

## SACRAMENT AND ORDINANCE: AREN'T THEY THE SAME?

by

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Cross-cultural communication often presents significant challenges for those who make the attempt. Not only is this the case when people are using different languages, but it is also true when English speakers from different countries try to communicate. An administrator from an American mission board told me of an experience he had when visiting missionaries in Australia. He and his wife arrived shortly before the local church service was to start. However, because of the lengthy trip, she was feeling sick and decided to stay at the hotel while he went to church. At the service the American was asked to give a greeting to the Australians. He was glad to do so, and he also felt compelled to explain why his wife was not with him. "She's a bit under the weather," he explained. The expressions on the people's faces looked shocked, so he quickly added, "It's okay, she's perking up." Little did he know that these common expressions we Americans immediately understand did not have the same meaning Down Under. In Australia being "under the weather" means that someone is drunk, and "perking up" means that someone is throwing up. The very same words meant very different things.

We smile when we hear stories like these, but such mistakes are not as humorous when they relate to biblical language. In the theological world precision in word meaning is extremely important. Those who formulate doctrinal statements and church creeds belabor many of the words they choose in order to communicate the exact meaning desired; they avoid using words which might be construed to mean different things.

One theological word that carries huge potential for misunderstanding and confusion is the term "sacrament." This term is

used to describe the rites or practices of the church.<sup>1</sup> Some Baptists use "sacrament" as a synonym for "ordinance."<sup>2</sup> But this is a far cry from the meaning that a Roman Catholic would attach to "sacrament." And this is where we run into the challenge of words which take on dual meanings.

Some believe that the issue I am raising is not that significant. Noted NT scholar Wayne Grudem remarks, "It does not seem that any significant point is at issue here in the question of whether to call baptism and the Lord's Supper 'ordinances' or 'sacraments.' Since Protestants who use both words explain clearly what they mean by them, the argument is not really over doctrine but over the meaning of an English word."<sup>3</sup> Yet, I believe that this opinion is a bit naïve for two reasons. First, the pastor (or priest) rarely takes time to define his terms when he officiates at a baptism or Lord's Supper. On occasion, he may describe the meaning of baptism during a baptismal service, or he may provide some directions in regard to the necessary qualifications for participants during the Lord's Supper. But are the terms "sacrament" or "ordinance" ever defined during these services? We would be quite safe to answer this question, "Seldom, if at all." Grudem's assertion is also naïve in that recent converts from churches where "sacrament" is frequently used will undoubtedly carry into their new assembly the meaning that term held for them in their pre-conversion days.

So I believe that a discussion about the use of the term "sacrament" holds vital interest for us at Eden Baptist Church. First, a description of the meaning of "ordinance" is necessary in order to grasp the significance this term normally holds for Baptists. Second, a survey of the ways that various Christian churches such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Reformed, and Anglicans define "sacrament" will be undertaken to enable us to make a conclusion regarding whether or not it is legitimate to use "ordinance" and "sacrament" interchangeably. Additionally, it will clarify whether or not "sacrament" can and should be employed by Baptists as a description of the two rites practiced by Christ's church.

**The Meaning of "Ordinance."** The noted Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong provides this explanation: "By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ appointed to be administered in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel. They are

signs, in that they vividly express this truth and confirm it to the believer."<sup>4</sup> As we follow the ministry of Christ in the Gospels, we see that he did, indeed, command his followers to be baptized (Matt 28:19) and to observe the Lord's Supper (Mk 14:22-25). Likewise, the newly formed Church obeyed these commands by practicing baptism as an initiatory rite (Acts 2:41; 10:48) and the Lord's Supper as a continuing rite (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7).

An ordinance is not only something that has been ordained or commanded by Christ for his church, but it also carries within it the concept of symbol. As Strong stated these ordinances give visible expression to vital truths of the gospel. What vital truths do they picture? Baptism pictures the believer's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12) and the washing and purification from sin that occurs in our regeneration (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16). The Lord's Supper symbolizes the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of his blood on the cross (1 Cor 11:24-25), and it shows the unity of believers in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:17).

Thus, an ordinance is a practice of the church commanded by Christ that symbolizes certain essential truths of the gospel. But do the ordinances carry any meaning beyond their symbolic demonstration? The Bible's answer appears to be, "No." However, a significant portion of the Christian church disagrees.

