



Sacraments: Pictures and words

by Bernard Gabbott

Memory verses:

"Repent," Peter said to them, "and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Acts 2:38-39

The cup of blessing that we bless,
is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we break,
is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 10:16

Introduction

I have been struck in this last six months by the presence of 'baptism' in the Great Commission. As Jesus—exercising his unrivalled authority—sends his disciples off to make more disciples, he mentions the three means by which this will happen: 'going', 'baptising', 'teaching' (Matthew 28:16-20). There, smack in the middle of the great missionary command of Jesus, is a 'sacrament' - baptism!

Now, before we go any further, we need to make sure we understand what we mean by 'sacrament'. The following is as good a definition as any, being Article 25 of the 39 Articles of Religion:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him. There are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.... The Sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about, but that we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same have they a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them unworthily purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith.

<https://acl.asn.au/the-thirty-nine-articles/>

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'Sacraments' are pictures and words together which confirm, strengthen, remind, apply the truth of God's good news in Jesus Christ. John Stott states, 'that both the sacraments of the gospel are essentially sacraments of grace, that is, sacraments of divine initiative, not of human activity' (J. Stott, The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism., (The Latimer Trust, 2008), p.7).

In The Catechism, 'sacraments' are defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means by which we receive that grace, and a pledge to assure us of it' (An Australian Prayer Book.,

3. From what we have read, how would you answer these questions:

(i) What is the context for the Lord's Supper?

(ii) Who is welcome to share the Lord's Supper?

(iii) What does the Lord's Supper signify/point to?

(iv) What does the Lord's Supper encourage?

(iv) What does the Lord's Supper distinguish?

(Anglican Information Office, 1978), p.546).

In the same Catechism, 'sacraments' have both a 'visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace' (AAPB, p.546).

And they are mentioned as part of the Great Commission!

We evangelicals can often be wary of such stuff, for any number of reasons. But the presence of baptism (and, I think, by implication, the Lord's Supper) in the Great Commission has pushed me to think that perhaps we need to spend a little time thinking through what the 'sacraments' are, what they involve, why we 'do' them, and who can 'do' them. After all, both are commanded by Jesus, both are enjoyed by Jesus, and both are explicitly practiced in the early church.

So, over the next five weeks, we are going to look at the two sacraments commanded by God's word—the Lord's Supper and baptism. Now, let me clear, this is an area that has caused immense conflict amongst believing brothers and sisters right throughout the history of God's mob—even Luther and Zwingli fell out over their understanding of the Lord's Supper! And so we must proceed generously, kindly, gently, and on the clear foundation of the clear word of God. Moreover, there are so many intricate threads and concepts and ideas that are intertwined in these two 'sacraments', and we will not deal with all (even some) of these in five studies!

Study 1: Matthew 28:16-20

1. Read Matthew 28:16-20.
2. What is so heartwarming about verse 16? (cf. 26:32; 28:10)
3. What happens when they see Jesus?

Why is this a significant moment for the disciples?

4. What does Jesus state? (vs.18)

How does this fit with his favourite self-description, 'Son of Man'? (cf. Daniel 7:9-14)

5. What is the natural result of this in verse 19?

What is the command in verse 19?

How is this to be carried out in verses 19-20?

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

6. What is the reassurance that Jesus gives to the disciples? (vs.20)

Study 5: the Lord's Supper (ii)

1. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-22.

The wider context is food, idols, freedom and caring for each other (see the start of chapter 8).

What is the warning from the history of God's mob? (vs.1-13)

What is the command? (vs.14)

Why? (vs.15-22)

What does 'sharing'/'participating' mean here?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

What issue is there amongst God's mob? (vs.17-20)

What is the context for the Lord Supper, and how is it being conducted? (vs.21-22)

What does Paul remind them of? (vs.23-26)

What does Paul command, and what is the consequence of not listening to this command? (vs.27-32)

In what attitude should the Lord's Supper be enjoyed? (vs.33-34)

In verses 26 and 28, what does 'is' mean? Why?

What is Jesus saying here, and what is the context for this?
(cf. Matthew 1:21; John 1:29)

3. Read Acts 3:41-42.

What does this describe?

What is it reasonable to assume that God's mob are already doing?

7. Read Matthew 26:26-30.

What has Jesus just created? (vs.28)

How?

And what did this 'new covenant' achieve?

8. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34
(we will come back to this passage in the next study)

What did God promise? Why? How?

How is this promise connected to what Jesus achieved?

At the heart of the sacraments is 'covenant' - a binding agreement between two or more people, with binding obligations. There are two covenants in God's word— the old covenant and the new covenant. Both sit under the overarching idea of the 'covenant of grace' - God initiates, commits and bears the burden of the covenant(s) he makes with his people. And all are welcome into these covenants. The aim of these covenants is to bring God's people to live with him, obedient to him, enjoying his rule through his word.

