



WHAT ARE THE SACRAMENTS?

THEME
7

The Biblical Foundations of Baptism

PART
1

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

The Christian sacraments have been sources of intense discussion throughout church history. In Protestant churches baptism and the Lord's Supper have emerged as the two sacraments commanded or instituted by Jesus Christ and available to all persons. Yet Protestant churches have squabbled over the most appropriate mode of baptism (sprinkling, pouring, immersion) and the way in which Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. Some Protestant churches refer to sacraments as "ordinances." It is ironic that those special, visible signs given to us as Christians as a means of bolstering our faith, should be the source of so much division within the body of Christ.

The Old Testament and the New

An important dimension of this session is the exploration of the Old Testament roots of the Christian practice of baptism. We do this first in terms of the use of water for ritual washings and purification. These Jewish practices indicate one aspect of God's ways of working with the people of God: visible, everyday elements—such as water—are used to convey important theological meanings. The common usage of such elements is transformed when they are used by God to convey a significant message. As the *Resource Book* indicates, the apostle Paul also associated the act of circumcision with Christian baptism. Circumcision was a sign and seal of God's covenant promises now received in Jesus Christ. God uses ordinary actions and common elements to convey a new message. The physical is a means of communicating the spiritual.

It is important to see these linkages between the Old Testament and the New. The practice of Christian baptism is rooted in Old Testament precedents and understandings. Unfortunately, a dichotomy or disjunction is often set up between the two major divisions of the Bible. The Old Testament is viewed as a collection of books with no real relevance for "New Testament" Christians. To realize that the basic entry rite into the

Christian church emerges from Old Testament practices and understandings gives us a stronger appreciation for the unity of the Testaments.

Baptism and the Spirit

An important thread to recognize throughout this session is the association of baptism with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist predicted one to come who would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:10). The Spirit’s presence and power enabled the early church in its witness (Acts 2:38). In Paul’s writings, the Spirit unifies the church (1 Corinthians 12:13) and is sealed in believers’ lives in baptism (Ephesians 1:13). Notice also the connections of “water” and “Spirit” in John’s Gospel (3:5; 7:38-39 etc). Union with Jesus Christ means the reception of the Spirit of God.

These biblical perspectives remind us that baptism is a very special action. Many churches practice infant baptism as well as adult or “believer’s” baptism. Other churches admit only the validity of “believer’s” baptism. Regardless of specific practices and beliefs, it is a common Christian conviction that baptism is linked with the reception of God’s Holy Spirit. No other rite could be more significant in a Christian’s life. No other experience could more completely radicalize life or set it in a new and meaningful direction than Christian baptism. To receive the Holy Spirit of God and be reminded of that action by the sacrament of baptism is a tremendously powerful event. Our own baptism continues to have an ongoing effect in our lives as we become more constantly aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence with us. The church itself is the fellowship of the Spirit in that among us, God’s Spirit is at work. Each time a baptism is performed and each time we witness a baptism, we can give joyful thanks for the continuing work of the Spirit in the church, in the world, and in our own lives.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Trace the development of sacraments in early church history.
2. Identify several Old Testament roots of the Christian practice of baptism.

3. Describe the relationship of baptism by water and the Holy Spirit, using a New Testament account of baptism.
4. State at least three biblical meanings of baptism.

Resources You May Need

Nametags

Chalkboard or newsprint, chalk or markers

Chart for Activity #5 in Setting the Stage

Copies of the assignments for Activity #3 in Exploring the Scripture

Slips of paper with Bible references for Activity #4 in Exploring the Scripture

Hymnals

Copies of "Passed through the Waters" by Avery and Marsh

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Open the session with a prayer for minds that are open and receptive to God's leading.
2. If even one participant is a stranger to the others in the group, take time for everyone to give his or her first name. It might be helpful at this first session to provide name tags.
3. This session will be most effective if members of the group received their books in time to prepare for their study together. However, if participants are not familiar with the *Resource Book*, guide them through its structure, pointing out:
 - the two themes, with their chapters or parts
 - the summary of the content, basic Bible references, and word list for each chapter
 - in the Foreword, guidance for preparing for the group meetings
4. Introduce the theme by asking for responses to one or more of the following questions:

- a. When you were a child, what special rituals did your family have? (For example, at bedtime or Sunday activities.)
- b. What special rituals/activities/traditions do you have in your present family?
- c. Are there groups to which you belong that have special rituals or practices? What are some of these and what are the reasons for such rituals?

