

Introduction

Today’s sermon has been in the works for quite some time. The elders have been wrestling with a number of things, seeking the Lord’s direction and wanting to be faithful in all things. They’ve asked me to preach a sermon on sacraments before we begin our series in Judges and Ruth, so here we are.

I recognize many of us have been third-grade J-Ts. Let me explain. For some reason, in third or fourth grade I suddenly could not turn around. If I got up from my desk and turned to the pencil sharpener, I had to retrace my steps in a manner that prevented me from turning around completely. I have no idea where this came from. It just...happened.

This compulsion only lasted about a year, or maybe two. There were some other compulsive things that came with it. They say you spend your childhood preparing for adulthood but you spend your adulthood *recovering* from your childhood. There are things that happen that affect how you see yourself and the world and it can take a literal lifetime to undo some of the falsehoods you believe. Sometimes the things you need to recover from are things of your own doing—like not being able to turn around 360° in elementary school. Even today I cannot—I *cannot*—put on my left shoe first.

We have a dog which means none of us ever really knows where our other shoe is. My encouraging wife laughs at me when she sees me, er, *pick up* my left shoe by sliding my left foot into it—hear what I’m *not* saying—and wander around the house looking for the other shoe. When I find the right shoe I will *release* the left shoe and then put on my right shoe first and then I will put on my left shoe. I’m no longer *carrying* my left shoe; I’m *wearing* my left shoe.

As far as I know that is the only quirk I have. The truth is we all have quirks from our childhood. Whether you put on the correct shoe first or not, you have quirks—and I mean *theological* quirks. One thing I keep hearing is how many of us have discovered some of these theological quirks. These are beliefs that we simply take for granted and assume have been believed everywhere, always, by all true Christians.

These theological quirks often manifest in words—specifically, the *avoidance* of words. For example, each week we recite a Creed, whether the Apostles or the Nicene Creed. In the Apostles Creed we declare we believe in the holy *catholic* church. In the Nicene Creed we declare more fully we believe in one holy *catholic* and apostolic church. Many of us come from church traditions that do not like the term “catholic” because it sounds too, well, *Catholic*. (By the way, if you were not here for our topical series called “Beyond Labels: Who is New City?”, I would encourage you to check it out on our website.)

There are many such “buzzwords” we’ve been taught to avoid. For some it’s “Calvinism” and for others it’s “Arminianism”. It might “premillennial” or “amillennial” or “postmillennial”. It could be “Dispensationalism” or “Covenant Theology”. For still others, these terms don’t really get your hackles up whatsoever. #blessedandhighlyfavored

This morning we're going to think through a fairly recent theological quirk of much of Protestantism. Protestants are those Christians who come from the Western church tradition but sought to remove some of the theological accretions—quirks—that were added over many centuries. They were trying to root out theological quirks. This process is dated to the year 1517 but the truth is there were those seeking to remove these accretions long before Martin Luther came along. It is for this reason many Protestants don't like the word "catholic". There are many such words that we don't like even if we don't really know *why* we don't like them. Many of us are just third-grade theological J-Ts who don't understand why we cannot turn around.

Sacrament

The term sacrament is one of those words we tend to avoid. It comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. In Roman times it referred to a sacred oath. It was used of a military pledge of allegiance. The idea is that the oath was sacred and binding. In the second century Tertullian used it in place of the Greek word *μυστήριον*—mystery. This is the word Paul used to describe "the mystery of the gospel". Mystery here does not mean a whodunnit, like a mystery novel, but God's secret and private counsel that can only be known by him revealing it.

Paul declared the gospel was a mystery though the prophets predicted his coming. It was a mystery because God had to reveal it. There is no other way to know and understand the gospel. Only through God's revelation can we understand what the prophets were saying and what God was planning to do all along. Tertullian used the Latin word sacrament to describe this idea of mystery.

Augustine would later explain the idea of sacrament and defined a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace". John Calvin wrote in his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" that a sacrament was "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us". To put this another way, a sacrament is a way to *see and experience* God's promises.

You might ask why we should use the term sacrament when Scripture itself uses the term mystery. Every time the word mystery comes up in a Scripture text in a sermon, I explain that in Scripture a mystery is not a whodunnit, like a mystery novel, but is something God himself had to reveal, just as I explained a few moments ago. The term sacrament—generally speaking—requires far less explanation. It is more readily understood by more people than the Greek word mystery.

