



The Sacraments

A position paper by Justin Dean

What is a “sacrament”?

The Latin word *sacramentum* was first used by the Romans in the first century to describe the oath of loyalty soldiers would make to the emperor. Pliny the Younger (AD 61-113), a Roman administrator wrote a letter to the Roman emperor around A.D. 112 regarding the worship practices of the early church. In this letter, Pliny stated that one of the things that Christians did in their gatherings was to bind themselves by oath (*sacramentum*). “In this context, we can imply that a *sacramentum* was an oath of loyalty of God.”¹ The word is also associated with the Greek word, *mysterion* (Eph. 1:9; 3:2), so as we begin to study and discuss the Christian sacraments we should expect that there will still be some mystery involved. This mystery, and the church’s response to it, has caused much speculation, division, and injury to the body of Christ throughout history. It is my prayer that we can hold in a closed hand our convictions where scripture is clear (the gospel) and we can give a lot of grace, and hold in an open hand where mystery still abounds. According to the Heidelberg Catechism,

“Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal on that promise. And this is God’s gospel promise: to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.”

We consider a sacrament to be a visible sign and seal of the gracious work of Christ found in the gospel. At Sacred City Church, we acknowledge only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both of these sacraments have Old Testament significance and were recognized and instituted by Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 22:14-20) for the covenant community of faith. John Frame shows us how these sacraments both show us the gospel (sign) and have covenantal significance (seal),

“In baptism, God admits people to the visible Church. The symbolism of baptism presents the gospel to us. The water symbolizes our cleansing from sin, and that in turn indicates our union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). The Lord’s Supper also pictures the gospel; the bread representing the body of Christ, given for us; the cup representing his blood, shed for the forgiveness of our sins. The supper renews the covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). So in the sacraments, God reminds us vividly of his gospel promises. And he seals the promises to us, guaranteeing that he will fulfill his promises.”²

¹ Espinoza, B. (2012). Early Christian Worship. In J. D. Barry & L. Wentz (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (J. D. Barry & L. Wentz, Ed.). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

² John M Frame. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. P&R Publishing Company, 921

Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Old Testament

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are mysterious "symbols" that speak to us of the biblical "story"; they point both backwards to God's action toward his people in the Old Testament and also forward to new creation.³ Baptism is found analogously in several places in the Old Testament; both the flood (Gen. 7-8, 1 Pet. 3:20-21) and the Red Sea (Ex. 14, 1 Cor. 10:1-2) are spoken of in the New Testament as "baptisms." There is also a covenantal relationship between baptism and circumcision as theologian Michael Horton says succinctly: "Baptism, in fact, is now the true circumcision (Col. 2:11-12)."⁴ God gave Abraham the sign and seal of the covenant community of faith in the Old Testament through circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14; 23-27). Circumcision was the sign of initiation into the Old Testament covenant community. Circumcision was not salvific (i.e. It did not confer salvation), but pointed forward to the work of Christ and spoke to those inside the covenant that their sins could be cut away, just as a boy's foreskin was cut away, if they would walk by faith in God's grace. Paul tells the Romans that Abraham's circumcision was a "sign" and "seal of the righteousness he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Romans 4:11). Circumcision itself was pointing to the true circumcision that could only be had by faith, a circumcision of the heart (Dt. 10:16; 30:5; Jer. 4:4; 31:32-34; Rom. 2:28-29; 3:30; 4:10; Gal. 5:2-6; Phil. 3:3, Col. 2:11).

It was common in the Old Testament to celebrate and ratify a covenant or treaty with a meal. One of the most notable and mysterious examples is the king of Salem, "priest of God Most High," who "brought out bread and wine" and pronounced a powerful blessing upon Abraham (Gen. 14:17-20). This covenant meal points toward the Passover Meal (Ex. 12:1-27), which anticipates the Lord's Supper. While the covenant of circumcision was a one-time event to symbolize entrance into the covenant community, the Passover meal was an annual symbol of the renewal of the covenant. Likewise, baptism, a one-time event, symbolizes entrance into the New Covenant Community (Matthew 28:19; Galatians 3:26-29), while the Lord's Supper symbolizes the regular renewal of our covenant with God and with each other. Therefore, we believe one should naturally come before the other. Baptism is to precede the taking of the Lord's Supper. Based upon this, it is our belief and practice as Sacred City Church that only baptized believers are to partake of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper also points toward the new creation, awaiting the time when Jesus will return to claim His bride (1 Cor. 11:26) and we will feast with Him in paradise (Rev. 19:7).

