

# Ordinance or Sacrament: Both/And Rather Than Either/Or<sup>1</sup>

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I recognize that “sacramental theology” carries negative baggage for many people. I could avoid this language, but there are reasons to emphasize the *sacramental* character of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly. If *sacrament* means some kind of ritualistic power rooted in institutionalism or clerical authority, then I would not use the term. If *sacrament* has overtones of “magical powers” or “superstition,” then I would not use the term. If *sacrament* entails that faith is unnecessary or that the ritualistic act itself (in terms of its own power) imparts grace, then I would not use the term. Or if *sacrament* is understood to restrict God’s freedom, I would avoid the term. I do not use *sacrament* in any those senses.

On the contrary, I am interested in using this language because it emphasizes that *God acts through appointed means to impart grace, assurance and an experience of the future to believers by the power of the Spirit because of the work of Christ*. I prefer *sacrament* to *ordinance* precisely because I want to emphasize that God works through these means since much of American Christianity tends to emphasize what people do with regard to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly. At the same time, I do not want to throw out ordinance terminology with the proverbial bathwater either.

But there is a problem. American Christianity is often anthropocentric (human-centered) in its understanding. Ordinances are often conceived as mere acts of human obedience. They are primarily, if not exclusively, something we do. Stressing the sacramental dimension of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly need not undermine their function as ordinances, but it would move us toward a more theocentric understanding where baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly are recognized as divine acts of grace through which God encounters believers to transform them into the divine image by the presence of Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

So I ask you to hear me out. How might we think about these Christian ordinances as sacraments, or these sacraments as ordinances? Instead of polarizing the two designations, let us consider that perhaps *together* they embrace the fullness of what God intends for baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly.

## **Ordinance Language**

Linguistically, *ordinance* is more biblical language than *sacrament*. At least, the linguistic data is there if we begin with the King James Version or even the American Standard Version. For example, the Passover is described as a feast that must be kept “by an ordinance forever” (Exod 12.14, 17). Ordinances, or statutes or regulations, circumscribe the Passover feast.

When David Lipscomb was asked how many ordinances God instituted, he replied, “Everything, then, commanded, required, ordained of God as a rule of perpetual observance, is properly and truly an ordinance.” Whatever is ordained (commanded) is an ordinance. This broadens the category considerably such that not

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this material is dependent upon my *Enter the Water, Come to the Table: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the Bible’s Story of New Creation* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2014) and “Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology,” *Restoration Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2008), 35–48.

only are “acts of public and social worship” ordinances, but also “every requirement of private devotion and every act or rule of life given of God”—such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, administering to the wants of the needy, and being truthful, honest and merciful—are “as much the observance of the ordinances of God, as the attending upon baptism or the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the Stone-Campbell Movement has historically referred to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Lord’s Day (assembly) as the three positive ordinances of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> This narrower construal recognizes the ritual dimensions of these commandments: they are positive (prescribed) ordinances rather than simple moral duties. They are, in fact, ritualized embodiments of the gospel story.

Ordinance language is important because it recognizes the human aspects of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly. We *do something* in those events. Each is a command, which is the basic meaning of an ordinance. We recognize this when we hear the imperatives “Repent and be baptized” or “Do this in remembrance of me.” Consequently, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and assembly are matters of obedience and thus marks of discipleship.

More basic, however, each one is performative. We perform the story of God in these ritual acts. Our whole bodies—all our external senses—are engaged. It is a full-body immersion into the story as we enact the story of God in each of them. In this sense, they function as three memorials of the gospel through which we not only remember the story but we also participate in it.<sup>4</sup>

Further, each is a witness. We bear witness to the reality of truth of the gospel in each. We proclaim the gospel in our actions, words, and communities. In this sense every performance of the ritual is a missional act that involves us in the proclamation of the gospel.

Lastly, each is a pledge or confession. We commit ourselves to the story the ordinance proclaims. Baptism is our oath of allegiance as we become citizens of the kingdom of God, the table is a covenant renewal of that oath, and whenever we assemble, the body politic gathers, a polis that embraces a different set of values than what norms the principalities and powers.

