The Sacraments: Baptism & Communion

A position paper of Legacy Church

Introduction

To be sacraments, or ordinances, are among the most visible and formative practices in the life of the church. They are not merely traditions or rituals, but God-given means through which the gospel is proclaimed, remembered, and experienced by His people.

Throughout church history, there has been both agreement and disagreement regarding their meaning, function, and necessity. While nearly all Christian traditions affirm baptism and communion, they differ in how they understand what is happening in and through these practices.

At Legacy Church, we seek to approach the sacraments with clarity, reverence, and faithfulness to Scripture. Our goal is to understand what the Bible teaches, consider how the church has historically interpreted these practices, and clearly articulate how we practice them today.

What is a Sacrament and a Means of Grace

Historically, the church has used the word "sacrament" to describe practices **instituted by Christ** that visibly express and communicate spiritual realities. Many Protestant traditions use the word "ordinance" to emphasize that these practices are commanded by Jesus rather than functioning automatically as channels of saving grace.

Closely tied to this is the idea of a means of grace. A means of grace is something God uses to strengthen, remind, and mature His people spiritually. It is not something that saves on its own, but something God uses in the life of a believer to deepen faith and reinforce the gospel.

For example, the Word of God is a means of grace. Prayer is a means of grace. In the same way, baptism and communion are practices through which God reminds us of the gospel, strengthens our faith, and shapes our identity in Christ.

Over time, the church expanded the number of sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church came to formally recognize seven sacraments: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. These were understood as channels through which grace is conveyed.

During the Reformation, leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected this expansion, arguing that only practices clearly instituted by Christ and tied directly to the gospel should be recognized. As a result, the Reformers affirmed two sacraments: **baptism and communion.**

Old Testament Foundations and Jewish Understanding

Both baptism and communion find their roots in the Old Testament and in Jewish religious life.

Jewish purification practices, often referred to as mikveh, involved ritual washings that symbolized cleansing and preparation before God. These were repeated acts tied to ceremonial purity and were also understood as God-given commands in Judaism. This provides important background for baptism, as the idea of water symbolizing cleansing and transition was already well established.

Communion is rooted in the Passover meal. In Exodus 12, God institutes Passover as a memorial of Israel's deliverance through the blood of the lamb. This meal shaped the identity of God's people around His saving work. When Jesus institutes communion, He does so within this framework, revealing Himself as the true Passover Lamb.

New Testament Scriptures

Baptism

Baptism is commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 and is closely tied to discipleship. It represents identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, as described in Romans 6:3-4.

Throughout the book of Acts, baptism consistently follows belief. Those who receive the gospel are baptized as an act of obedience and identification with Christ.

John's Baptism vs Christian Baptism

John's baptism is described in Scripture as a "baptism of repentance." This means it was a preparatory act that called people to turn from their sin and ready themselves for the coming of the Messiah. In Matthew 3:1-2, John's message is clear: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His baptism was an outward expression of that repentance, a way for people to publicly acknowledge their sin and their need for God's forgiveness.

It is important to understand that John's baptism did not bring salvation in itself, nor was it tied to the finished work of Christ. It looked forward, not backward. It prepared hearts, but it did not unite people to Christ in His death and resurrection. As John himself says in Matthew 3:11, "I baptize you with water for repentance... he who is coming after me... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John clearly saw his baptism as temporary and incomplete, pointing ahead to something greater.

Christian baptism is distinct from this. It is rooted in the completed work of Jesus and identifies the believer with His death, burial, and resurrection. As Paul explains in Romans 6:3-4, those who are baptized into Christ are baptized into His death and raised to walk in newness of life. **Christian baptism does not merely express repentance, but union with Christ and participation in the new covenant.**

This distinction is made explicit in Acts 19:1-5. Paul encounters a group of disciples who had received John's baptism but had not yet heard the full gospel. After explaining the difference, he baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus. This shows clearly that John's baptism and Christian baptism are not interchangeable. One prepared the way, the other marks entry into the life of Christ.