³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 447-48.

⁴ Michael Horton. *The Christian Faith: A systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 790.

What does Baptism “symbolize”?

To put things concisely, baptism symbolizes the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4, Col. 2:11-12). But there are several different ways the symbol is used: it is used to symbolize the circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:11-12), the washing away of our sin (Acts 22:16, 2:38, Tit. 3:5), being saved from the judgement of God (1 Peter 3:20-22), and as a warning to flee from the wrath of God (Matt. 3:7). Like circumcision, baptism promises blessing for those who respond in faith, but at the same time it issues a warning to those who do not respond in faith. Greg Beale gives clarity to the purpose of this “dual-oath” sign,

“Circumcision represented, on the one hand, ‘the cutting off of the flesh’ to designate that the sinful flesh around the heart was cut off, signifying the regeneration of the heart and the setting apart of a person to the Lord. On the other hand, circumcision also represented being ‘cut off’ from Lord. If an Israelite child came to faith, the sign of blessing was applied. If, however, a child grew up in unbelief, the sign of cursing was applied. Baptism is also associated with a dual-oath sign.”⁵

A person is not saved by baptism any more than they were saved by circumcision. The water used in baptism symbolizes the reality that every human being is rightfully sitting under the just wrath of God, and only His grace can bring them through that judgment. This is what it means to be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the symbol that Peter gives us in 1 Peter 3:20-22 where he compares the great flood to baptism, and Noah’s salvation in the ark to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our true and better ark that brings us through the waters of judgment and wrath into our salvation.

An Open Handed View of Baptism

There are two main disagreements in the evangelical church over baptism. One is the candidate for baptism. Some churches only baptize confessing converts to Christ, while others choose to baptize infants of confessing converts to Christ. The other disagreement is in the mode of baptism. Some churches sprinkle, some mist, some pour, while others immerse individuals into water. I will briefly cover both disagreements and see if I can convince you to have an open hand when it comes to these issues. At Sacred City Church we choose to practice two modes of baptism (immersion and pouring). Further, with mutual respect for the other’s position, a paedo- (child) and credo- (confessing) Baptist position.

Let’s start with the two views regarding the proper recipients of baptism. People who hold to the Baptist position (“convert baptism”) believe that entrance into the covenant

⁵ G.K. Beale. *A New Testament Biblical Theology*. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 812-813

community is only for those who profess faith.⁶ This is the dominant way we see baptism being practiced in the New Testament: people professed their faith and then followed that profession with baptism (Matt. 28:19-20). In Reformed churches the most common position has been that of infant baptism and convert baptism of adults who come to faith who had not been baptized as babies. The common Reformed position is that children should be initiated into the covenant community based on an understanding of a biblical theology of the covenant. The biblical support for this is the connection between circumcision and baptism. Just as circumcision was the sign and seal of Israel's covenant relationship with God, baptism is the sign and seal of the Church's covenant relationship with God. As professing parents applied the Old Testament sign of circumcision to their children, so professing parents of the New Covenant apply the sign of baptism to their children (Gen 17:11-12; Col. 2:11-12). It should also be noted, that the early church father Origen (184 AD-253 AD) wrote, "The church has received a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children."⁷ This confirms the practice of infant baptism taking place early in the life of the church.

We also need to remember the highly communal cultural context of the first Christians. They were identified in more familial and corporate ways than we are today. It makes sense that the New Testament shows entire households being baptized based upon the profession of faith of the parents (Acts 11:13-14; 16:15, 31; 18:8 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15) and we see a household ethic that treats the faith of the parents as a means of grace to the children (1 Cor. 7:14). It should also be noted that Jewish believers who had practiced circumcision for generations, and who were well acquainted with the promised blessings and curses that the covenant contained for their offspring, would have been outraged that this New Covenant now excluded these promises to their children. If the Old Covenant contained promises for the children of believers, and the New Covenant is "enacted on better promises" (Heb. 8:6) it would follow that the New Covenant also contains blessings offered to the children of professing Christians.

It is important for us to remember however, like circumcision, baptism is not salvific. Through baptism, infants are welcomed into the covenant community to receive all the blessings of being a part of it: the faithful nurture and admonition of Christian parents (including some form of Catechism), the prayers of family and church family, the influence of Christian family, friends, teachers, and the consistent involvement in worship gatherings and missional community life where they will be exposed to the Word of God, singing, and sacrament. God uses the benefits of being inside the covenant community of faith to bring young ones to know Him so that they too might make a profession of faith when they are older, and in that way realize the symbol of their baptism.

