# Sacramental Theology Paper

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**Sacraments Defined:**

Christians from the early church, spanning the first and second centuries to the present, have engaged in practices known as sacraments. Some Christian denominations and faith backgrounds hold varying opinions on what constitutes a sacrament. Some have varying views on how to define a sacrament. For example, White defines sacraments as "God's love made visible."[i] Cherry defines it as "a sacred ritual, instituted and commanded by Christ to be practiced by all believers of all times and places, which serves as a means of grace."[ii] Duck notes that an Augustinian definition of sacraments might be, "a sacrament has been called an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. In other words, something from the physical world, joined by human words and action, points us to the presence and grace of God."[iii] Each of these definitions by these respective authors, by their own specifics, identifies something powerful in that the sacraments are something visible, that is practiced, and reminds us of God's grace.

In addition to these definitions, the sacraments are also communal, embodied, and missional in nature. Sacraments are first communal because we are called to practice sacraments as a collective. While aspects of sacraments are individualistic, we partake as the gathered body of Christ- whether partaking in the eucharist or baptism, they are celebrated when the community gathers. As seen in the United Church of Christ's Book of Worship, baptism is "not only a personal celebration in the lives of the individual candidates and their families, but also a central celebration in the life of the church in a particular place."[iv] When speaking of the Eucharist, the UCC Book of Worship writes, "the invitation and the call to supper emphasize that all people of faith are welcome at Christ's table."[v] While we may walk, stand, pass, and receive the communion elements, we are doing so as a community, humbly before God.

Sacraments are embodied. As Long points out, “we are in a dialogue of thanksgiving before God” when we participate in the eucharist and in baptism, we are at “awe and thanksgiving at nothing less than a miracle of grace.”[vi] They are also embodied because ordinary and mundane elements, such as water, bread, wine, or juice, signify that creation itself is a vessel of grace, available to all. Sacraments are missional in that they send the believer and the church into the wider world to be an embodiment of the reconciliation and grace that they proclaim.

The sacraments are missional because they invite us to participate in God’s mission in the world. They are not just private individualistic acts or private communal events. As a result of the sacraments, we are invited and even called to participate in God’s mission within the world. If the sacraments are, as Augustine writes, “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace”, then we are called to respond to this grace and the promptings of the Spirit who dwells within us.

Sacraments are powerful public demonstrations of God’s grace and reconciliation. The sacraments are the engine of God’s mission to heal and unite the world. Through baptism, outsiders are welcomed. Through the Eucharist, we see a foretaste of God’s kin-dom. As a result, we are sent out as God’s people and agents to make both our worship and daily life an extension of God’s work and mission in the world. The sacraments are not separated from God’s mission; they are actually the very means by which the Body of Christ lives out its calling as God’s people, whereby we are gathered by God’s grace, sent to show grace, as well as build community and reflect God’s restorative love and reconciliation.

## Theological Statements Communicated in Baptism

As stated by Ruth C. Duck, “baptism is at once a sacrament of faith and a ritual of Christian commitment and community.”[vii] As a sacrament of faith, baptism communicates

several theological statements. First, baptism conveys the foundational theological statement that we are united or in union with Christ. Baptism is, on the one hand, a sacrament that is individualistic in nature. It involves an individual's experience with both water and spirit. Through this act, it proclaims that each believer is united with Christ through his death and resurrection. As written in the United Church of Christ's Book of Worship, "The water, words, and actions of the sacrament are visible signs that convey the Christian's burial and resurrection with Jesus Christ."[viii] In Scripture, this can be seen in Romans 6:3-5 where it is written, "[3] Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."[ix] Through baptism, we, as individuals, are united with Christ.

Baptism also communicates the theological statement of incorporation into the Body of Christ. On the other hand, while baptism is an individual experience, it is also a communal one. As pointed out by Duck, "It [baptism] is a ritual marking the church's response to God's gifts of grace and Spirit, confessing its faith in the triune God. Through baptism, the church welcomes new members to the body of Christ."[x] The individual, through baptism, is welcomed into the church and the Body of Christ. Also, through baptism, the community is included. As written in the United Church of Christ's Book of Worship, baptism is also "a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the church of every time and place…" because baptism is "not only a personal celebration in the lives of the individual candidates and their families, but also a central celebration in the life of the church in a particular place."[xi] As a communal practice, those

present in the congregation during a baptism are also pledging to be a witness and to "love, support, and care" for the candidate.[xii]

A third theological statement communicated through baptism is forgiveness and new creation. "Baptism is linked to a call to repentance."[xiii] The United Methodist Book of Worship points out that, amongst the many symbols associated with baptism, baptism as an act, "signifies the whole working of God's grace… from the washing away of sin to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit."[xiv] In the act of baptism, there is a literal washing of water, but also a washing of sin. Baptism "may involve turning from one's previous life, sins, and values toward a new life in Christian community oriented toward God and God's ways."[xv] This happens because baptism is a sign of God's grace at work in and amongst us as believers. Powerfully, it is through this grace that God's "offer of forgiveness gives us courage to reflect on our lives, to repent how we have sinned through what we have done and what we have failed to do, and to start again."[xvi]

A final theological statement communicated through the sacrament of baptism is the concept of vocation and mission. Not only does baptism welcome new members into the Body of Christ, but it also serves as a commission, inviting believers to participate in the ministry of Christ. As Long points out, "we are named as God's own, marked with the sign of Christ, given a vocation, and empowered for the living of our lives."[xvii] The vocation is made clear in what Christ calls his disciples to do in the Great Commission. As written in Matthew 28: 19-20, "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 **20** and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."[xviii]

**Theological Statements Communicated in the Eucharist**

The eucharist expresses a complementary set of theological claims. Christ's presence is found in the eucharist. Some faith traditions, such as Catholicism, practice transubstantiation, whereby they believe that the actual substance of the bread and cup offered by the officiant is changed into the body and blood of Christ. On the other end of the spectrum, as advocated by individuals such as Ulrich Zwingli, others believe that the eucharist is memorialism, a symbolic representation of Christ's body and blood whereby no mystical or physical transformation occurs.[xix] While those traditions vary greatly, the eucharist is an encounter with the living Christ through the Spirit. Whether the substances of the eucharist change or not, we are changed as a result of partaking in this divine meal. We leave the table having been changed, called to share the good news of the communion table with all of those of whom we encounter.

A second theological statement of the eucharist surrounds thanksgiving and communion. The very word, eucharist, comes from the Greek word *eucharistia,* which means "thanksgiving." By partaking in the Eucharist, we are giving thanks to God for what is represented by the signs of the Eucharist. Those gathered give thanks for what is stated in 1 Corinthians 11:26: "[26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."[xx] We give thanks to God for Christ's life, death, and resurrection when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. "To omit thanksgiving or berakah when we remember Jesus at table is to abandon what he meant for us to do."[xxi] In the Eucharist, we also reflect on what Christ did. "When Jesus prayed at table, he blessed and thanked God who bestows the gifts of life, following the Jewish ritual of giving thanks to God at meals."[xxii] While the world around us may be full of chaos and challenge, we are reminded of God's goodness at the communion table. "While there is much

suffering and much cause for lament in our lives, we give thanks because God gives us life and shares our human life in Jesus Christ."

A third theological statement can be found in the concept of remembrance and eschatological hope. When we partake in the Eucharist, we join with many voices. These voices "tell us that we must not forget that our worship joins that of the heavenly host, and that therefore it is a foretaste of when we shall be counted among that host."[xxiii] It can be described as the great "rehearsal of the world as God created it to be…the meal is a foretaste of shared life in community where all are welcome, and all share the gifts of life."[xxiv] Depending on a congregation's practice, the Eucharist may be celebrated quarterly, monthly, or weekly.

Regardless of the frequency, each time the people of God come to the table, there is a quarterly, monthly, or weekly reminder of this great banquet that is to come, where sinners of all walks of life are welcomed to the table. While not a communion song outright, "*At this Table"* by Idina Menzel beautifully describes this eschatological hope and community when she sings, "At this table, everyone is welcome…everyone is seen… everybody matters."[xxv] She goes on to sing, "Come as you are, remember, the door is always open." Similar to these powerful lyrics, we, too, are invited to partake and reminded of the hope of a community made whole, where all are welcome.