In summary, John's baptism was a call to repentance in anticipation of the Messiah, while Christian baptism is an act of obedience that identifies the believer with the finished work of Christ and their new life in Him.

Baptism and Salvation

Scripture consistently teaches that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works or external acts. While baptism is commanded and closely associated with conversion, **it is not the means by which a person is saved.**

Passages like Ephesians 2:8-9 make clear that salvation is by grace through faith. The thief on the cross in Luke 23:42-43 is promised paradise without baptism. These examples demonstrate that baptism, while important, is not required for salvation.

Some traditions, such as those found in parts of the Church of Christ, emphasize baptism, teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. While this view seeks to take baptism seriously, it goes beyond what Scripture clearly teaches and what the church has overwhelmingly taught for the last 2000 years. Baptism is consistently presented as a response to salvation, not the cause of it.

Communion

Communion is instituted by Jesus during the Last Supper. In Luke 22:19-20, Jesus takes bread and says, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He then takes the cup and says, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul explains that whenever believers take communion, they proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Communion is both a remembrance and a proclamation of the gospel. It calls believers to look back to the cross, recognize the present reality of Christ's finished work, and look forward to His return.

At the same time, the New Testament treats communion with a level of seriousness that should not be overlooked. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, Paul warns against taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, saying that those who do so are guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. He goes on to instruct believers to examine themselves before participating.

Taking communion in an unworthy manner does not mean that a person must be perfect or without sin. If that were the case, no one could come to the table. Rather, it refers to approaching communion carelessly, unrepentantly, or without regard for what it represents. In the context of 1 Corinthians, this included division within the church, selfishness, and a failure to recognize the unity and holiness of the body of Christ.

To **take communion rightly is to come with humility, repentance, and faith.** It is to recognize the weight of Christ's sacrifice, to examine one's own heart, and to participate in a way that honors both the Lord and His people. Communion is not meant to drive believers away in fear, but to draw them near in reverence, calling them to remember, repent, and believe.

In this way, communion is not only a remembrance and proclamation, but also a moment of reflection, alignment, and renewal for the believer and for the church as a whole.

Early Church (First 300 Years)

The early church consistently practiced both baptism and communion as central and defining acts of Christian life. These were not occasional or optional practices, but regular and meaningful parts of what it meant to belong to the people of God.

Baptism in the Early Church

Baptism in the early church was closely tied to conversion and entry into the Christian community. It was not treated as a repeatable act, but as a decisive moment of initiation into the life of Christ and His church.

The Didache, dated to the late first or early second century, provides some of the earliest instructions we have on baptism. It directs that baptism should ideally be performed in "living water," meaning flowing water such as a river. If that is not available, it allows for other forms of water. It also states that if immersion is not possible, water may be poured over the head three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Didache 7).

This shows two important things. First, immersion appears to be the preferred and normative mode. Second, the early church allowed for flexibility when necessary, indicating that the mode of baptism, while important, was not treated as the essence of the act itself.

Early Christian writers also reinforce this understanding. Justin Martyr, writing in the mid-second century, describes baptism as the moment when a person is "washed in the name of God" after coming to faith and being instructed in the truth (*First Apology*, Chapter 61). This reinforces that baptism followed belief and instruction, not infancy or repeated spiritual experiences.

Baptism was also closely associated with belonging to the church. While the early church did not use modern membership language, baptism functioned as a clear boundary marker. Those who were baptized were recognized as part of the Christian community. It marked a person's entrance into the life of the church and their identification with Christ and His people.

Communion in the Early Church

Communion was regular and central part of the early church's worship gatherings. It was not treated as an occasional add-on, **but as an essential expression of the church's life together.**

In Acts 2:42, the earliest believers are described as devoting themselves to "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The phrase "breaking of bread" is widely understood to refer to the Lord's Supper, indicating that communion was a consistent part of their gatherings from the very beginning.

The Didache also provides insight into how communion was practiced. It includes prayers to be said over the cup and the bread and emphasizes thanksgiving and unity within the body. It also instructs that only those who have been baptized should partake, reinforcing the connection between baptism and participation in the life of the church (Didache 9-10).