⁶ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: An introduction to biblical doctrine* (966–967). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, 5.9.3 in Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2001), 1:367.

Personally, I have come to embrace infant baptism. I was raised in confessing Baptist churches and before Sacred City, I have never been a part of a community that baptized infants. But after studying the nature of the covenant and its signs and seals, I have come to see the blessings associated with infant baptism, its biblical foundations, and its historical practice by the church.

But this brings us to another issue. For those of us who have been raised in Baptist churches we are familiar with a practice known as “baby dedications.” This has often been called a “waterless baptism.” It demonstrates a strong desire to present our children to the Lord and ask for his blessing upon them. But are baby dedications biblical? Unfortunately, many of us have accepted such a practice without much thought, myself included. At Sacred City Church, we want everything we do to conform to the Word of God, so let us go to the Word of God and see what it has to say about child dedications.

By surveying the Scriptures we come to the conclusion that child dedication was not a normal practice in the Old or New Testament. You have a few special examples in Samuel, Samson, and John who were dedicated as part of their “Nazirite vows” (1 Sam. 1:1, 24-28; Num. 6:1-21, Judges 13:3-5, Luke 1:13-17). You also have the practice of dedicating the firstborn son in obedience to God’s command in Exodus 13. This was to remind parents of the Passover lamb that died in the place of the Israelites’ firstborn (Ex. 13:2, 13:15). This “dedication of the firstborn” was the practice that Jesus’ parents performed in Luke 2:22-24 when they brought him to the temple when he was about 41 days old. Jesus was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be “purified” following her son’s birth (Lev. 12:6-7). They had to perform this practice, in this way, in order for Jesus to perfectly fulfill the law of God. But this is not a practice that is continued after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel’s firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel’s mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of biblical evidence, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism, because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God’s community, with one caveat.

There is a practice in the Old Testament, with some continuity in the New Testament, of people making public vows to the Lord (Deut. 23:21-23, Num. 30:2, Ps. 50:14, 1 Sam. 1:11; Acts 18:18; 21:23-24). Therefore, a “child dedication” ceremony would actually be more of a parent dedication, in which the parents are making vows to the Lord in how they are going to raise their child according to His Word. This is very different from a child baptism. Child baptism encourages us and our children to put their trust in Jesus by symbolizing what Christ has done for us in the gospel. Dedication tends to focus more on what we will do as parents, than on what Christ has done in the gospel. That is not to say that making vows is bad; I think there is clear biblical support for such a practice. But baptized children have received a sign/seal that points directly to the

gospel, whereas dedicated children receive a symbol/sign that points to their parents' vows to God.

Based upon this evidence, I would say that parent/infant dedication is better than nothing, but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger biblical support. However, as I have said before, I do not believe that this is an issue to hold in a closed hand and break fellowship over. I would echo the thoughts of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10-16, where he places baptism as of lesser importance compared to preaching the gospel. We hold the gospel in a closed hand with white knuckles, willing to die for its content and implications, while holding the mode and candidacy for baptism in an open hand. Let us not forget the gospel.

Therefore, our practice at Sacred City Church is to perform both infant baptisms and parent/infant dedications based upon the biblical convictions of the parents. We will also baptize those who profess faith as adults who had not been baptized as infants by believing parents. When it comes down to it, those who choose to baptize their children and those who choose to dedicate them are charged with the same biblical mandates to "Train up a child in the way he should go;" (Proverbs 22:6) and

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut. 6:4-9).

Therefore, parents who wish to baptize their children or make vows to dedicate themselves to biblical parenting must be committed and covenanted members of a Sacred City Missional Community.

Now let us discuss the mode of baptism. In considering how baptism should be administered we look to the Scriptures' use of the word baptism. We must not only consider the lexical usage of the Greek word "baptizo" which most definitely includes immersion, but should also consider its many other usages inside the context of Scripture which include pouring, dipping, washing, and sprinkling (Num. 8:7;19:13, 18-20; Ps. 51:7; Ez. 36:25; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Titus 3:5). At Sacred City we choose to pour water onto infants and immerse those old enough to be immersed. We see God pouring out His spirit in Acts 2 and baptizing the believers there in the Holy Spirit. We also see in the New Testament the more common understanding of baptizing by immersing someone under the water. We believe both have biblical grounds and therefore choose to hold them together.

