

The Case for Covenantal Baptism and Communion

Since the death and resurrection of Christ, the church has regarded baptism and communion as sacraments. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin *sacramentum* (English: holy oath), which is itself a translation of the Greek word *musterion* (English: mystery).¹ The Roman context of *sacramentum* is that of an individual forming a relationship with the gods, and indeed, for Paul the *musterion* of Jesus’ gospel is that the Gentiles now have access to a fully formed relationship with God.² The focus of the sacraments, therefore, is on the relationship between God and his people - and that relationship is intrinsically *covenantal* in nature.

The Foundation: Covenant

The Old Testament Hebrew word for covenant is “*berit*,” and, depending on the context, can be translated as “treaty,” “pact,” “agreement,” or “solemn promise.” While the New Testament Greek uses a different word than *musterion* to describe the Hebrew term for covenant, they both communicate the same thing: “a relationship by way of solemn/holy oath.” Several New Testament authors explicitly make this semantic connection between covenant and sacrament in their description of the practice of communion.³ There are numerous types of covenant in scripture, but those pertaining to the relationship between God and mankind are specifically redemptive.⁴ Genesis 3 paints the picture of God’s perfect world wrecked by one man’s sin, and God’s promise for someone to restore creation is the controlling feature of each subsequent covenant with humanity- much like constructing a new building begins with the foundation and then adds more stories.⁵

The three redemptive covenants made with Noah, Abraham, and Jesus each do a unique work in the overall redemption of mankind, yet progressively build upon the prior covenant. They also each have unique requirements for making and participating in their respective redemptive covenant:

Covenant Representative	Covenant Making	Covenant Participating
1) Noah	Rescue-by-Ark	Rainbow
2) Abraham	Circumcision	Sacrificial System
3) Jesus	Baptism	Communion

As you can see, the two sacraments of baptism and communion are the direct descendants of the Old Testament pattern of covenant *making* and *participating* (respectively). In other words:

The sacraments of baptism and communion are “*holy oaths*” of redemptive relationship making and participating between God and His people.

The New Testament sacraments are not original to the New Testament church, but rather have a long pre-sacramental history in the practices of the Old Testament church. The person and work of Jesus gives these practices new meaning for the sake of the New Testament church. To dive deeper into that claim, it is helpful to survey their respective biblical development.

¹ Oxford Dictionary: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sacrament>

² Ephesians 3:1-6. The English “mystery” here in Ephesians is the Greek “*musterion*,” which is in turn translated as the Latin “*sacramentum*.”

³ Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25.

⁴ See our position paper on Covenant for a fuller description of the biblical use of this term and its various applications.

⁵ See Romans 6. See also Genesis 3:15

The Origins and Meaning of Baptism: Covenant Making

As discussed above, baptism is Redemptive Covenant *Making*. Prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, Baptism was an Old Testament cleanliness ritual where a Levitical priest sacrificed an animal and mixed its ashes with clean water. Both Jews and Gentiles would then bathe in it for ritual purity.⁶ Later, John the Baptist adapted this cleanliness ritual by using the Jordan River as his water source and omitting the sacrificial animal's ashes.⁷ Though receiving John's baptism was certainly an example of great piety on the part of those John baptized, from the standpoint of Mosaic law this act lacked any ritual meaning without the sacrificial animal. Significantly, Jesus' baptism by John was necessary not for the forgiveness of Jesus' sins, but to "fulfill all righteousness" by providing the sacrificial animal that John's baptism lacked.⁸

Did you catch that? *By inserting himself in the Jordan River, Jesus declares himself to be the missing sacrificial animal!*

Interestingly, this very point is made by Paul when he meets some Jews who had received John's baptism, but did not know who Jesus was. When Paul makes clear that John's baptism of repentance only worked in conjunction with the person and work of Jesus, they were all baptized again in Jesus' name (thus including the otherwise-missing component of Jesus as their atoning sacrifice).⁹

Q :: Does this mean that baptism "saves" you?