A sacrament, then, is a visible sign of something God himself is doing in the life of the church. There are only two of these, for the Lord Jesus commanded us two things. First, he commanded us to baptize and second he commanded us to share a simple meal together. Thus baptism and communion are *sacraments*. They are visible signs of what God is doing internally in the life of the church and of the individual believer through faith—and that is key.

The Roman understanding is a sacrament works all by itself. So long as the sacrament is "performed" properly and by a legitimate priest, it will "work". In other words, Rome claims that baptism, particularly when you follow the right formula, works in and of itself. This meaning and understanding of sacrament we reject fully and completely. God does not

look for right formulas. God is not demanding precise rituals of us. As I've said so many times, the only currency God accepts is *faith*.

When we by faith are baptized and we by faith receive communion, God is active in us to work and to do great things for our salvation. It isn't the *thing* but *the faith* in Christ. Our sacramental view of baptism and communion is they are the channels through which God's grace is seen and experienced by faith.

Sacraments don't save you; God saves you. Sacraments don't make you right with God; God makes you right with God. Sacraments by themselves are nothing; God is delighted when we submit to baptism and receive communion *in faith*. When we *by faith* engage in these things, they are the outward sign that God is actively working in us. With this understanding of the sacraments, let's take a closer look at them.

Baptism

The first sacrament is baptism. Remember the definition of sacrament: it is an outward sign of inner grace. It is the work of God made visible to us with the promise that God is, in fact, doing something in and through the sacrament. Through baptism we see what God is doing, and what is that? Over and over again Scripture declares baptism is "into Christ". For example, in Galatians Paul wrote,

Gal 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Galatians 3:26–29

There is a fundamental change in identity through baptism. Baptism into Christ means you belong to Christ, regardless of whether you are Jew or Greek, whether you are slave or free, whether you are male or female. Those are all important, but what truly defines you is the reality that you have been baptized *into Christ*. We are, first and foremost, *Christians*—those who belong to Christ.

In Colossians Paul writes about regeneration in the terms of spiritual circumcision and says this:

Col 2:11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12

Notice the connection to baptism. There is regeneration—the circumcision made without hands—and there is baptism—*buried with him in baptism*. In baptism we are also *raised with him through faith*. As Calvin put it, baptism is "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us". Again, baptism is a way

to see God's promises. Through faith we are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Through baptism we can see this promise, for in baptism we experience this union. In Romans 6 Paul makes this union through baptism more explicit.

Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3–4

With this text we see one of those theological quirks I mentioned. If you come from the Baptist tradition this may not be how you were taught Romans 6. For 1,800 years Christians universally understood this to be referring to water baptism. A little over 150 years ago this understanding changed among British Baptists, and then it spread from there. The early Baptists all used this text to prove baptism should be by immersion, not sprinkling. The imagery is death and burial, therefore a person should be plunged under water to illustrate death and burial. The imagery is also resurrection, therefore a person should be lifted out of the water. You lose this imagery with sprinkling.

This was the primary text used by Baptists to argue for immersion, and it was understood sacramentally. In fact, one of the earliest Baptists was John Smyth. In 1609 he wrote “The Short Confession of Faith in 20 Articles”. Article 13 says,

(13) That the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, ~~appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren of body of the church.~~

John Smyth, Short Confession of Faith in 20 Articles, Article 13

This understanding changed. In the 1800s in England, which is the origin of the Baptist tradition, among Anglicans there was the so-called “Oxford Movement”. Many Anglicans—English Protestants—began to move back toward Roman Catholicism. Many converted fully while many others began to adopt more Roman liturgical practices. In response to the Roman understanding of sacraments many English Baptists began to claim Romans 6 was about baptism of the Spirit, not baptism in water, though there is no mention of the Spirit in the entire chapter.

The historical—universal, until the 1800s!—understanding of Romans 6 and Colossians 2 and Galatians 3, etc., has been that in baptism God is uniting the believer with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. God can do this because God is outside of time. He is the eternally present one. As Jesus himself said, “Before Abraham was, I am”. He didn't say, “Before Abraham was, I was”. Being God he is present before Abraham was, and he is present now, and he is present a thousand years from now. Time is not a constraint on God. In baptism, he is present in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, uniting the believer with Christ through faith.

