *Book of Order* states that it is the congregation that makes the promise to support that parent or parents as they raise the child. There has to be a context of commitment to this community for that

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<sup>1</sup> or the Lord’s Supper

<sup>2</sup> In this survey of 1,600 from June 1982, they conducted a survey specifically on the Sacraments involving 1,160 members, 519 Elders and 703 ministers. Source: Presbyterian Panel

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↑ Andrea De Castagno,  
“Last Supper” 1445-50

camper and they stopped, one Sunday, and asked us to baptize their infant on their way to Hackensack New Jersey, . . . what meaning would there be in our promising to support the nurturing of their child if we would never see them again? If you’d like to find out more about baptism in our churches, ask for a printed copy of a more thorough explanation given previously.<sup>3</sup>

There is also some confusion on who can participate in the sacrament of communion. Once in a while, people wrongly think they’ve got to be an active and participating member of that church in order to take communion.

The denomination’s guidelines state that *any* Christian can receive communion, regardless of church membership or denominational affiliation. If you would like to read more on this issue, it is available in print as well.

Some people may feel that churches, particularly ministers, have somehow failed to teach about the sacraments – accounting for the confusion.

One part of it is that the Gospels don’t say anything about “sacraments.” Sacraments have evolved only in church tradition. The Bible only testifies to the life and teachings of Jesus and how the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations of Christians *began to establish a regularity* in their faith expression.

Another part of the confusion is that we are living in a predominantly Roman Catholic

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<sup>3</sup> You can receive it by way of email as well.

community. The images and experiences of many of our friends and neighbors have influenced our general understanding. The Roman Catholic tradition heavily emphasizes sacraments and the Protestant tradition does not. That's why we have Western New York Protestants occasionally feeling a bit fearful about matters of the sacraments. On the other hand, though, how often do you go into work or to a party and someone comes up to you and asks: "Quick, tell me, . . . what are the sacraments of your denomination?"

As we mentioned in the children's moments, we all have rituals and patterns to our lives. We deem some rituals as more important than others. Regularly brushing our teeth is more important than making our beds because few see the results of sloppy bedrooms comparable to the pain, expense and inconvenience of gum and tooth disease. And obviously these mundane things are a far cry from the rituals in our faith tradition.

Presbyterians, like most faith expressions, have many rituals (that aren't official sacraments). We welcome new members into the church. We conduct weddings, funerals and memorial services. Since Presbyterians are a melting pot for people who have come from other denominations, we have a diversity of religious backgrounds. How many of you, here this morning, were in churches other than Presbyterian in your youth?<sup>4</sup>

Those of you who were in the Roman Catholic faith expression can remember seven sacraments. There is Baptism and Communion. There is also Penance (which is confession of sin to the priest). There's Sacred Anointing (which is a ritual for a dying person that used to be called "last rites"). Our brothers and sisters in the Roman expression also count Marriage, Confirmation and Ordination of Priests among the sacraments.

The first place Protestant leaders have consulted about our sacraments is the 15<sup>th</sup> century Westminster Confession – the original blueprint of Protestant theology. From it, we teach children and adults that **sacraments are a visible sign of God's**

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<sup>4</sup> Actually, 59% of all Presbyterians and Elders grew up in other denominations as did 35% pastors.

**invisible grace.**<sup>5</sup> That's all you'd have to know for the test (if one were given). So if our two sacraments are visual remembrances to remind us of God's gracefulness in our lives, how does that apply to Baptism and the Lord's Supper?

**Baptism** is the sacrament using water to symbolize how God spiritually washes our sins away – recognizing that we are part of the community of God's people. So when we baptize a baby, we are celebrating that this child will grow up experiencing the blessings of God's covenant people – hearing the scriptures and being nurtured by God's people in the church. It's not a certification that the baby is a Christian or any guarantee that she or he will become one.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it symbolizes that this child will be brought up in the nurturing community of God's people and their life will be blessed because of it.

We cringe when we hear people who express anxiety about "getting their baby baptized" – because we know there may be some Medieval thinking that lurks in their psyche – telling them that their child 'may go to Hell without a baptism.' Those who have portrayed God to be a ruthless and loveless Being are responsible for this anachronistic thinking.

As for **the Lord's Supper**, it is, as well, a ritual with a visible sign to help us remember the grace of God. In this ceremony, we recall that Christ loved us so much that He was willing to suffer and die a miserable death at the hands of cruel and evil people. Jesus endured this so we would find God's love in our own lives.

Interestingly, Paul and Luke had different interpretations of the meaning of the crucifixion.

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<sup>5</sup> In the shorter catechism, sacrament is described like this: A sacrament is a holy ordinance, instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers. [Question 92]

<sup>6</sup> As the more thorough summary of Baptism states (if you choose to obtain one from the church office), Baptism was used as a replacement ritual to symbolize similar things of the ancient Israelite rite of circumcision – a sign of blessings because the child will be brought up in the covenant community of God's people. Unlike circumcision, however, Christians adopting baptism realized the rite was for girls and boys, women and men – a dramatic change from the ancient religion and rituals of Judaism.

Paul, being a religious lawyer, tried his hand at explaining the crucifixion by using his courtroom experiences as a metaphor. He taught that out of love for people, Christ saw humans as being tried and condemned by God because of their sin. In response, Jesus offered to take upon Himself our mandated punishment – personally serving as the atoning sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> In Paul’s metaphor, then, he has Jesus essentially hopping over the courtroom railing, stepping forward before the cosmic Judge and offering to go to the electric chair in our place.

