

The Holy Sacraments

What is a sacrament? Juhani Uljas, in the book *Treasure Hid in a Field*, answers the question in this way:

“The word, ‘sacrament,’ is not found in the English or the Finnish Bible, yet the sacraments are deeply founded in Scripture. In the Latin Bible, the word ‘sacramentum’ corresponds (ex. Eph. 5:31) to the word ‘mysterion,’ mystery, in the Greek Bible. The mystery of faith, which we cannot fully understand is connected to sacrament. For that reason, we regard it with the timidity and humility of a child, for we remember that God has ordained it.”

“God has given the sacraments to those who have been helped unto faith to support them in their endeavor.”

“According to our Christian Doctrine, the sacraments are holy acts of the congregation, that Jesus Christ himself has instituted. Christ himself is present in them and distributes His grace to us through visible elements (CD 56). In the sacrament God’s Word is joined to the visible, even to the elements touchable to the hand, so that we are assured again and again how real is God’s grace toward us.”

How many Holy Sacraments are there? Again, quoting from Uljas:

“The Apology to the Augsburg Confession states the matter as follows: ‘The genuine sacraments, therefore, are Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution (which is the sacrament of penitence)’ (XIII:4). Absolution was removed from among the sacraments, because the promise of God was not connected to visible elements but to the Holy Spirit. The resurrected Christ said to His disciples, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whosoever sins ye remit...’ (John 20:22,23). The sacraments have not been instituted by men or the church, but God has instituted them.”

In the Old Testament, circumcision corresponded to baptism and the Passover lamb to communion.

“In both the Old and New Testaments the Sacrament is associated with the covenant made by God and His people and the promise given in that connection. God has instituted the sacrament as a sign to remind of His promise. Faith takes hold of the promise of God; the sacrament supports and strengthens faith.” (Uljas)

What is the purpose of the sacraments?

Faith is not received through the sacraments. Faith comes first, and then the sacraments serve to confirm and strengthen faith. Luther wrote:

“Sacraments are not satisfied by the performing of them, but by believing in them. It cannot be true that the power to justify should reside in sacraments.....The dogmatists of the sacraments have not understood these at all, since they have attached no attention to faith nor in the promise

of the sacraments. They become entangled with the mere sign and its use and thrust us from faith to works and from the word to a sign. But by so doing, they have not only harmed the sacrament, but have entirely destroyed its content. Let us therefore open our eyes and learn to pay more attention to the word than the sign, more upon faith than the use of the sign. Do we not know that the divine promise always demands faith and that both, the promise and faith, are indispensable to each other, but are separately ineffectual. For without the promise, believing is impossible, neither does the promise come true without faith. But when both are reciprocally effective, they guarantee the true and surest effectiveness of the sacraments. It is therefore a vain struggle and a passage to perdition to seek the power of the sacrament avoiding faith and the promise. Does not Christ say: 'He that believeth and is baptized is saved, but he that believeth not is condemned!' Thus he indicates faith to be so indispensable in the sacraments, that it can save without the sacraments, and therefore He did not want to add: 'who does not believe nor is baptized.'"

The Augsburg Confession states:

"Concerning the usage of sacraments, we teach that they are not instituted for signs only, by which Christians can be recognized, but are the marks and testimony of God's will towards us so that our faith might be stirred and strengthened by them. Therefore, they require faith, and they are then properly used when received by faith and faith is fortified."

Philip Melancthon wrote concerning the sacraments:

"For signs are to be used for this purpose, to establish the conscience. Neither John's nor Christ's baptism justified (and I speak of the signs as such) but only certified.....In both, faith justified." Melancthon further wrote: "Participation in the Lord's Table, that is the chewing of Christ's body and the drinking of His blood, is a sure sign of grace.....Participation in the Lord's Table does not abolish sin, but faith does. Of a truth, faith is confirmed by this sign. Just as the mere sight of Christ did not justify the dying Stephen, but only confirmed his faith by which he was justified and vivified, so in like manner mere participation in the table of the Lord does not justify but only confirms faith."

In Acts 2:38, 41,42, we read:

"Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.....Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Thus we see the correct order: preaching – faith – baptism – doctrine & fellowship (Communion).

Baptism

Christ said in His baptismal command, *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."* Matt. 28:19-20

A person is not saved by baptism but by faith. Faith does not come through baptism but precedes it. As Christ said, *“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”* Mark 16:16

This was true also of circumcision. Apostle Paul writes of the circumcision of Abraham: *“For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also.”* Rom. 4:3,11

Baptism, as circumcision, is a sign of the righteousness of faith. Apostle Peter writes that baptism is *“not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God.”* 1 Peter 3:21

The correct order of preaching – faith – baptism is illustrated by the scripture narratives about Philip and the eunuch of Ethiopia and Peter in the house of Cornelius.

Of Philip and the eunuch, we read in Acts 8:35-38:

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.”

In Acts 10:44-48, we read of the event in the house of Cornelius:

“While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.....Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.”

Thus, faith is not received through baptism but precedes it. We believe therefore that every child is born with a living soul and as a child of God and is in a saved condition even before being baptized.

Although we believe that neither faith nor forgiveness is received through baptism, the believers keep baptism as a holy covenant. Augustine has written: *“Not by the lacking of a sacrament, but by the despising of a sacrament one is damned.”*

Neglect of a sacrament is illustrated by the account of Moses, when God had called him to lead His people from the bondage of Egypt. Moses had failed to have his son circumcised, according to God’s command. We read in Exodus 4:24-26: *“And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him [Moses], and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.”*

Moses had neglected to keep the sacrament of circumcision, and the condemnation was not directed to the child but to the father.