Covenant Renewal and The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a deeply personal and communal act of worship in which we are actively renewing our covenant with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ, which is why it is often referred to as "Communion." It is a time where we stop speaking for a moment, reflect and commune with God. When Jesus sat down with His disciples on the night he was betrayed, He instituted the Lord's Supper in the midst of the Passover celebration that had been celebrated in the same way for 1500 years (Matt. 26:17-30; Ex. 12:14-20). By breaking with the traditional practice of Passover, and offering a new interpretation of the bread and the wine, Jesus made it clear that He was now the true and better Passover lamb. As the lamb's blood was spilled and placed over the door posts of the Israelites to save them from the angel of death, Christ's blood will be shed to save them from their sins and death. In the bread and cup, "Christ's propitiatory, vicarious, and substitutionary death for us are translated into a palpable sign."⁸ This covenant meal is a celebration and a weekly renewal of faith in God's work to rescue us from death and to adopt us into His family. The Lord's Supper is deeply personal and spiritual, causing us to pause, reflect on our spiritual condition, repent, and renew our trust in Jesus' finished work on our behalf. We can rest from our striving, because Jesus was perfect in our place and gives us his righteousness by faith. Therefore the Lord's Supper should be a time in our gatherings where God's love for us becomes very real to us personally. But it is also deeply communal (Acts 2:41-47; 1 Cor. 11:18, 20-21, 29), causing us to pause, reflect on our relationships within the body of believers, repent, and to once again renew our faith in the gospel. The Lord's Supper takes the personal aspects of our faith and presses them down into the covenant community of faith. It isn't just about us as individuals, it is also about us as the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper is also a gift, meaning that we believe that Jesus is truly "present" when we eat. This has been a major point of disagreement throughout history. The Catholic church believes the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus during the observance (transubstantiation). While Martin Luther strongly rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he believed that Christ did not actually become the bread and wine, but He was physically present "to," "with," and "under" the bread and wine (consubstantiation). At the other end of the spectrum was Ulrich Zwingli (another influential Protestant reformer) who believed that the bread and wine were only symbols, not the actual body and blood of Christ. Zwingli and the Anabaptists, along with most non-denominational and baptistic churches, believed that Jesus was truly absent from the meal. It is our position at Sacred City to take a mediating stance, alongside John Calvin, that "the Supper is a gift, it does not merely remind us of a gift."⁹ The Lord's Supper is a mysterious gift of grace. To summarize our position, the Lord's Supper is actually doing something when we eat it. It is not just a symbol. The Lord is doing something mysterious and special through the elements and we are taking him

⁸ Tim Keller, *Changing the World Through The Lord's Supper*, Online Article

⁹ Calvin, *institutes* 4.14.17

into us, in a special spiritual way. This is “a meal in which God ratifies his covenant of grace by feeding believers with Christ’s true body and blood in heaven through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ Therefore, Let us not divide over this holy mystery, but respond in wonder and awe that “Christ communicates Himself to us with all His benefits”¹¹ in the Lord’s Supper.

To whom is The Lord’s Supper Administered?

Unlike baptism, only those who are practicing repentance and faith are to be allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper. According to Paul, admission to the Supper requires discernment, so as not to eat and drink unworthily (1 Cor. 10:21-22; 11:17-32). Which is further evidence that something mysterious happens in the supper. Paul tells the Corinthians that some have gotten sick and even died from eating it in an unworthy manner. If the Lord’s Supper was nothing more than a sign or a symbol, one could hardly imagine its improper use having a real physical effect on believers. This requires parents to use discretion with their children. Once a child has made a profession of faith, and been baptized (in any order) they must show the evidences of grace of ongoing repentance and faith before they are admitted to the table. This is not meant to be a legalistic way to “guard the table” or determine who is “truly” regenerate, but a helpful guide so as to not eat or drink the cup in an unworthy manner.

Conclusion

There is a vital relationship between the Word of God and the sacraments. It is the Word of God, and therefore God Himself who breathes life into the sacraments. The Word and the sacraments are means of grace that belong together. The sacraments are supplemented to the Word for the purpose of confirming or sealing it. God gave them both to us for our spiritual benefit. Let us use them wisely, and worship God rightly through them. It is my prayer that Sacred City Church would be known for our love for the Word of God, the true preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the proper use of the sacraments that God has given to us.

¹⁰ Michael Horton. *The Christian Faith: a systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530 , 823

¹¹ *Belgic Confession of Faith*, art. 35, *Psalter Hymnal: Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the CRC, 1976), 87-88