This is what Peter means in his first letter. After explaining how Christ suffered for our sins and illustrating God's rescue of Noah and his family with the ark, he wrote this:

^{1 Pet 3:21} Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

1 Peter 3:21

Notice closely what he says here. He's writing about Noah being saved via the ark from the waters of judgment that covered the earth. Who saved Noah? Not the ark! *God saved Noah*, but *he used the ark*! Last week Dan read from a new translation of the Bible so let me quote from that same version.

Now *baptism* saves you—but not the physical act! It's by faith in God...

Danslation of 1 Peter 3:21

Whereas the ark saved Noah, now baptism saves God's people. Rather, whereas God once used an ark, now he uses baptism. He is quick to say, however, it isn't the act of baptism itself. Just as God was saving Noah, so God saves us. This is why reject Rome's teaching that baptism all by itself does anything: Peter says it isn't the "removal of dirt from the body". It isn't the physical act of dunking someone under water, anymore than it was a wooden boat that saved Noah. Noah's *faith* led him to build the ark, and he was trusting God to keep him safe when the waters covered the earth.

Similarly, in baptism it is the faith that appeals to God for a good conscience. That is, it appeals to God for forgiveness of sins, which results in a clear conscience. How does the believer know? Baptism is the visible sign of what God has done.

This happens, Peter says, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ". What did Paul say in Romans 10? If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Baptism is the outward sign of this inward work of God. God is working through baptism to seal your faith and to purify your conscience and to unite you with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. We see this connection from Luke in the book of Acts. When Saul is converted, Jesus sends Ananias to him.

^{Acts 22:16} And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

Acts 22:16

Notice the connection between baptism and washing away sins. There is also the necessity of faith! This is what Peter was saying! God unites the believer with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, washing away the believer's sins through faith. Baptism makes this visible! Luke also quotes Peter saying this in Acts:

^{Acts 2:38} And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, ~~and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.~~

Acts 2:38

One of our theological quirks is we sometimes don't like using the very words of Scripture for fear of being misunderstood. The Southern Baptist Convention recently rejected adding the Nicene Creed to its standards because it declares, "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins"—even though the Creed is essentially quoting the Bible!

Jesus alone saves. Jesus saves through faith alone. *And* God is doing something extraordinary through baptism. It is, therefore a sacrament—a visible sign of an inward reality. If we cannot use the language of Scripture, it isn't Scripture that is in error.

Communion

Baptism is our first sacrament. Communion is our second. The Lord Jesus instituted this simple meal right before his crucifixion in the event known as the Last Supper. This meal is written about in the Didache, a very early church manual. Some scholars believe was written as early as the year 50, which would place it in the lifetimes of all the apostles, except for James, who died in the year 44. An overwhelming majority place it in the first century, which gives it about a 50-year range of composition, still making it a document written within the lifetimes of some or most of the apostles. In chapter 9 of this book we read,

Did 9:1 Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks as follows.

Didache 9:1a

The word "Eucharist" is the Greek word that means "thanksgiving". Concerning the Thanksgiving. You could say that most Americans celebrate a Eucharist on the fourth Thursday of November each year. In the first century Christians had taken to calling the Lord's Supper or communion "the Eucharist"—the time in which the whole church offers thanks to God for the gift of the body and blood of the Lord. What a beautiful term for what is happening! We must reclaim our sacramental understanding of this meal, whether we call it the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper or communion.

Remember what a sacrament is: it is a visible sign of something God himself is doing in the life of the church. Just as God uses baptism to unite the believer with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, so God uses communion to strengthen the believer's faith in the Lord. There is something happening that we cannot see that communion makes visible.

In 1 Corinthians Paul is addressing the issue of meat offered to idols. In the Roman empire the overwhelming majority of meat available for purchase was connected to a temple and to ritual sacrifices. What mattered most in Roman religion was the proper exercise of ritual. So long as the bull was sacrificed according to the requirements, all was well, but what to do with all that meat? Sell it! Fund the operation of the temple! Christians rightly began to wonder about whether they could eat such meat.

