



**Study guide for  
ASSEMBLY AS SACRAMENT**

# Historic and Systematic Overview

## SACRAMENT

The term 'sacrament' was not used in the Bible or in the earliest church, although what we would now regard as sacramental worship was at the centre of the life and worship of the church from the beginning. The term that is closest to sacrament in the NT is *mysterion*, mystery. In the synoptic Gospels we read of 'the mystery of the kingdom of God' (Mark 4:11). For Paul the mystery is God's plan of salvation, revealed in Jesus Christ. *Mysterion* was also a reality disclosing God's hidden plan (Col. 1:26). It could refer to earthly happenings related to God's great plan, and more generally to secrets that are revealed to the faithful.

### The Fathers

The early Fathers of the church were cautious about referring to Christian worship as a mystery, perhaps because they were uneasy about possible confusion with the pagan 'mystery religions' of the day. Clement of Alexandria spoke of three categories of Christian mysteries, the greater and lesser mysteries, and the supreme mystery, which is Christ himself. The Latin Fathers on the whole tended to speak of *sacramentum* rather than *mysterion*. In secular life the word *sacramentum* referred to the ritual for army recruits, involving an oath of unconditional loyalty. Tertullian was the first to use *sacramentum* in a Christian context, specifically in reference to baptism as the start of a new life following on a binding commitment. Cyprian understood *sacramentum* in a less military way than Tertullian. For him, *sacramentum* is a matter of symbols, figures and signs representing spiritual realities. He speaks of the Eucharist, baptism and marriage as sacraments.

Augustine understood a sacrament as the 'sign' of a spiritual reality, the visible form of an invisible grace. He distinguished four components, inseparable from one another: the outward and visible element; the virtue, or grace bestowed in the sacrament; the spoken formula or *verbum* which links the sign with its virtue; and the agent of the sacrament, that is, Christ himself. After Augustine there was continuing controversy about the number and the nature of the sacraments. Peter Lombard taught that there were seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, marriage, ordination, penance and extreme unction), while the Reformers taught that there were only two – baptism and the Eucharist – on the grounds that a sacrament must be specifically instituted and commanded by the Lord. Thomas Aquinas taught that the sacraments were effective *ex opere operato* – a way of stressing the objectivity of the sacraments, and their independence of the goodness or otherwise of the priest and the congregation. After Thomas the prevalent legal and juridical thinking resulted in the validity of the sacraments often being seen as depending on the correct performance of the rite in the prescribed form with the proper words and actions by the legally authorized minister. This legalistic understanding of the sacraments became very widespread during the later Middle Ages, sometimes almost totally obscuring a theological understanding of the rites and their significance.

### The Reformation

The Reformers' understanding of the sacraments varied widely. At one extreme were the Zwinglians, who understood sacraments as no more than visual aids, vivid reminders of past salvific events, at the other, those who saw the sacraments as moments in which the faithful experienced the real presence of Christ with his people. In some traditions, God the Spirit was invoked in an *epiclesis* to come down and be with his people; in other, particularly Calvinist (see Reformed theology), traditions the imagery was more in terms of the faithful being lifted up to share in a *proleptic* way the joys of heaven, and the heavenly banquet in particular. All the major Protestant traditions affirmed a necessary close linkage between word and sacrament. One could not, for instance, have a eucharistic service without the reading of Scripture and preaching. Only thus could the temptation to regard Christian worship as magical be avoided. Some Protestant sects – most notably the Quakers – are often presented as non-sacramental or antisacramental. There is, however, a strong case that they regard the whole of life as sacramental, every meal as eucharistic, and so forth.