Conclude this activity with the comment that rituals enable us to know who we are and where we belong. In the church the sacraments convey what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ.

5. Depending on the length of the session, introduce the study of the sacraments in one of the following ways:

Briefly review the Introduction to this part in the *Resource Book*, using this chart to show early church understandings of the sacraments.

3rd century	Tertullian—a new Christian's commitment to Christ
4th century	Followers of Tertullian—pointers to the divine mystery revealed in the gospel
5th century	Augustine—"visible signs of divine things"
13th century	Accepted Augustine's definition—number of sacraments set at seven in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches
16th century	Luther, Calvin—number of sacraments limited to those instituted by Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper

OR

Give a mini-lecture tracing the history of sacramental doctrine in the early church, using as a resource *Theological Turning Points*, Chapter 7, "Sacramental Controversy" on pages 115-124, and "What Are the Sacraments Today?" on pages 173-174. If you have access to the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No. 111, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, include some ideas from it.

and

Comment: Augustine defined a sacrament as “a visible sign of divine things,” or “a sign of a sacred thing.” He also said a word must be added to the sign to make it a sacrament.

Ask: How do you respond to this application of Augustine’s ideas—“The sacraments ought never to be celebrated unless accompanied by the preached word”? Solicit reasons for expressed agreement and disagreement.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Comment: Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper make use of basic, well-known elements (water, bread, wine) and both have their roots in the Old Testament.

Ask the members of the group to turn to the section entitled “Old Testament Background” in the *Resource Book*. Then lead the group in a discussion of the Old Testament roots of baptism, using these or similar questions.

- a. What Old Testament stories do you recall in which water played a significant part? (As stories are named, record them on newsprint.)
- b. What symbolic uses of water can be found in these stories? (Write responses next to the related story.)
- c. Which of these symbolic meanings are also found in Christian baptism?
- d. In what ways do you see our sacrament of baptism rooted in the ritualistic use of water as recorded in the Old Testament?
- e. Why did Jesus condemn such practices in Mark 7:1-4? What often happens to rituals over the years?
- f. Do you see any diminishing of or changes in the significance of baptism in our churches today?

or

Give a report on ritual washings in Old Testament Israel, using material from the *Resource Book* and a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. Following the report, ask:

- a. In what ways are these Old Testament practices similar to Christian baptism?

- b. Why did Jesus condemn the scribes and Pharisees for following these rituals?
- c. What causes rituals to lose their initial power and meaning?
- d. How would you evaluate the power and meaning of the sacraments in today's church?

and

Introduce Ezekiel 36:22-32 with some background information about the prophet and the book. Then ask participants to silently read the passage in their Bibles. After a few minutes, lead the group in considering the relationship with God made possible through the cleansing action of water. Ask: What is the role of each party in the covenant? In what ways is this envisioned experience of cleansing similar to Christian baptism?

2. Comment: Authority to baptize believers comes from the words of Jesus found in Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 16:15-16. Lead the group in reading these passages aloud or, if participants are using several different versions of the Bible, invite several persons to read from their favorite translation. Encourage discussion with questions such as these:
 - a. What, for you, are the key words in these passages? (Record the responses on newsprint or a chalkboard.)
 - b. How do these words inform the practice of baptism in the church today? (If no one mentions the use of the Trinitarian formula, add it yourself.)
3. Introduce this activity with a comment such as the following: In the New Testament baptism by water was usually accompanied by the gift of Holy Spirit. Give each person a copy of one of the following research assignments.

Assignment #1

- a. Review "The Baptism of John" in the *Resource Book* and Matthew 3:1-12 and Mark 1:4.
- b. How was John's baptism both like and different from the purification rituals commonly practiced by the Jews of his time?
- c. What did baptism mean to those who came to John?

- d. What relationship did John's baptism have to baptism as administered by the followers of Jesus?
- e. What place did the Holy Spirit have in John's baptism?

Assignment #2

- a. Dr. McKim raises the question asked by John the Baptist and many others since John: Since Jesus was without sin, why did he ask for baptism? How have you answered that question for yourself in the past? What answers suggested by Dr. McKim in the section of the *Resource Book* entitled "The Baptism of Jesus" do you find most helpful? Why?
- b. What relationship do you see between what John was preaching as recorded in Matthew 3:1-12 and what occurred at Jesus' baptism?
- c. What do you understand to be the significance of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus?
- d. In what ways is this significance reflected in baptism today?