Justin Martyr gives one of the clearest early descriptions of a Christian worship gathering in his *First Apology* (Chapters 65-67). He explains that believers would gather on the Lord's Day, hear the Scriptures read, receive teaching, pray together, and then partake of the bread and wine. He describes the elements as not being treated as ordinary food, but as something set apart, consecrated to Christ Himself.

This shows that communion was not merely symbolic in a casual sense. It was treated with reverence and understood as a meaningful participation in the life and work of Christ, even if the precise theological language would later develop in different directions.

Summary of Early Church Practice

Taken together, the early church presents a consistent picture.

Baptism was a one-time act closely tied to conversion and entry into the Christian community. It was most commonly practiced by immersion, though allowances were made when necessary. It functioned as a clear line of identification with Christ and His people.

Communion was a regular and central part of the gathered worship of the church. It was practiced frequently, likely weekly, and was understood as both a remembrance of Christ and a meaningful participation in the life of the body.

These practices were not treated lightly. They were central to the identity, unity, and spiritual life of the early church.

The Reformers and the Development of Sacramental Theology

Over time, the Roman Catholic Church developed the doctrine of transubstantiation, teaching that the bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Christ, and that the Mass is a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice.

During the Reformation, this view was challenged. Martin Luther affirmed a real presence of Christ in the elements, while John Calvin taught that believers spiritually partake of Christ by faith. Other reformers emphasized remembrance more strongly.

In many Protestant contexts over time, communion was reduced to a purely symbolic act. While this preserved a rejection of transubstantiation, it often lost the deeper understanding of communion as a meaningful participation in the work of Christ.

Mainstream Western Christianity

Today, views on baptism and communion vary widely. The Roman Catholic Church continues to affirm seven sacraments and teaches that grace is conveyed through them. Eastern Orthodox churches emphasize mystery and participation in divine life.

Most Protestant churches affirm two ordinances, but differ in how they understand their meaning, with some emphasizing symbolism and others maintaining a stronger sense of spiritual participation.

Key Scriptures for Interpretation and Application

Matthew 28:19

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 2:41

"So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

Romans 6:3-4

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

Luke 22:19-20

"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

1 Corinthians 11:26

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Acts 19:4-5

"John baptized with the baptism of repentance... On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Ephesians 2:8-9

"For by grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Luke 23:42-43

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom... Today you will be with me in paradise."

Legacy Church Position (Practical Outworking)

At Legacy Church, we affirm two ordinances given by Christ to His church: baptism and communion. We understand these as means of grace, not to the sense that they save, but in that God uses them to strengthen faith, remind us of the gospel, and shape us spiritually.

On Baptism

We baptize believers in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We do this because it is commanded and closely tied to conversion and identification with Jesus. We do not practice baptism for individuals, as Scripture presents baptism as a one-time act.

We do not believe baptism is necessary for salvation, but we do believe it is commanded and should be pursued by every believer who has the opportunity. Baptism does not save, but it does matter. It is a God-ordained act that marks identification with Christ and entry into the life of the church.

We also reject the reduction of baptism to merely an outward sign of an inward reality. We believe it is more than symbolic language. It is an act of obedience, identification, and participation in the life of Christ.

While baptism often takes place in front of others, Scripture does not require it to be a formal public statement. What matters most is obedience to Jesus and identifying with Him. In Scripture, a believer is stepping into the water in a way of saying, "My life is no longer my own. I belong to Jesus." It marks a turning point, leaving the old life behind and identifying fully with Christ in His death and resurrection.

On Communion

We practice communion weekly because we believe it keeps the gospel central in the life of the church. Communion is a remembrance, a proclamation, and a participation in the work of Christ. We affirm that it is a true work of grace in the life of the believer. While we reject the idea that the elements become the literal body and blood of Christ, we also reject the idea that communion is merely symbolic. It is a meaningful, spiritual act through which believers engage with and are strengthened by the reality of Christ's finished work.

In all things, our desire is to practice baptism and communion with clarity, reverence, and faithfulness, keeping the gospel at the center of the life of the church.