In chapter 8 Paul tells the Corinthians that idols have no real existence, which means meat sacrificed to an idol was meat sacrificed to *nothing*. Eat it! However, if eating such meat causes a brother or sister in Christ to have serious doubts about his or her faith, for the sake of a brother for whom Christ died, he says do not eat it. Your brother and your sister in Christ is far more important than meat.

With that in mind he gets to chapter 10. He is urging them to not eat meat in a way that is an actual participation in the sacrifice to idols. It's just meat he says, however, *do not engage in idolatry*. Then he says this:

¹ Cor 10:16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

1 Corinthians 10:16–21

His argument here is that when we participate in the Lord's Supper *together*, we are participating in the body and blood of Christ. His point is that if they were to take a bull to the temple in order to have it butchered there, this would be the same as participating in the worship of demons. Just as the physical act of slaughtering an animal in a temple is participating in the physical act of worshiping idols, so the physical act of receiving communion is a participation in the body and blood of Christ.

Listen carefully: the bread and the cup remain bread and the cup. They do not change or transform into anything. They do not transubstantiate into anything. They are an outward sign that God himself is doing something in us. Receiving communion together strengthens our faith by pressing into our hearts the reality of what God in Christ through his Spirit has done and is doing and will do. New Testament scholar Anthony Thiselton cites another scholar in a very helpful way:

Groshiede concludes: "Paul implies that the Christian, because he partakes of the Lord's Supper, is in connection with the death of Christ."

Anthony Thiselton, NIGTC

How? God is outside of time. God is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine. The Lord Jesus gave us a gift by which we participate in his death in a profound way. Again, *we do not consume Jesus*. We are not cannibals, as the early church was accused of being. Why were they accused of this? They were accused of being cannibals because they spoke of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus. Where on earth did they get this idea?

^{Jn 6:53} So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

John 6:53

Paul himself gives us the Words of Institution in 1 Corinthians 11. What does he say?

¹ Cor 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Anthony Thiselton points out that when Jesus said this at the Last Supper, he could not have meant his literal flesh, for he had not been crucified, and he could not have meant his literal blood, for it still flowed within his veins. Instead, he meant that when we through faith eat the bread and drink the cup we are participating in his body and blood. Paul said it is a participation in the body and blood of the Lord.

I'm not really sure what this means! Communion is not merely an act of obedience. It is not merely a time in which we remember the Lord—though it *is* an act of remembering. It is more than just remembering. John Calvin put it this way:

If it is true that the visible sign offered to us to attest the granting of the invisible reality, then, on receiving the symbol of the body, we may be confident that the body itself is no less given to us.

John Calvin

He says by eating the bread and drinking the cup our confidence—our faith in Christ—is strengthened to believe he really and truly has given us his body and blood. This means God is doing something extraordinary as we receive the bread and the cup. He is strengthening our faith and affirming in us his covenant love. Whether you get goosebumps from it or not is irrelevant. Whether you are overcome with emotion isn't the issue. We are not striving to create an *experience* when we receive communion. It is an encounter with the risen Savior by which he shows us—visibly—his promise to save. In this way his body and blood are actually given to us, for were it not for his sacrifice none of us would be saved.

Application

When we say we have a sacramental understanding of baptism and communion we are simply acknowledging that in baptism and in communion we have God's promise that in Christ he is working out our salvation. These are the visible signs that God is at work in us. Through the sacraments we celebrate the truth of Philippians 1:6.

Phil 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

Baptism is the initial, visible act of this work, and communion is the ongoing sign that God is bringing it to completion. There are several implications of this for us.

First, baptism signifies one's entrance into Christ, and therefore into his body. As we did with Suzy's baptism, we will receive the baptizand into membership. This represents a change for us that we've already implemented. This means baptism is not a rite of passage, a spiritual service we perform for someone with no intention to be part of this church. Baptism is for those who trust in Christ and intend to join themselves to his body.

Second, we rightly recognize the visible aspects of baptism. Our ordinary practice is to immerse—baptize—a person by symbolizing his or her death and burial with Christ and by symbolizing his or her resurrection with Christ by lifting out of the water. We recognize through this the promise of God that he is uniting the believer with Christ. This is not a change but a clearer recognition of what baptism is.