### The Eastern churches

The Eastern churches followed a very different path. For them the term mystery in their liturgies referred to the incarnation, the Eucharist, marriage, baptism and so forth as sacramental. The whole of life and all the events of our salvation should be regarded as sacramental. There should be no argument about whether there are two, or seven, or many sacraments

### The liturgical movement

At the heart of the modern liturgical revival is a recovery of the sense that sacraments are mysteries in which participants encounter the living triune God. Disciples of today, just as the disciples of long ago, in encountering Jesus come into touch with a mystery which they know to be the mystery of God's being and acts, the secret of the universe and the meaning of life. In the primary sense, then, we should speak of Jesus Christ as being the sacrament. In Christ, the incarnate Son, through his physical, historical and material humanity we encounter the mystery and the reality of God himself. In a secondary sense the church, which is the body of Christ, should be regarded as a sacrament. It is the community in space and time, the visible fellowship in which the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is encountered, and as his body it represents Christ sacramentally to the world. Thus the church is to be understood as the sacrament of the unity of all humankind. It shows in sacramental form the saving purpose of God for all humanity; it is a sign of hope for all, the purpose of God for all humanity, a working model (to use a rather crude image) of what God wills for everyone: loving fellowship with God and with one another. And the church is a sacrament because the visible empirical reality of the fellowship points beyond itself to its Lord, to Christ....

The modern liturgical movement has led to a significant coming together of the major traditions of understanding of the sacraments, most clearly perhaps in documents such as the Faith and Order Commission's convergence document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, agreed at Lima in 1982. But it is also fair to say that these new agreements between the major churches about the nature and celebration of the sacraments have not led to many serious moves towards unity or greater intercommunion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. B. Forrester "sacrament" in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*. 2nd edit. Ed: Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, T. A. Noble, (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2016) 796-798

# Theological Definitions and Categories

## SACRAMENT

"The English word "sacrament" derives from the Latin word for "sign" (sacramentum) for the Greek word "mystery" (mysterion). In secular contexts, mysterion referred to a religious rite or oath, as sacramentum was used especially in military contexts when individuals were inducted into the army. It is difficult to locate a topic more illustrative of the deep inner connections of faith and practice." <sup>2</sup> - Michael S. Horton

"A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers"

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 92

**Simple Definition:** A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Thus a sacrament includes and indicates the following:

1. An outward, visible sign.

- Augustine called it "a visible sign of invisible grace instituted for our justification." While the latter part of his definition smacks of sacramentalism, the emphasis on a visible sign is essential to the existence of a sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

2. An inward, spiritual grace.

- A sacrament signifies an inward work of grace, without which the outward symbol is an empty form, devoid of spiritual reality. The inward work of grace consists in the riches of Christ, not, as Rome holds, an addition to human nature that enables man to do good works.
- Some have described a sacrament as a visible enactment of the gospel proclamation. A sacrament does proclaim the gospel. But there is more to it than proclamation. It signifies the general truth of the gospel along with a definite gracious promise given by God and accepted by us. Thus, it serves "to strengthen our faith with respect to the realization of that promise, Gen. 17:1-14 Exod. 12 : 13; Rom. 4:17-13" (Berkhof). <sup>4</sup>

3. A union between the sign and the grace it signifies.

- Berkhof terms this union "the essence of the sacrament."
- Rome holds that it is a physical union, so that the sign necessarily includes the grace it signifies (see Opus Operatum).
- Lutherans hold that it is a local union, as if the sign and the thing signified occupied the same portion of space, so that whoever receives the sign, even an un-believer, necessarily receives the grace signified by it.
- Reformed theology holds that the union is spiritual, or relative and moral. That is, where a sacrament is received by faith, the grace signified by it is communicated. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael S. Horton, "Sacraments" Dictionary of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Kevin VanHoozer (Grand Rapids. Baker, 2005) 709

<sup>3</sup> Alan Cairns, "Sacraments" Dictionary of Theological Terms, rev. and enlarged ed.,(Greenville, SC: Ambassador–Emerald, 2002). 394

<sup>4</sup> Alan Cairns, "Sacraments" Dictionary of Theological Terms, rev. and enlarged ed.,(Greenville, SC: Ambassador–Emerald, 2002). 394-395

<sup>5</sup> Alan Cairns, "Sacraments" Dictionary of Theological Terms, rev. and enlarged ed.,(Greenville, SC: Ambassador–Emerald, 2002). 394