### Sacramental Language

The Stone-Campbell Movement has pervasively, with few exceptions, rejected sacramental terminology. Alexander Campbell categorized it as one of many “Babylonish terms and phrases which must be purified from the [C]hristian vocabulary.”<sup>5</sup> This association of sacramental language with denominational and divisive terminology saturated the movement, and the simple dictum “Calling Bible things by Bible names” excluded such language. For example, E. G. Sewell, when asked about the number of sacraments responded, “And as the word is not there [in the Bible], we of course cannot give its Bible meaning for it has no Bible meaning. The word ordinance does occur in the Bible, but the word sacrament, not at all.”<sup>6</sup>

But there is a problem. We have always stressed, for example, that baptism is not so much what we do but something that God does. After all, we are passive actors in baptism and God is the primary actor as God incorporates us into Christ, forgives our sins, and adopts us into the family. These ordinances are, as Alexander Campbell understood, also “means of grace.”<sup>7</sup> *God does something* in these events. Consequently, just as *ordinance* emphasizes what we do, we need language that emphasizes what God does. This is the function of sacramental language. The sacraments are divine acts of grace through which

2 David Lipscomb, “The Ordinances, What Are They, How Many?” *Gospel Advocate* 15 (14 August 1873), 750.

3 Thomas Campbell, “An Address to All Our Christian Brethren, Upon the Necessity and Importance of the Actual Enjoyment of our Holy Religion,” *Millennial Harbinger*, Third Series 1 (May 1844), 202.

4 Carey Morgan, “The Place of the Lord’s Supper in the Movement,” *Centennial Convention Report*, ed. W. R. Warren (Cincinnati: Standard, 1910), 464: “There are three such memorials: the Lord’s Supper, Baptism and the Lord’s Day. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial of his death, Baptism is a symbol of his burial, and the Lord’s Day celebrates his resurrection.”

5 Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. IV,” *Christian Baptist* 2.11 (6 June 1825), 159.

6 E. G. Sewell, “How Many Sacraments?” *Gospel Advocate* 15 (14 November 1873), 1095.

7 Alexander Campbell, “Regeneration,” *Millennial Harbinger Extra* 4 (August 1833), 341.

God transforms believers into his image by the presence of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. As ordinances we perform the story, proclaim the gospel, and commitment ourselves to following the story of Jesus; as sacraments God performs what God has promised in the gospel, incorporates us into story of Jesus, and actualizes new creation in our lives.

What, then, is a sacrament? First, a sacrament involves *created materiality*. Baptism utilizes the material element of water and the Lord's Supper uses bread and wine. The concrete sign of assembly is the gathered community. As created embodied material beings, we are buried in water, eat/drink the supper, and gather as a community.

Second, a sacrament *signifies something*; it points to a reality beyond itself. Baptism signifies the death and resurrection of Jesus, the table signifies the presence of Christ eating with his disciples as well as his body and blood, and assembly signifies the heavenly assembly around the throne of God.

Third, a sacrament is a *means of grace*. The material elements do not merely represent—they participate in the reality to which they point. They are not mere signs, but symbols that mediate the spiritual reality. The signs become symbols because God does something through them. Through baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6.3–4), through the Lord's Supper we eat with Jesus at his table in his kingdom (Matt 26.30; Luke 22.15–18, 28–30) as well as nourished by his body and blood (John 6.51–58), and through assembling as a community, we enter the sanctuary of God (Heb 10.19–25; 12.22–24).

Fourth, God accomplishes his sacramental work *by the power of his Spirit*. Through baptism we experience new birth as we are born of the Spirit (John 3.5; Titus 3.5), through eating with Christ we enjoy the communion of the Spirit at the table (1 Cor 10.16; 2 Cor 13.14), and as an assembly we worship the Father in the Spirit through Jesus (John 4.24). The Spirit mediates the grace of God through baptism, mediates the presence of Christ through the table, and transports us into the heavenly assembly surrounding the throne of the Father.

Fifth, sacrament is the *experience of the eschaton*—a participation in the future reality of the kingdom of God. Through baptism we already experience our own resurrection by participating in Jesus' resurrection, through the Lord's Supper we already eat at the future Messianic banquet by eating at the Lord's table, and through assembly we already participate in the future eschatological gathering of the people of God around the throne (Rev 7.9–17).

Sixth, God's work through the sacrament is *received by faith*. Without faith we have no means to see or experience the spiritual reality to which the signs point and in which the symbols participate. Thus, through faith we are buried and raised with Christ in baptism (Col 2.12), through faith we eat at the Lord's table (1 Cor 10.16–22), and through faith we draw near to God in the assembly (Heb 10.22; cf. 11.6).

In sum, sacraments are (1) *concrete, material* realities that (2) *represent* the truth of the gospel—that is, they are signs that point beyond themselves to the work of God in Christ. But they do more than point: they are (3) *means of grace* that participate in the reality to which they point and are joined to that reality by the promise of God. They mediate that spiritual reality to those who experience the sacrament. This experience is (4) *eschatological* as we participate in the future reality of the kingdom of God in the new heaven and new earth whether it is resurrection through baptism, the messianic banquet around the table, or the eschatological assembly around the throne through gathering together. The power of this sacramental moment, however, is not contained in the sign itself but (5) is effected *by the Spirit* who mediates the presence of God through the sacrament as (6) we receive what God gives *through faith*. The ground for God's gracious actions through the sacraments is the *reconciling work of Christ* through incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. The sacraments are effectual because they embody the gospel.