Third, baptism is rightly conferred on a person with a credible profession of faith. Because baptism signifies salvation and one's entrance into the covenant people of God, we need to make sure—as far as it depends on us—we are baptizing a true follower of Jesus. This may mean, particularly in the case of young children, delaying baptism until they've reached a certain level of maturity. When a child professes faith we should believe the child until he proves otherwise—but we should give him time to prove otherwise. Far better to wait until a child is aware of the temptations of this world and can truly choose to pick up her cross in order to follow Jesus. This, too, isn't really a change, but more of a clarification.

Fourth, because there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”, provided it is in the singular name of the Trinity, we will accept as a legitimate baptism those whose baptisms came before faith, usually in the form of infant baptism, upon their confession of faith. Since it is faith that God uses in baptism, even if one's baptism were improperly administered, faith is what God is looking for. This, too, represents a change that we've already implemented.

Fifth, communion is a covenant meal, and therefore rightly belongs to those who have been baptized into Christ. We've always “fenced” the communion table by saying it is open to all who are followers of Jesus. What we have not done, and what we will begin doing is clarify that it is open to all baptized followers of Jesus. Because it is the sacrament by which God strengthens our faith, it has—throughout church history—been reserved for those who have received baptism. Baptism is the outward sign that God is uniting a person with Christ; communion is the outward sign that God continues to renew and sustain their faith in him. It's a covenant-renewal meal and therefore is reserved for those who have been baptized into Christ. Again we read in the Didache:

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been
baptized into the name of the Lord...

Didache 9:5

While this may *feel* like a change because it affects the practice of some, it is what has always been meant when we've said the table is open to all who are followers of Christ. It is, therefore, a clarification and not truly a change.

Along with this, since communion is a covenant meal, it is meant for the whole church, not for individuals or for family units. This is why we did not receive communion in our homes during lockdown a few years ago when we “met” on Zoom.

Sixth, from the beginning this meal was the Eucharist—the Thanksgiving. Dan has occasionally prayed before receiving it, but we are making it our practice to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord for his incredible gift after it has been distributed and before we participate in it. Every church manual in history has included some form of prayer of thanksgiving. Paul said the Lord Jesus took bread, *and when he had given thanks* he broke it. We should pray these same prayers.

Seventh, because a sacrament is a *visible* sign we should make the sign more visible. We already have this in baptism, for we can see the person plunged into death and burial and we can see him or her raised to new life. Beginning today we will break bread and we will pour the cup. (We'll still pass trays, but we want you to *see* what's happening.) There's nothing special or magical about this. There's no *hocus pocus* going on. Instead, it will help us *see* what God is doing, what God has been doing, and what God will continue to do: that is, save us through the gift of the body and blood of our Lord.

Finally, this sacramental understanding of both baptism and communion means we are truly receiving something. It is not, as many Protestants have come to claim, merely an act of remembering the Lord Jesus, as if it were some rote act of obedience. We should not say we “take communion”. Instead, we receive it, for these are the gifts of the Lord Jesus. Even as the elders oversee the sacrament and speak the words of institution, the Lord Jesus is the head of the church and is its celebrant. He offers to us the gift of himself. We receive that gift, first through baptism, and then—ongoing—through the Eucharistic meal he has given us.

To be clear, the physical act of either baptism or of communion does nothing. The sacraments are not primarily about the physical act. Apart from faith, and therefore the Holy Spirit, the sacraments are of no avail. *Without faith, the sacraments are very ordinary—they are a quick bath and a tiny snack.* Through faith, however, God himself is strengthening our faith and drawing us to himself and filling us with Christ more and more.

Paul says something incredible in the words of institution he gives us. When we eat this bread and when we drink the cup, we *proclaim the Lord’s death*. This is true of baptism as well. This is the only time physical actions are equated with the proclamation of the gospel. The sacraments are the gospel made visible through faith. The sacraments reveal Jesus to us.

As we behold the glory of the Lord through preaching the gospel, through prayer, through the sacraments of baptism and communion, through worshiping him in his gathered assembly, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Through worship we see Jesus more clearly. There is no greater gift he can give than the gift of himself, and he gives himself to us freely through faith.