#### 4. Sacraments have an Eschatological Dimension

“Like the Passover, the Lord's Supper is not merely a memorial of a past event but also participation in that event, and in the ongoing work of the Spirit. This raises the importance of eschatology: the sacraments are signs and seals of God's promise, which means the word of the gospel. It is not just the memory of a past event, but participation in its ongoing reality as well as a proclamation of Christ's saving work until he returns (1 Cor. 11:26). Like Israel in the wilderness, the church in between the two advents experiences the “already” and “not yet” of redemption—the inbreaking of Christ's new creation through word and sacrament (Heb. 6:4–5). Whichever view of the sacraments we embrace, it should be able to affirm the real tension between sign and reality, faith and sight, hope and presence.”<sup>6</sup> - Michael S. Horton

#### SACRAMENTALISM

“The view that ascribes such importance to the sacraments as to make them absolutely necessary to salvation and conveyors of divine grace, *opus operatum*.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Michael S. Horton, “Sacraments” *Dictionary of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin VanHoozer (Grand Rapids. Baker, 2005) 711

<sup>7</sup> Alan Cairns, “Sacraments” *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, rev. and enlarged ed., (Greenville, SC: Ambassador–Emerald, 2002). 395

## **The Stone-Campbell Teaching on the Sacraments in a nut shell**

Sacrament involves several ideas.

First, a sacrament involves created materiality. Baptism utilizes the material element of water and the Lord's Supper uses bread and wine. The concrete sign of the Assembly is the gathered community. As created embodied material beings, we are buried in water, eat/drink the Supper, and gather as a community.

Second, a sacrament signifies something; it points to a reality beyond itself. Baptism signifies the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Table signifies the presence of Christ eating with his disciples as well as his body and blood, and the Assembly signifies the heavenly assembly around the throne of God.

Third, a sacrament is a means of grace. The material elements do not merely represent, but they participate in the reality to which they point. They are not mere signs, but symbols that mediate the spiritual reality. The signs become symbols because God does something through them. Through Baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6:3-4), through the Lord's Supper we eat with Jesus at his table in his kingdom (Matt 26:30; Luke 22:15-18, 28-30) as well as nourished by his body and blood (John 6:51-58), and through assembling as a community, we enter the sanctuary of God (Heb 10:19-25; 12:22-24).

Fourth, God accomplishes his sacramental work by the power of his Spirit. Through Baptism we experience new birth as we are born of the Spirit (John 3:5; cf. Titus 3:5), through eating with Christ we enjoy the communion of the Spirit at the Table (1 Cor 10:16; 2 Cor 13:14), and as an assembly we worship the Father in the Spirit through Jesus (John 4:24). The Spirit mediates the grace of God through Baptism, mediates the presence of Christ through the Table, and transports us into the heavenly assembly surrounding the throne of the Father.

Fifth, sacrament is the experience of the eschaton—a participation in the future reality of the kingdom of God. Through Baptism we already experience our own resurrection by participating in Jesus' resurrection, through the Lord's Supper we already eat at the future Messianic banquet by eating at the Lord's Table, and through Assembly we already participate in the future eschatological gathering of the people of God around the throne (Rev 7:9-17).

Sixth, God's work through the sacrament is received by faith. Without faith there are no eyes to see or experience the spiritual reality to which the signs point and in which the symbols participate. Thus, through faith we are buried and raised with Christ in Baptism (Col 2:12), through faith we eat at the Lord's Table (1 Cor 10:16-22), and through faith we draw near to God in the Assembly (Heb 10:22; cf. 11:6).

### **The same idea expressed in A Gathered People**

When we view the assembly as entrance into the divine sanctuary, this grounds a sacramental understanding of assembly itself. ...

First, a sacrament must be concrete, material. Just as Baptism and the Lord's Supper have material elements (bread, wine, water) that represent the reality of the gospel, so the sacrament of assembly also has materiality. The concrete sign is the gathered people. It is not the building or the particular location, but the people. As created embodied material beings we gather in community and that communal reality constitutes the sign of the sacrament.

Second, a sacrament signifies something; it represents a reality beyond itself. Just as Baptism signifies the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Table signifies the presence of Christ eating with his disciples, so the assembly signifies the heavenly assembly around the throne of

God. The earthly assembly represents the reality of God's own dwelling place; the assembly on earth points to the heavenly sanctuary.