9. As Jesus sends his disciples out, what two signs of the 'new covenant' has he given?
10. Write down what you think these mean and represent and signify, and why...

Study 2: Baptism (i)

1. Read Genesis 15:1-20; 17:1-26.
 What does God make with Abraham here?

 Who is this available to?

 What is it symbolised with?

 Why this sign? (cf. Gen.3:15)
2. Read Exodus 19:1-8; 24
 What has God already done for his people?

 What does he make with his people?

 What do his people commit to, in response to, and resting, what God has already achieved?
3. Read Psalm 24:3-4; Isaiah 1:16-17; Leviticus 16:30; Psalm 51: 1-2, 7, 16-17; Mark 7:15-23...
 What is the problem for all humans?

 What needs to happen?

 How is this achieved? (read Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Study 4: the Lord's Supper (i)

1. Read Exodus 11:1-13:16.
 What does God promise? (11:1)

 What will be seen? (11:7)

 What are God's mob to do? (12:1-11)

 What will God do? (12:12-13)

 What will this moment become? (12:14)

 How will this be carried out, and who will it be for? (12:24-28; 13:1-10)

God saved his mob out of slavery in Egypt to become his people, to worship him by representing him to the world (cf. Ex.19:1-8; 24). The sign of that moment, the symbol, that was used to remember (and include and distinguish) was the Passover meal. It was a picture explained in words, to remember what God had done. It was a 'participation' in this salvation, by God's great grace, across the ages and the generations.
2. Read Matthew 26:1-30.
 What does Jesus make explicit? (vs.1-2)

 Once they are at the meal, what does Jesus make explicit? (vs.26-30)

Acts 10:44-48:

Acts 16:25-34:

5. Scan these passages, and observe what circumcision/ baptism does not achieve, and how the promises circumcision/baptism point to are received:

Romans 4:

Romans 9:6-8:

1 Cor.10:1-13:
(note the striking use of 'baptism' in verse 2!!!!)

6. Write down what you understand baptism to be, how it is done, who is it for, what it rests in (from what you have learned from God's word)...

4. Does circumcision achieve the covenant God makes? Why/ why not?

What then does circumcision 'do'?

The sinful hearts of God's people need dealing with—their sin needs forgiveness, and their sin needs washing and removal. Only in this will the covenant of God with his people be enjoyed fully. And the old covenant points forward to a time when this will happen fully (remember Jeremiah 31?). It points forward to a moment when 'the seed' descended from Abraham will bring this great cleansing, received by faith.

4. Read Matthew 3:1-17.

How does John prepare God's people for the moment when sins will be forgiven?

What image does John use?

What does the baptism of Jesus communicate?

Baptism by John the Baptist is NOT the new 'circumcision'. Instead, it takes an action familiar to God's mob, and uses it to prepare his people for what he promised would come: a complete change of people, through his action, in Jesus, alone! (read Malachi 3:1-6). This is THE 'seed' of Abraham, who fulfils the promise of God.

Study 3: Baptism (ii)

1. Read Colossians 2:4-23.

There is a lot going on here, but we are going to focus on verses 8-15.

What does Paul command? (vs.8)

Why? (vs.9-10)

In verse 11, how is this described? What is striking about that image?

What does it express about our relationship with, connection with, Jesus? Whose circumcision are we joined to?

And then what surprising symbol does Paul equate this with in verse 12? And what is it connected to?

What do you think this means?

And how does this work?

Who achieved all this for us, what image does Paul use, and when did he achieve this for us? (vs.13)

How is this explained in verses 14-15?

In simple terms, the old and new covenant have signs that proclaim the grace of God and the promise of God, and

Describing the community connected to that promise: the old looks forward to Jesus, the new looks back to Jesus... In the old, the symbol is connected to the 'seed of the woman' to come. In the new, the symbol is connected to the cleansing and washing of sin promised by God, achieved in Jesus. In Paul's words, they are both connected in Jesus—Colossians 2 makes this clear. In this sense, Jesus is the one to whom circumcision looked forward to, resting in the promise of God's grace, and baptism looks back to, resting in the same promise (now fulfilled) in God's grace.

2. Read Matthew 28:16-20.

When the 'new covenant' is proclaimed, what is the symbol connected to it?

3. Read Acts 2:37-39.

When the response to the 'new covenant' is sought, what does Peter make clear?

And who is this for?

In what ways is this similar to the old covenant sign of circumcision? (cf. Genesis 15 and 17)

There is remarkably little commanded about baptism in the New Testament—which, I presume, means that most of the early Christians understood its continuity with the 'old covenant' and its sign of circumcision...

4. That said, skim these accounts baptism in Acts, and write down what we observe...

Acts 8:26-40: