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What Do We Mean by “Sacrament”?

Marc Cortez, “Who Invited the Baptist,” in *Sacraments and Christian Unity: Come Let Us Eat Together*, ed. George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2018), 203f.

A Working Definition?
Something counts as “sacrament” when:

- God is the primary agent at work.
- There is real efficacy: *something* actually happens.
- It is *somehow* unique: distinct from other ways God acts.
- It is (relatively) necessary for Christian life, even if God can work without it in some cases.
- It emphasizes divine presence *somehow* different from God’s general presence.

2

That which is given by God corporately for the sake of the community and the world can come to be preoccupied with questions of the self (individual or corporate) and of limits, bounds, and boundaries for the sake of demarcating *from* and not *for*. Questions of order can become the most primary questions into which questions of grace, of community, and of witness are subsumed. The sacraments so-called are in fact dominical ordinances *amongst others* which are given to focus the believer and the community away from themselves (and their hearts turned in on themselves) outwards towards God (vertically) and towards one another in the world (horizontally). **They are given as visible expressions of the invisible reality of the church's participation in Christ's body by the Holy Spirit.**

Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology, Vol. 1: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 153.

3

Sacraments are Marks of the Church (among others!)

Baptism and Communion are essential marks of the church, but relatively, not absolutely, necessary.

The marks of the church are not ends in themselves; they feed our incorporation into Christ and communion with the triune God.

The church's whole life is a visible sign of the gospel, a provisional anticipation of the kingdom in Christ by the Spirit for the world.

4

Questions: Proportion and Perspective?

Is it possible to over-focus on two marks (baptism and communion)? Important as they are can we neglect the many ways Christ urges us to conform our lives together?

The New Testament spends extensive time on money, forgiveness of debts, visiting the prisoner and widow, and love of neighbour – also visible marks of the church.

A possible danger? Trying to institutionalize the presence of Christ and the Spirit?

5

Big Claims!

Debate about sacramentology both unites and divides the church.

Our view of the sacraments shapes our view of **community**, not the other way around.

George Kalantzis, "For You Have Been Planted Together With Christ," in *Sacraments and Christian Unity: Come Let Us Eat Together*, ed. George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2018), 187.

6

Reflecting together today:

- Asking: What sort of community is Jesus and the Spirit making and reshaping?
- Briefly, how do baptism and communion richly signify and enact this?
- Jesus makes community: meals

7

Baptism and the Wider Biblical Story: Through the Waters

Baptism re-enacts the great “through the waters” story: creation, flood, Exodus, Jordan.

When we are baptized, we enter an ancient biblical pattern: through waters of death into new creation life.

Baptism is being saved “through the waters” and brought to new life on the other side.

8

Baptism as Symbol and Participation

In baptism we share in Christ's death and are raised to new life, symbolising death to self and entry into his body.

Baptism announces Christ's boundary-crossing grace.

9

Baptism and the community

By baptism we share in Christ's baptism, death, risen life and ministry in the Spirit.

Baptism is a public act: it orders the individual toward the community and the community toward the individual and God.

10

Baptism as Immersion into Jesus' Death

See especially the rich narrative given by Rowan Williams in *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), chapters on baptism and communion. His work is reflected in many of the points made on these slides.

Jesus speaks of his coming suffering as a “baptism” he must undergo (Mark 10:38).

To be baptized is to be “dropped” into the depths of Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:3). We are all baptized into Christ’s baptism.

Baptism is new creation: water, Spirit, and God’s voice echo Genesis 1’s re-ordering of chaos.

11

Baptism and Identity

In baptism, one’s individual identity now subsists in Christ, in communion with the body.

All other identity markers (race, gender, status) are relativized by the central identity of being “in Christ.”

The church is a community where this new identity is lived out against racism, gender bias, and other dividing lines.

12

Where the Baptized Are Found?

The baptized are found in the neighbourhood of chaos and human need, where humanity is most disordered and at risk.

They also face the chaos within themselves, honestly acknowledging their own inhumanity and muddle.

Baptism leads us into the depths of human need and the depths of God's love, where the Spirit refreshes human life.

13

Solidarity, Not Status

Baptism is not about elite status; it claims solidarity with a messy world.

The church is not a gathering of the untouched, but of those who accept being "contaminated" by human need for love's sake.

Openness to the Spirit comes as we go with Jesus into risky solidarity.

14

Community of the Baptized

Baptism brings us into the neighbourhood of other Christians; there is no Christian life apart from them.

The baptized stand in the middle of two realities: the joy of the triune God and a world of suffering and sin.

“Where I am, there my servant will be also” (Jn 12:26): we share Jesus’ location in both God’s joy and the world’s pain.

15

Communion and Creation

Communion is about creation as well as redemption: renewing the face of the earth through a re-created community.

We are commissioned, as we receive, to participate in God’s renewal of the world.

Holy Communion connects human experience with the divine giver, bridging world and God.

16

Not a Reward, but Food for Pilgrims

Communion is not a prize for having “done well” but food for people who are failing, forgetful, and prone to betray.

It holds cross and resurrection together: we remember Jesus’ death even as we experience renewed community.

Communion calls us continually back to honest repentance and fresh invitation.

17

Communion as Future-Facing Feast

Ongoing participation in the Lord’s Supper points beyond itself to the final feast of the Lamb (Rev 19; 22).

At that final meal, Jesus gathers people from every nation for an eternally life-giving feast.

Every communion is a foretaste of that future table.

18



19

Guests of Jesus (Rowan Williams)

To share Holy Communion is to live as people who know they are wanted guests.

Jesus is both host and guest: he welcomes us, and he asks to come into our homes and lives.

In Communion we welcome him and our neighbours, because he has first welcomed us.

20

Guarding the Table?

We can be tempted to “protect” the table and Jesus’ ‘honour’ (or our sensibilities).

Jesus showed remarkable freedom about honour and table-fellowship, regularly eating with the “wrong” people.

Jesus, our high priest, makes our table fellowship holy; our righteousness comes from his vicarious life and the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15).

21

Hospitality that Re-makes Community

Jesus’ meals in the Gospels create community: he eats with “unsuitable” people and binds them together.

After the resurrection, he continues to eat and drink with the apostles, recreating community on the far side of death.

In our Eucharist, we share that same apostolic moment of renewed life together.

22

Communion and Our Neighbours

Communion reminds us that others at the table have been invited and wanted by God.

It calls us to make our communities places of welcome, especially for those in deep need of solidarity and fellowship.

Following Jesus, we move toward human suffering and need, not away from it.

23

The Holy Spirit's Work at the Table

The Spirit who brought Jesus to life and to his vocation now animates communion.

We invoke the Spirit on bread, wine, *and people*, asking for a miraculous change that makes us capable of receiving gifts.

In Communion, we live in the middle of the Father's delight and the world's pain, empowered by the Spirit.

24

A Community of Sacrament

The church is not a group that “possesses” sacraments, but a community that is sacramental.

The whole life of the church is a sign of the gospel, a visible anticipation of the kingdom for the world.

Water (baptism) and table (Communion) express the expansive, boundary-crossing nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

25

Bound to the World (Tom Greggs)

The unity of one baptism is not only internal to the church but also binds the church to the world God loves.

Sacraments tie the church to the world’s need for justice, mercy, and new creation.

Our life must always be oriented “for” the world, not primarily “against” it.

26

Questions for Reflection



How does our table practice challenge other identity markers in our church?



Who is currently missing from our table?



In what ways can we “be water” in our context? Justice and Mercy.