A fourth theological statement articulated through the eucharist, and is also connected to baptism, is the idea of formation as the Body of Christ. As stated previously, baptism grants identity and membership into the Body of Christ, and the eucharist both nourishes the individual's spiritual life and brings the community together. The Eucharist helps to nourish us both as individuals and as a community, connecting us to the Body of Christ, past, present, and future. The Eucharist has remained an enduring aspect of the Christian for thousands of years,

and while “centuries have passed, and our worship has evolved; but throughout the centuries what makes us one is the conviction placed in us by none other than the holy Spirit that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.”[xxvi] Not only are we connected with both past and future, but we are also reconciled as a community in the present. The Body of Christ is brought together when we celebrate the Eucharist. As Alexander Schmemann emphasizes, the Eucharist makes the Church “the Body of Christ in the world.”[xxvii]

A final theological statement found in the eucharist is one of ethics. As stated previously, through our encounter with the eucharist, we are changed. As a result, we are called to lives of justice, compassion, and hospitality. Justin Martyr notes that the Eucharist compels us to care for the poor as an extension of sharing Christ’s body.[xxviii] There is an ethical component to the eucharist because, as we have already seen, all are welcome at the table. The communion table is not a place where people are divided or left out, but rather a place where they are welcomed. As stated by Branson and Martinez, “The space of communion is always ready to appear where the people of God reach down to join the land and reach out to join those around them, their near and distant neighbors.”[xxix] As a matter of ethics, the communion table, the eucharist, should never be used as a means to divide the Body of Christ, but rather as a place to unite us. We are reminded that at this table, where we share the eucharist, this meal also carries ethical consequences. We are reminded that participation in the Eucharist compels solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

## Relationship between the meaning and practice of the sacraments and the mission of the Church

The meaning and practice of the sacraments are inseparable from the mission of the Church. They are deeply rooted and connected to each other. While sacraments are rich in

symbolism and meaning, they are not merely symbols. They call the church to embody grace and reconciliation to the world.

One relationship between the meaning and practice of the sacraments and the mission of the church is that the sacraments shape a community that participates and engages fully in God's mission in the world. As repeatedly stated, baptism grants identity and membership into the Body of Christ and the eucharist, both nourishes the individual's spiritual life and brings the community together. They form a people who are to live this embodiment of grace and reconciliation, as well as the self-giving love of Christ. Through baptism, the Body of Christ receives their identity as the people of God who are called, forgiven, and then sent. Through the Eucharist, the church is nourished and enriched for that mission, continually experiencing renewal in Christ's presence and also strengthened to live out God's kin-dom values. In the mission of the church, the practice of the sacraments teaches who they are and what they are for their purpose. Not only do they share in the death and resurrection of Christ as seen in Scripture, but they must also live as a people marked by self-giving love, hospitality, and justice.

A second relationship between the meaning and practice of the sacraments and the mission of the church is that the sacraments are a means of proclamation. The sacraments take the proclamations of the gospel and embody them in tangible form. As seen in baptism, the believer is washed, both physically and spiritually, and announces victory over all that plagues humanity. In the Eucharist, the proclamation is one of a reconciling power. The sacraments are an embodied proclamation that heralds that all are welcome, both at the font and at the table, and in the Body of Christ.

A third relationship between the meaning and practice of the sacraments and the mission of the church is that not only do the sacraments form part of God's mission, but they also call the

church into participation within that mission. Many missional theologians, such as Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder, Mark Lau Branson, and Juan F. Martinez, will state that the church does not have a mission, but rather God's mission precedes and empowers the Church.[xxx] "Every congregation is both called and sent; the call gathers us to hear, understand, and accept our vocation of being sent into the world for the sake of the gospel."[xxxi] The Sacraments help the Church connect to its mission. Through baptism, we are reminded of who we are as the Body of Christ, and through the Eucharist, we are reminded of what we are to proclaim.

A final relationship between the meaning and practice of the sacraments and the mission of the church is that the sacraments are an anticipation of the kin-dom of God. As stated previously, sacraments- both baptism and the eucharist- are not only reminders of the past and present, but are also eschatological signs. Through the lens of the church's mission, the church is called to help bring about and live into a world where God is bringing about completion. In this, baptism points to resurrection- the life everlasting, and the eucharist anticipates the future messianic banquet where all, regardless of background, are welcome.

**Conclusion:**

Sacraments, while symbolic rituals, go beyond that. The sacraments of the church are transformative- as a result of these experiences, participants are changed. These experiences help the Body of Christ to have a profound encounter with the Triune God. These sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism help shape the Body of Christ into a people of discipleship, communion, and mission. As a result of baptism, believers are united to each other and to Christ, who commissions them into ministry and to carry out God's mission of liberation, reconciliation, and grace. As stated previously, baptism grants identity and membership into the Body of Christ, and the eucharist both nourishes the individual's spiritual life and brings the community together. The

Eucharist gives nourishment to the church with Christ's life-changing presence. The Eucharist forms a reconciled community and sends that community out into the world to embody the kin-dom of God. Together, both baptism and eucharist declare that God is still at work renewing creation and that the church participates in this renewal.

# Notes

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