**The Meaning of "Sacrament."** For many Christians the word "ordinance" does not carry the necessary theological freight that "sacrament" does. They believe that the rites of the church provide much more than mere symbols of spiritual truth. Instead, the actual provision of grace comes through the sacrament as it is received by the individual. The various Christian churches carefully nuance their understanding of "sacrament," and for this reason, we need to discuss the unique emphases of each one in turn.

**Roman Catholic.** The Catholic Church believes that there are seven sacraments: baptism, eucharist, ordination, confirmation, matrimony, penance, and extreme unction. In the Roman view the sacraments effectively convey grace to the individual and are necessary for salvation. Thus, the sacraments provide sanctifying and saving grace to those who receive them.

**Lutheran.** Lutherans differ little from Catholics in regard to the meaning of "sacrament." They hold to baptism and the Lord's Supper as instruments of grace. In regard to baptism, O. Hallesby wrote, "Baptism is the means whereby the little one is regenerated. From the moment of baptism the child has life in God."<sup>5</sup> The Lord's Supper is understood to provide forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith for the one who partakes.

**Presbyterian and Reformed.** In this tradition the sacraments are viewed as signs and seals of the covenant of grace that provide spiritual benefits for those who receive them. Infant baptism communicates forgiveness of sins, regeneration, and incorporation into Christ,<sup>6</sup> and it serves to maintain the child's membership in the church until he (hopefully) confesses Christ openly when he comes to maturity. Opposed to the Catholic view of transubstantiation, teachers in this tradition insist that Christ is present in the Supper in a spiritual sense as a life-giving influence. The elements actually convey to the worthy recipient the benefits of Christ's redemption.

**Anglican.** The Church of England (Episcopal Church in America) follows the Thirty-nine Articles as its doctrinal standard. Article 25 states that the sacraments are "effectual signs of God's 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." Baptism "grafts" children into the Church and provides a visible sign and seal of God's adoption (Article 27). In regard to the Lord's Supper: "The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is Faith" (Article 28).

**Conclusion.** To varying degrees all four of these Christian traditions view "sacrament" as a means of conferring grace upon the participant. While this truth is most clearly delineated in the Catholic Church, it has found its way into the teaching of the other three as well.

The notion of conveyed grace helps to explain why infant baptism is practiced by all of these churches. Baptism is administered to every child, regardless of personal faith. And so it is *more* than a mere symbol of Christ's death and the cleansing from sin that all believers enjoy. It is viewed as in some way providing grace to the infant for their future

salvation. This sacrament does not look back to symbolize what Christ has done for the person being baptized, but it rather looks forward hoping for the grace of God to be manifested more fully in the days ahead.

While all the traditions vary in regard to their conception of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, they hold to a grace-giving aspect in the elements themselves. Some form of spiritual blessing is received by everyone who partakes.

It may be helpful to observe that none of these Christian churches uses the term "ordinance" to describe the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper. They prefer "sacrament" because of the spiritual meaning this word conveys. This is the first reason why "ordinance" provides Baptists (and other evangelical churches) with a more accurate term to describe the two rites of the church: it signifies that these rites are symbols of spiritual realities and not the realities themselves.

A second reason for avoiding the term "sacrament" arises from our survey of these four Christian traditions. Though each one retains certain unique emphases in their use of the term, they all attach a grace-giving element to the practices of the church. We, then, ought to steer clear of the perplexity created when "ordinance" and "sacrament" are interchanged.

Colloquialisms can create unnecessary bewilderment when Aussies and Americans get together; that's the nature of cultural interaction. However, when Baptists (and evangelicals generally) speak about the rites of the church, they can and should avoid such complexity. Thus, when we talk about the ordinances that Christ has given to his church, we do not mean to suggest that these practices confer grace to the participants. They do not, and using a "synonym" like "sacrament" only serves to create needless confusion.

<sup>1</sup> Every Christian church views baptism as the initiatory rite and communion as the continuing rite for the church. Of course, some churches (e.g. Roman Catholic) include more sacraments than these, but at least these two are observed by all.

<sup>2</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1985), 1089-1127.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1994), 966.

<sup>4</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Judson Press, 1907), 930.

<sup>5</sup> O. Hallesby, *Infant Baptism and Adult Conversion* (Augsburg, 1924), 60. Cited in Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3 (Zondervan, 1994), 247.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.6.3. Calvin is using the verb "communicate" in the sense of "provide," and he can make this statement based on his equation of infant baptism with OT circumcision. For Calvin, baptism, like circumcision, is the sign and seal of the covenant, and it places the infant into the family of God.