

The Reformations - Sacraments

Here is the prologue to the *Decree Concerning the Sacraments* issued by Session VII (March 1547):

For the completion of the salutary doctrine on justification, which was promulgated with the unanimous consent of the Fathers in the last session, it has seemed proper to deal with the most holy sacraments of the Church, through which all true justice either begins, or being begun is increased, or being lost is restored.

Wherefore, in order to destroy the errors and extirpate the heresies that in our stormy times are directed against the most holy sacraments, some of which are a revival of heresies long ago condemned by our Fathers, while others are of recent origin, all of which are exceedingly detrimental to the purity of the Catholic Church and the salvation of souls, the holy, ecumenical and general Council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same legates of the Apostolic See presiding, **adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, to the Apostolic traditions, and to the unanimous teaching of other councils and of the Fathers**, has thought it proper to establish and enact these present canons; hoping, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to publish later those that are wanting for the completion of the work begun.

This decree followed the session on justification where the Council had already indicated the role of Baptism as the means of justification with God alone through the merits of Jesus Christ as the singular and only cause.

The Council of Trent defined a sacrament in its documents, particularly in the "Decree on the Sacraments" (Session VII). It states that a sacrament is "*a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification.*"

The Catechism of the Catholic Church expands on the definition provided by the Council of Trent. It describes the sacraments as "*efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.*" It emphasizes that the sacraments not only signify grace but also bring about the grace they signify via the actions of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church.

The Council of Trent on the Sacraments

Here are some of the key points made in the canons of this session:

- There are indeed seven Sacraments
- Sacraments are more than mere outward signs, they convey the grace of God in actuality that they signify
- Sacraments operate *ex opere operato*. In the context of the sacraments, the principle of *ex opere operato* means that the sacraments are effective in conferring grace by virtue of the sacramental action itself, rather than depending solely on the faith or holiness of the minister or recipient. It emphasizes that the power of the sacraments comes from Christ, who instituted them, and the action of the Holy Spirit working through the sacraments. (Canon 8 on the Sacraments)
- Baptism is not optional, but necessary for salvation (Canon 5 on Baptism)
- Canon 4 on Baptism: "*If anyone says that the baptism which is given by heretics in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, with the intention of doing what the Church does, is not true baptism, let him be anathema.*"
- Rejects the rejection of infant baptism and the teaching that Baptism is only completed by the later mature acceptance of the faith by the infant now grown to the age of reason.

Martin Luther on the Sacraments

Martin Luther had a distinctive understanding of the sacraments, influenced by his theological beliefs and his interpretation of Scripture. He recognized two sacraments as having been instituted by Christ himself: Baptism and the Eucharist.

Luther affirmed the sacrament of Baptism as a means of grace and initiation into the Christian community. He taught that through the water and the Word, administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God offers forgiveness of sins, grants spiritual rebirth, and bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism, according to Luther, marks the beginning of the believer's lifelong journey of faith and is not to be repeated.

Luther had a significant theological development in his understanding of the Eucharist, which differed from the Catholic understanding of transubstantiation. He advocated for the concept of "consubstantiation" or "sacramental union." Luther believed that, during the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the true body and blood of Christ are present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, which remain physically unchanged. He held that, through faith, believers partake of Christ's body and blood, receiving forgiveness of sins and spiritual nourishment.

Luther emphasized the importance of faith in receiving the sacraments. He believed that faith is necessary to receive the benefits and grace offered in the sacraments. He rejected the idea that the sacraments had an automatic, mechanical effect apart from faith. Instead, he emphasized the need for faith to lay hold of the promises of God and to receive the spiritual blessings conveyed in the sacraments.

Luther also emphasized the significance of the Word of God in the sacraments. He believed that the Word of God, along with the visible elements of the sacraments, is essential for the sacraments to be effective. The Word, in Luther's view, conveys and confirms the promises of God that are attached to the sacraments.

Martin Luther held different views on Confirmation, Reconciliation (Confession/Penance), Marriage, and Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick):

Luther did not consider Confirmation as one of the sacraments instituted by Christ. He regarded it as a church rite rather than a sacrament, viewing it as a time for individuals to publicly affirm their faith and receive pastoral instruction. Luther did not attribute any specific salvific or sacramental grace to the rite of Confirmation.

Luther retained the practice of private confession and absolution but significantly reformed the understanding of it. He emphasized that confession is not a sacrament but a pastoral practice for the purpose of receiving comfort and assurance of forgiveness. Luther emphasized the importance of confessing sins directly to God and receiving forgiveness through faith in Christ, rather than solely relying on the mediation of a priest.

Luther considered marriage to be a sacrament, though he distinguished it from the two sacraments instituted by Christ (Baptism and the Eucharist). He believed that marriage was a divinely instituted union between a man and a woman. Luther emphasized the mutual consent and commitment between the spouses, viewing it as a vocation and a means through which God works in the lives of believers.

Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick): Luther did not regard Extreme Unction as a sacrament. He believed that the practice of anointing the sick with oil had biblical and pastoral support but did not carry sacramental significance. Luther emphasized the importance of comforting and caring for the sick, trusting in God's mercy and healing, and praying for their well-being.

It is important to note that Luther's views on these sacraments evolved over time, and his teachings on specific sacraments may vary in different stages of his theological development. These views reflected his desire to reform certain practices and theological understandings within the Catholic Church based on his interpretation of Scripture and his theological insights.