Third, a sacrament is a means of grace. The material elements do not merely represent, but they participate in the reality to which they point. They are not mere signs, but symbols that mediate the spiritual reality. Through Baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6: 3-4). Through the Lord's Supper we eat with Jesus at his table in his kingdom (Matt 26: 30; Luke 22: 15-18, 28- 30). Through assembling as a community of believers, we enter the sanctuary of God. We actually join the heavenly throng around the throne of God through assembling with the saints on earth.

Fourth, sacrament is the experience of the eschaton—a participation in the future reality of the kingdom of God. Through Baptism we already experience our own resurrection by participating in the resurrection of Jesus. Through the Lord's Supper we already eat at the future Messianic banquet by eating at the table of the Lord. Through assembly we already participate in the future eschatological gathering of the people of God around the throne.

Fifth, sacrament is experienced through faith. Without faith, there are no eyes to see or experience the spiritual reality to which the signs point and in which the symbols participate. Thus, by faith we are buried and raised with Christ in Baptism (Col 2: 12). By faith we eat at the table of the Lord (1 Cor 10: 16-22). And by faith we draw near to God (Heb 10: 22; cf. 11: 6). The assembly that is gathered to God—gathered to worship the Father and gathered into the name of Jesus—is, by faith, a communal sacramental encounter with God in the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Quotes from John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2007).

# Quotes From Book

A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter,  
By John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton and Bobby Valentine

## Old Testament

Major texts establishing this rhythmic liturgical calendar are found in Leviticus 23, Numbers 28-29, and Deuteronomy 16. Leviticus 23 offers a number of key themes that clarify the significance of these festivals where sacred space encompasses the life of Israel. First, four times the text emphasizes that these occasions are “the Lord’s meetings” or “Lord’s appointed seasons” (23: 2, 4, 37, 41). God expects his people to carve out time to meet him. Second, these gatherings are “sacred assemblies” (NIV) or “holy convocations” (NRSV). This phrase occurs nine times (Lev 23: 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 21, 24, 27, 35, 36, 37). The Hebrew term *miqra* can mean “call,” “summons,” or even “reading.”<sup>12</sup> It is a summons to gather as assembly. These “holy convocations” were gatherings to celebrate the greatness of God and to hear his word.<sup>9</sup>

these holy convocations are characterized by the phrase “do not do any regular work” (Lev 23: 7, 8, 21, 25, 28, 30-31, 36). No workaholics were allowed in ancient Israel. Life easily gets out of balance but the religious calendar was designed to bring shalom into their lives. The disruption of life as usual by holy convocations of gathered worship brought balance. God never intended his human creation to live as slaves to Pharaoh or to any other task master except the supremely benevolent One. The festivals were characterized as times of great joy and rejoicing (Deut 16: 11, 14, 15). Through regular appointed meetings with the Lord in holy convocation, Yahweh renewed the grace of joy so often missing in this fallen world. The Torah prescribed six principal festivals—Sabbath, Passover and Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles. The Sabbath heads the list of holy convocations in Leviticus. The Sabbath firmly grounds the rhythm of life in Israel as it celebrated two great facts. First, it celebrated the creation of the world. By so doing Israel affirmed that she herself is a creation. She, and the world, exist by divine grace. As such, Sabbath assemblies celebrated family, friends and food as good gifts from the hand of the Lord as they met weekly for Sabbath meals. Second, Israel celebrated her salvation from slavery. This broke the daily grind of labor by affirming that Yahweh has set us free.<sup>10</sup>

[T]win themes of creation and redemption supercharge Israel to become a living Sabbath for the world. Indeed through the Sabbath assembly two worlds collide—the world that is and the world that is to come. “For the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest; joy is part of this world; holiness and rest are something of the coming world.”<sup>11</sup>

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9 John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2007). Kindle Page 45 · Location 617