What then does baptism signify? Uljas writes, *“In baptism, God joins a child into the fellowship of His congregation to be cared for. The endeavor as a child of God begins there. When a child grows older, the battle against sin begins. Baptism obligates us to it. Paul writes to the Romans, ‘So many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in the newness of life.’”* (Rom. 6:3, 4)

“According to the teachings of the Small Catechism, baptism signifies that the old Adam in us should be pressed down by daily sorrow and repentance. It must be mortified, with all its sins and evil lusts. In its place, the new man should daily come forth and rise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

To the commandment of baptism also belongs the commandment of instruction, which obligates the parents to bring up their children according to the word of God, so that they would grow up in grace and life. In baptism, through the visible sign, God takes the believing child into His covenant for life to establish him in salvation.

Finally, we note that judgment is not directed to one who does not have the opportunity to be baptized before death comes. Luther explains this when writing about Jesus’ commandment of baptism (Mark 16:16, Matt. 28:19): *“Therefore must this text be understood so, that baptism is here commanded and reinforced and it must not be despised but used as has been said and nevertheless not straining this text so taut that someone therefore would have been condemned if he were unable to be baptizedThere has always been one-mindedness in this, that if someone believes and nevertheless dies unbaptized, he is not for this cause condemned to damnation, for it may be so, that someone believes and even though he desired baptism, death came first.”*

Holy Communion (Sacrament of the Altar)

We can find the scriptural basis for the sacrament of holy communion in the accounts of the Last Supper found in the three synoptic gospels.

Matthew 26:26-28 *“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”*

Mark 14:22-24 *“And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed and brake it, and gave it to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it.”*

Luke 22:19-20 *“And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.”*

Apostle Paul writes of this in his first epistle to the Corinthians: *“For I have received of the Lord*

that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." 1 Cor. 11:23-26

As said previously, one does not receive forgiveness or justification through partaking of Holy Communion. This is a feast of the believers, a precious meal of remembrance. It is received by faith, for the words "shed for you" require a believing heart. In this meal, we partake of the body and blood of Christ, at which time our faith becomes strengthened and refreshed.

The children of God partake of Communion because it is the commandment of Christ and His gracious promise, and because we need strengthening and refreshment in our endeavor of faith. This was also true of the eating of the Passover lamb in the Old Testament. The Passover lamb was eaten with "the doorposts of the hearts daubed with blood" for the strengthening of the faith and journey. The Passover meal was also a meal of remembrance. In partaking of it, the children of Israel remembered how they were delivered from bondage.

There are two elements present in Communion – the bread and the wine. Scriptural accounts of the Passover meal indicate that the bread was an unleavened bread. The Scripture is not clear as to the nature of the wine. The scripture texts dealing with the establishment of Communion simply refer the "the cup" and to "the fruit of the vine." As to whether the content of the cup was fermented or unfermented is unclear. Grape juice, wine and non-alcoholic wine have all been used in Communion. As believers, we understand that the body and blood of Christ are present in communion.

In the Augsburg Confession, it is written: *"It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present in the supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine, and are there distributed and received."* Luther taught that childlike faith is required here. With our natural eyes, we see the elements, but in faith we believe that Christ's body and blood are present.

Finally, two quotes from the Swebilius Catechism regarding Communion:

"Without faith or the spiritual eating and drinking, sacramental eating and drinking which happens in Communion does not help at all: but it comes to the partaker more for judgment than for salvation."

"What benefit do we have from the Lord's Communion? (1) Our faith becomes strengthened and assured of the forgiveness of sins; (2) We become joined with Christ, so that He is in us, and we in Him; (3) Our faith becomes assured of resurrection unto everlasting life."

Conclusion

The Augsburg Confession teaches: *"The sacraments are effective, even though the priests which give it are not righteous, as Christ himself testifies: On the seat of Moses sit the Pharisees."* This is the way it has been taught in Christianity. On the other hand, the office of the gospel is an

office of the Holy Spirit. The proclaimer must be a partaker of the Holy Spirit through faith.

As believers, we keep the sacraments as holy and as commandments and covenants with Christ. The most important matter is that we are believing. In this way, we are acceptable participants in Christ's sacraments.

Yet we also wish to show respect to these solemn and sacred occasions, even in an outward form, by our conduct, dress, etc. We have been present at the solemn occasion of baptism. The small child is dressed in white garments. The minister performing the baptism, the parents, the godparents and the other guests also have dressed for this occasion to gather around the baptismal basin.

Also at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we show proper respect to the occasion. In the Swebelius Catechism, the question is asked: "*How should we conduct ourselves as we proceed to the Lord's table?*" The answer is: "*When we have received absolution by the office of preaching, we should - (1) Step forth in true repentance, putting away all foreign and worldly thoughts; (2) While partaking of the sacrament, conduct ourselves in godly, sober and meek manner, remembering that we are not communicating with man but with God; (3) When we leave, we should rejoice in spirit over God's renewed grace, and praise Him from our heart for this, retaining good intention and will to walk in the new life.*"

References

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Apology to the Augsburg Confession
Small Catechism
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On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church
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Treasure Hid in a Field