John Calvin on the Sacraments

John Calvin's sacramental theology, as outlined in his writings and teachings, differed from both the Catholic and Lutheran sacramental traditions of his time. His sacramental theology emphasized the spiritual significance of the sacraments, particularly Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He saw them as visible signs and seals that confirm and strengthen the faith of believers, pointing them to the grace and promises of God in Christ. Calvin recognized two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist).

Calvin affirmed the sacrament of Baptism as a sign and seal of God's covenant and grace. He emphasized that Baptism is a visible sign of God's promise and an outward testimony of one's faith in Christ. Calvin viewed Baptism as a means through which believers are united with Christ, cleansed from sin, and initiated into the Christian community. He emphasized the spiritual reality signified by the sacrament, rather than any inherent saving power in the physical act of water baptism.

Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper is often referred to as the "spiritual presence" or "real presence" view. He rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which taught that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. Instead, Calvin emphasized a spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist, whereby believers spiritually partake of Christ's body and blood by faith. He saw the sacrament as a means of nourishment and spiritual communion with Christ, strengthening the faith of believers.

Calvin stressed the importance of faith in receiving the benefits of the sacraments. He believed that faith is necessary to receive the grace and spiritual blessings signified in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He regarded the sacraments as visible signs and seals of God's promises, pointing believers to Christ and confirming their faith.

It is worth noting that Calvin did not recognize other traditional sacraments, such as Confirmation, Reconciliation (Confession/Penance), Marriage, and Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick) as sacraments in the same sense as Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He considered them as "ecclesiastical ceremonies" or practices that could have religious significance but did not have the same sacramental nature as Baptism and the Eucharist.

The Scottish Reforms under John Knox were classically Calvinistic.

The Anabaptists on the Sacraments

The Anabaptist Reformers were not a single group. The moniker covers a diverse group of radical reformers during the Protestant Reformation, who held distinct sacramental understandings that set them apart from both the Catholic Church and other Protestant groups of the time. While it is important to note that the Anabaptist movement was characterized by various theological perspectives, there are some general trends in their sacramental theology:

Anabaptists placed great emphasis on adult believer's baptism, considering it as the only valid form of baptism. They rejected the practice of infant baptism, advocating for baptism to be reserved for those who were old enough to profess their faith consciously. Anabaptists viewed baptism primarily as a public act of personal commitment and a sign of membership in the faith community. They saw it as an expression of obedience to Christ and a symbol of spiritual rebirth.

Anabaptists held diverse views on the Lord's Supper. Some Anabaptist groups regarded it as a memorial or symbolic remembrance of Christ's death, emphasizing the communal aspect of the meal. They rejected any notion of the real or spiritual presence of Christ in the elements. Other Anabaptists considered the Lord's Supper as a spiritual experience of communion with Christ and fellow believers, emphasizing its transformative and communal aspects.

Anabaptists generally rejected the traditional sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church. They also rejected even other Protestant ecclesial rites not viewed as sacraments, such as Confirmation, Reconciliation, Marriage, and Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick). They viewed these practices as human inventions not rooted in biblical mandate or apostolic practice. Since neither were attested, as human inventions, they were forbidden from being celebrated. Anabaptists emphasized a more simplified worship and rejected what they considered to be remnants of the Catholic sacramental system.

Anabaptists generally rejected traditional sacraments and sacramental systems, seeking to return to what they believed were more authentic New Testament practices and principles. However, in time many of those pastoral practices found their way back into church ceremonies, e.g. Marriage but not with any sense of implied grace.

The Methodists on the Sacraments

The Methodist Church is an 18th century revival with the Church of England. The origins of the movement were Calvinistic rather than Lutheran, although of an Arminian variety stemming from the 17th century Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius. This "reform" of Calvin's tradition was a moderation of the doctrines of Calvinism related to its interpretation of predestination. The central Arminian beliefs are that God's preparing grace to regeneration is universal, and that God's justifying grace allowing regeneration is resistible.

The sacramental understanding in the Methodist tradition is rooted in the teachings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Methodism recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). Here are some key elements of the sacramental understanding in the Methodist tradition:

Methodism affirms the sacrament of Baptism as a means of God's grace and initiation into the Christian community. Methodists practice both infant baptism and believer's baptism. They understand baptism as a sign and seal of God's covenant, a visible act of God's saving work in the life of the believer. Baptism represents the forgiveness of sins, spiritual rebirth, and incorporation into the body of Christ. It is seen as an act of initiation into the Christian faith and a commitment to follow Christ.

Methodists hold the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in high regard. They believe that in the Eucharist, through the power of the Holy Spirit, believers spiritually partake of the body and blood of Christ. While Methodists do not adhere to a specific theory of the presence of Christ in the elements, they affirm that Christ is spiritually present and that the sacrament nourishes the faith and sustains the believer's relationship with Christ. Methodists view the Eucharist as a means of grace, a time of communion with God and fellow believers, and a celebration of Christ's sacrifice.

In addition to these two sacraments, Methodism also recognizes other practices that are considered "sacramental" in a broader sense, though not strictly classified as sacraments - for example, Christian Marriage: Methodism upholds Christian marriage as a sacred and covenantal relationship ordained by God. While marriage is not considered one of the sacraments, Methodists regard it as a means of grace, a union in which God's love and grace are made manifest. Marriage is seen as a holy institution and a context for mutual support, love, and growth in the Christian life.