Luke, on the other hand, didn’t hold this interpretation. Rather than being a sacrifice for sin, Jesus is an example of God’s self-sacrificing compassion and forgiveness for all to emulate.<sup>8</sup> Jesus’ death, then, was understood by Luke to be the ultimate example of how much God loves us. In the words of John, ‘God loved the world so much that God gave Jesus so that *anyone* who believes will have eternal life.’

We have to have rituals and special sacraments in our faith expression because God is so great that we can only symbolize it. Whenever we try to talk about matters that go beyond what we could call “natural,” it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about them. God and the spiritual world immediately exceed our experiences so we usually have to use symbolism. We *need* visible signs (or symbols) to describe the magnitude of God’s invisible grace.

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<sup>7</sup> the “substitutionary” atonement for our sins

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Harris, *The New Testament, A Student’s Introduction* [ISBN: 0-7674-0014-3] p183. Besides deleting Mark’s crucial statement about Jesus’ dying sacrificially as a “ransom for many” (10:45) and emphasizing instead his example of service that will be a pattern for disciples later in Acts (Luke 22:27), Luke also eliminates Markan passage that show Jesus as too humanly vulnerable. In the Gethsemane scene, Luke severely edits the Markan description of Jesus’ desperate anguish, totally eliminating His prayer to be spared the cup of suffering (cf. Mark 14:32-42 and Luke 22:39-46). The famous verses that describe Jesus as “sweating blood” do not appear in some of the oldest and best Lukan manuscripts; later scribes may have inserted them to make Luke’s account consistent with the other two gospels. The Lukan Jesus thus utters no final cry of abandonment, but instead serenely commits His Spirit to God (cf. Mark 15:33-37; Luke 23:46-47). Harris, p162.

If you thought about it for a minute, I suspect you’d conclude that it really doesn’t matter how many sacraments our denomination has “officially” established. Who knows, . . . maybe someday they’ll add a few more. What *is* significant is that in all of our rituals and in all of our usual religious symbols in our lives, we are using them only to remember and respond to God’s holiness and love.

When Jesus was sitting at the table with His dearest friends, just before He was going to die, He did *not* say, “And remember, whatever you do, don’t drop these communion cups!” And He didn’t say, “Write this down because I don’t want you to get this out of order . . . you’ve got to do the bread first and *then* the cup or it won’t work!” In fact, a close comparison of Mark, Matthew and Luke has Jesus talking about the cup, then the bread and finally the cup again. Matthew, also using his source Mark (as did Luke) has the bread and then the cup. Which order was right and what came first doesn’t matter.

At the Last Supper, did Jesus say: “Before you pass this to the person next to you, you better make sure you’ve confessed all your sin and gotten everything in your life straightened out before God?” No.

One of the most widespread misinterpretations about communion is a result of lazy readings of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. The house church in Corinth was a mess, as you’ve heard on previous occasions. In the context of a worship service based around a congregational meal (an *agapae*<sup>9</sup> meal), they would observe communion. But only in this church, someone would be drunk at one end of the table. Someone else would be stuffing themselves in gluttony while across the table would be a family so poor that they hadn’t eaten any food that day. And then some of them were directly involved with a lifestyle that was so ethically compromised that it was downright embarrassing.

For these excessive and bizarre reasons, Paul sternly told the people *of this particular church* to approach the communion observance with a more

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<sup>9</sup> Greek for “love” – the name ‘Agapae Meal’ of the worship service that took place in the context of the church community meal.

appropriate remembrance of Christ. They were so far from remembering the importance of Christ's death in the ritual that he said, 'if anyone eats the Lord's bread or drinks from the cup, in a way that dishonors Him, they are guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood.' This wasn't a trend in all the churches – it was happening only in that house-church in Corinth and he was rigorously trying to correct their behavior during this meal-time form of congregational worship.

So you can see how clergy, in the past, have taken that phrase out of the context – of that *particular* troubled church – and have dumped a lot of guilt and misinformation on church people about communion. It's no wonder that some people today often don't go to church when communion is served. It's because they wrongly think that they are not good enough to take communion.<sup>10</sup>

It's particularly discouraging that this has happened in the Christian Church. The whole point of communion is to remember Christ's love for each of us – especially as we remember how Jesus deeply and eternally loved those faltering humans sitting around the table with Him. When the pressure was on, they betrayed Him and ended up saying they never knew Him. Amazingly, they had traveled with Him for three years and still couldn't figure out what was going on. There, even the night before His gruesome death, they were still bitterly arguing over their positions in (what they thought was) Jesus' coming political administration in Jerusalem.

Communion is a celebration that God loves each of us enough to die for us – especially because of what we already are and what we haven't gotten around to doing just yet. The good news is that God loves us unconditionally. There is nothing that will ever change that. There is joy and unshakable security in knowing that our relationship with God doesn't depend on any person-made idea that we somehow have to be 'good enough.'

This good news of God's love is also celebrated when we baptize a person. We celebrate

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<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of this topic, ask for a copy of the talk "What if you're not good enough to take communion."

that God continues to think that life is good and worth living and so God has us bring another child along on our pilgrimage through life as a church family. We know that life is hard but it will be great and worth all our efforts with God beside us.

So however many sacraments the Presbyterians – or any other faith expression determines – the important things worth remembering have to do with God's love for us. We also remember the support and the joy we experience as we live in a community of God's people. How we end up symbolizing these things is only to help us in our celebration of life. These rituals are just one of our many ways of saying to God and to ourselves, that God's love is what is important and it makes all of life worthwhile. ■



Gustave Doreé  
A woodcut of "The Last Supper"