Assignment #3

- a. Review Acts 2:37-42, Acts 10:34-48 and "Baptism in the Book of Acts" in the *Resource Book*.
- b. In what ways is the experience of baptism for these early Christians similar to and different from the Old Testament rituals and from John's baptism?
- c. What support do you find in these scriptures for the interdependence of "word" and "sign" in the sacrament?
- d. What did baptism mean to those in the two biblical accounts in Acts?
- e. How was the Holy Spirit operative in these baptisms?

Following the distribution of the assignments, encourage members of the group to move to other parts of the room to complete their work.

After about fifteen minutes, reconvene the group. Ask those who worked on Assignment #1 to respond to the questions they received. Invite other members of the group to ask further questions or make comments. Follow the same procedure with those who worked on Assignments #2 and #3.

OR

Comment: In the New Testament baptism is almost always by water and the Holy Spirit. It is important for us to explore the significance of such baptism for that time and for this.

Divide the participants into small groups and assign to each group one of these sections in the *Resource Book*: “The Baptism of John,” “The Baptism of Jesus,” and “Baptism in the Book of Acts.” Provide each group with a copy of the following guide for their study.

- a. Review the assigned section of the *Resource Book* and the scripture passages in bold type.
- b. In these passages, what was the meaning of baptism to those being baptized? What effect did the baptism have on their lives?
- c. Dr. McKim says that it is a common Christian conviction that baptism by water is linked with the reception of the Holy Spirit. What support do you find for that statement in the scripture references in the material you read?
- d. How would you respond to a person who says that the Holy Spirit comes only to some persons, usually through some unusual occurrence?

After about fifteen minutes bring the groups together. Ask each group to report on the meanings of baptism found in their scripture passages. List these on newsprint. Then ask: How are these meanings reflected in our church’s practice of baptism? (Save this list for the next activity.)

Next, ask the groups for reports on the experience of baptism by the Holy Spirit as found in their scripture passages. Ask: What place does baptism by the Holy Spirit have in our church’s understanding and practice of baptism?

4. Comment: We do not know how many persons Paul baptized, but we do know that baptism was of great significance to him. Distribute slips of paper with one of the following references to two or three people seated together. Ask them to find theological ideas and meanings about baptism in their passage. Give only two or three minutes for this search, before calling for reports.

Romans 6:1-4

Ephesians 1:13-14

Romans 6:5-6

Ephesians 4:1-6

Romans 6:7-11

Colossians 2:11-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Titus 3:5

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

John 3:5

Galatians 3:26-29

As groups report their findings, add their responses to the list you began in alternate activity #3 above. If you did not use that activity, begin a list now. Save this list for use in the next session.

and

Ask: As we look at this list, what guidance do these biblical understandings of baptism provide the church in its teaching about and administration of the sacrament of baptism? How might we use this material in meetings with parents seeking baptism for their children? In meetings with adults seeking baptism?

or

With this list as background, write a letter to an infant or young child who is being baptized, for him or her to read at the age of confirmation.

CLOSING

Distribute copies of your church's hymnal and read or sing one of the hymns for baptism.

or

If you have access to the song, "Passed Through the Waters," by Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, look at the biblical allusions in the verses before singing it.

and

Tell the group about Martin Luther's practice each morning of placing his hand on his head and saying, "I am baptized." Invite them to remind themselves of their baptism each day between now and the next meeting of the group. Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's saving grace experienced in baptism.

Supplementary Reading

Theological Turning Points, by Donald K. McKim (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988), Chapter 7, "Sacramental Controversy," and pages 173-174, "What Are the Sacraments Today?"

Faith Seeking Understanding, by Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991) Chapter 11, "Proclamation, Sacraments and Ministry," pages 211-220.

Basic Christian Doctrine, by John H. Leith (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pages 251-256.

Looking Ahead

1. Recruit five persons to present a symposium on images of baptism in the early church. Give each one the appropriate guidance from the directions for small groups in Activity #2 in Exploring the Scripture in the next session. Inform them that they will each have three minutes for their presentations.
2. Ask three persons to prepare two or three minute responses to the following questions for Activity #4 in Exploring the Scripture in the next session:
 - a. Who may baptize? Refer to *Theological Turning Points*, pages 126-133.
 - b. At what age should baptism be administered? See *Faith Seeking Understanding*, pages 214-220.
 - c. What is the practice of baptism in this congregation: age, mode, who can baptize, frequency of the sacrament, parental responsibility, etc.? Suggest a consultation with the pastor.