*Sacramental* speaks of the mystery of God's action toward and in us through the external means of water, wine, bread, and communal assembly as we experience the story of God in specific moments. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and assembly are dramatic rehearsals of the story through which God renews communion, empowers transformation, and touches the future. By faith the community participates in this story and rehearses that story together as the church shares the sacramental reality together through water, food and drink, and gathering in the power of the Spirit.

### **Sacrament and Ordinance: A Divine-Human Encounter**

As ordinances, baptism, the Lord's Supper and assembly are a human witness to the grace of God as well as a human pledge of allegiance to the story of God in Jesus. As sacraments, they are a divine pledge of assurance and a means by which God encounters, communes with, and transforms believers into the image of Christ. They are gospel ordinances but also sacramental means. In other words, these gospel symbols mediate the presence of Christ to his community. They are not only signs that point to the gospel: they are also symbols through which God acts. They are both ordinances and sacraments.

Ordinance language emphasizes discipleship while sacramental language emphasizes divine action. As ordinances, baptism, the Lord's Supper and assembly are communal moments that mark the journey of discipleship. As sacraments, they are moments of divine encounter through which we are moved along the path of discipleship toward entire sanctification. When we empty the ordinances of all sacramental imagination, then baptism becomes either a mere sign or a legal test of loyalty, the Lord's Supper becomes an anthropocentric form of individualistic piety, and assembly becomes either the ongoing public test of faithfulness (a definition of a "faithful Christian") that may degenerate into a legalism or merely a horizontal occasion for mutual encouragement that is susceptible to pragmatic consumerist ideology. In effect when we have no sacramental imagination, we have no divine encounter and no divine action.

This is why it is important to think sacramentally about these ordinances. Sacramental language emphasizes what God does rather than what we do. Sacramental imagination envisions these moments as encounters between God and believers for the sake of transformation and spiritual formation. God is active rather than passive. God is truly present. God is not a spectator but a participant because God—through the presence of Christ by the power of the Spirit—seals, confirms, energizes, and realizes our faith through communion and encounter in these sacramental events.

*The sacraments are authentic experiences of God.* The sacraments are not bare (nude) signs but means of divine action. They are divine gifts through which we may experience God as God comes to us in grace and mercy. God is not absent from the creation or merely dwelling in the "spirituality" of our consciousness. Rather, God is present through the creation as the Spirit existentially and communally unites us with Christ through bread and wine, through water, and through assembly.

*The sacraments serve our faith as moments* of assurance that our feeble hearts can grasp through materiality. God's word and promise are connected to the signs. God assures us in these moments. Faith is assured that Jesus is ours as surely as our bodies are washed, our lips sip wine, and we as the people of God are gathered. The sacraments are a means of assurance for embodied believers.

*The sacraments are communal experiences of God.* As God created community and redeems a community, so the divine presence comes to us in community as well. Baptism, the Lord's Supper and assembly are shared experiences through which God is present to bind us together. We are baptized into one body, we eat the one body of Christ together, and we are the body of Christ in assembly united with the people of God in the heavenlies as well as throughout the whole earth.

*The sacraments bind us to God's story in creation and the history of redemption.* We are united with Israel's exodus from bondage, their journey through the wilderness, and their entrance into their inheritance, the promised land. We are united with Jesus as he is immersed in the Jordan, prays in the wilderness, feasts at the tables, dies on the cross, and ascends into the heavenlies in a resurrected body. We are united with the church throughout the centuries and into the future. We embrace the future of God's creation and experience the newness of redeemed creation as we share the resurrection of Jesus in our baptism, are nourished by the living Christ through the supper, and gather before the throne of God in assembly. The story of God becomes our story through the sacraments, and through the sacraments we remember, embrace, experience, and commit ourselves to the story of God.

Sacramental theology grounds and empowers the ordinances in much the same way that the indicative grounds and empowers the imperative in Paul's ethical theology. *The ordinances are effective precisely because they are sacraments.* At the same time, the sacraments are not unilateral impositions by divine fiat. Rather, they are covenantal means couched in ordinance language because they involve human engagement.

As divine-human encounters, sacramental language stresses the divine action while ordinance language stresses human participation.

Baptism, the Lord's Supper and assembly are divine acts of grace that we embrace through faith. As divine-human encounters, God acts and we receive; God saves and we bear witness; God transforms and we pledge allegiance.

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