10 Hicks, Melton and Valentine, *A Gathered People*: Kindle Page 46 · Location 628

11 *Ibid.* Page 46 · Location 640



## **New Testament**

The new community of the Spirit, in the tradition of the festival, gathered to hear the word, commune at God's table and shared the bounty of God's provision with the poor (Acts 2: 42-46).<sup>12</sup>

uncertain whether Luke intends to describe two or four activities in Acts 2: 42. The apostles' teaching and fellowship are apparently the two main ideas, as Luke does not use a conjunction between "fellowship" and "breaking of bread." Consequently, breaking bread and prayer are expressions of fellowship. As a result, while four items are noted, the list is really two, as the second has two sub-points: word and fellowship (including table and prayer).<sup>13</sup>

Practicing the kingdom of God, therefore, involves the public proclamation of the kingdom of God (the apostles' teaching) and the fellowship of sharing food, resources, and prayers. This daily rhythm of teaching and sharing, word and table, Temple and homes characterized these early Christians.<sup>14</sup>

## **Christian assembly**

[The] word ekklesia (church) appears frequently in 1 Corinthians (1: 2; 4: 17; 6: 4; 7: 17; 10: 32; 11: 16, 18, 22; 12: 28; 14: 4, 5, 12, 19, 23; 28; 33-35; 15: 9; 16: 1, 19). Its basic definition is assembly, a congregation, or simply a gathering of people. The English word "church" (also German kirche and Scottish kirk) is derived "from the Byzantine Greek form kurike" which means "belonging to the Lord." In that sense the church is a people who belong to the Lord, but the term ekklesia refers to an assembly.<sup>15</sup>

Referring to the people of God, ekklesia "always speaks of the coming together of God's people in answer to his call, in order to meet with God in the company of each other and to meet each other in the presence of God." As J. Ridley Stroop noted, it is better to translate ekklesia as "assembly" because it essentially "can mean nothing more or nothing less." The church is an assembly, a gathered people—baptized believers, filled with the Spirit, enjoying the forgiveness of sins, coming together to encounter God and share the love of Christ with one another, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and to be the instruments of that kingdom in the world.<sup>16</sup>

they are "assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus" and Paul is also with them "in the power" of Christ's own "presence" (1 Cor 5: 4). When the people of God gather in the name and presence of Christ, they act as the body of Christ and enact the gospel demands of the kingdom. To "drive out the wicked person from among you" means that they should no longer eat with him, that is, they do not consider him part of the assembly of God that is privileged to eat at the Lord's table (1 Cor 5: 11-13). The unity expressed by the bread and cup is no place for the immoral brother—he is excluded from the assembly's table fellowship. Further, life according to the gospel produces a benevolent disposition toward the poor. Paul instructs the Corinthians to use their weekly Sunday gatherings as an occasion to collect funds for the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16: 1-2; cf. Gal 2: 10; Rom 15: 25-33; 2 Cor 8: 4, 18-21; 9: 1). Paul's gospel concern for the poor reflects both the ministry of Jesus (Luke 4: 17-18; 12: 33) and the Jerusalem community (Acts 2: 44-45; 4: 32).<sup>17</sup>

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12 *ibid.* Page 48 · Location 663

13 *Ibid.* Page 62 · Location 893

14 *ibid.* Page 64 · Location 915

15 *Ibid.* Page 70 · Location 1030

16 *Ibid.* Page 71 · Location 1036

17 *Ibid.* Page 71 · Location 1049

### **Illustration of doctrines application**

Through the Spirit we enter the heavenly Jerusalem where we share the future with all the saints gathered around the world and spread throughout time. Through the Spirit the assembly mediates to us the eschatological assembly of God's people around the throne that transcends time and space. This experience is more meaningful to me than almost any other. I have told my story in several other writings. I have lost a wife, a father and a son to death. Unlike many grievers, I rarely visit their graves. I feel no compulsion or need to do that. It is not a meaningful experience for me, though it is for many and God be praised for the comfort he gives through those visitations. For me, however, given my sacramental understanding of assembly, I enjoy the presence of my departed loved ones when I assemble with the saints—past and present—on the Lord's Day. There we meet in sweet communion as the whole of the heavenly Jerusalem gathers in festive assembly. There I feel closer to my son than when I visit his grave. Assembly is an eschatological experience, a sacramental presence. It is the union of time and space in the presence of God. It is a moment when the living and the dead are together before the throne.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Ibid. Page 15 Location 135