Apart from the work of Christ, baptism is just a bath. Only Jesus, placing himself in the water, provides the act of baptism with any meaning. Paul declares in Romans 6 that entering the baptismal waters is participating in Jesus' death, and rising from those waters is participating in His resurrection.¹⁰ We enter the water, but that act lacks power apart from Jesus' sacrifice.¹¹ In other words we are saying that Jesus saves you, and baptism is "holy oath" making with the one who does the saving.

Q :: Who is baptism for?

The bible makes an explicit connection between baptism and the Noahic covenant making act of entrance onto the Ark, as well as the Abrahamic covenant making act of circumcision:

- 1 Peter 3:20-21 "because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"
- Colossians 2:11-12 "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

Peter's baptism/ark analogy connects the two acts of redemptive covenant making, and through this analogy he invites us to compare them. As the narrative in Genesis 6-9 describes, Noah's sons

⁶ Numbers 19:1-10 discusses the ritual "water for impurity."

⁷ Matthew 3:5-6. Matthew specifically connects this with the sin offering of the "water for impurity" in Numbers 19 by noting that those who were being baptized did so while confessing their sins.

⁸ Matthew 3: 13:17

⁹ Acts 19:3-5

¹⁰ See also Colossians 2:12

¹¹ It is because of this Christ-centered understanding of salvation that good, Jesus-loving churches can disagree on baptism and still worship together!

Shem, Ham, and Japheth were not on the ark because of their own faith but because of Noah's. This very fact is demonstrated after the flood in Genesis 9 as Ham's wicked heart (faithlessness) is revealed, and both he (and his future descendants) are kicked out of the family of God. While Ham's heart and behavior in Genesis 9 did not surprise God, *God still included Ham on the ark in Genesis 7-8 because of his father's faith*. Now that is grace! Likewise, the children of believers receive baptism "as an appeal to God for a good conscience," but the act of baptism does not itself impute that good conscience any more than Ham's ride on the Ark imputed Noah's faith in Ham.

Paul's comparison of baptism and circumcision links the expectation that believing parents would baptize their children just as they circumcised their sons eight days after birth.¹² Paul also compares baptism and communion with the life and history of Israel:

- 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ."

Here Paul connects baptism with passing through the Red Sea and communion with eating Manna in the desert. This historical analogy is particularly striking because the Israelites were not required to leave their infant children on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea, nor were they forbidden from feeding their children the manna God provided. Paul's purpose in mentioning this scene from Israel's history is that recipients of both sacraments may still fall away. In other words, just as Ham's passage on the Ark didn't impute Noah's faith, so too did Israel's passage through the Red Sea and sustenance in the desert not impute faith in them. In both cases, however, the children of believing parents participated fully in both the boat ride and the exodus. Children of believing parents, therefore, receive the full privileges of covenant membership.

Q :: What if I didn't grow up a believer?

The Old and New Testaments are filled with examples of people who became believers without having believing parents. Abraham (Josh 24:2-3), Rahab (Josh 2:1-21), Ruth (Ruth 1:1-18), Naaman (2 Kings 5), an Ethiopian Eunich (Acts 8:26-38), etc. were all from non-believing families who came to make "holy oaths" with the God of Israel. Just as the covenant making act of baptism is for the children of believing parents, so too is it for adults who profess faith.

The Origins and Meaning of Communion: Covenant Participating

Communion, like baptism, had a long history prior to its transformation into redemptive *Covenant Participating*. When Jesus instituted the practice of communion during the pre-Passover meal, He says:

"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."¹³

The phrase "new covenant" is itself not new. It comes from Jeremiah 31:31-32:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.

¹² See Leviticus 12:3 and Acts 7:8

¹³ Luke 22:19-21

The Passover celebration recalls how the Jews in Egyptian captivity smeared the blood of a lamb over the doorposts of their homes causing death to “pass over” them, and the following day Pharaoh set them free from captivity. Jeremiah’s words promised a new covenant whose redemptive deliverance would be even greater and more total than the people’s deliverance from Egypt. Not coincidentally, Jesus institutes communion with the cup of the new covenant during the pre-Passover meal, *declaring that his death and resurrection during the Passover celebration fulfilled Jeremiah’s “new covenant” prophecy.*

Communion also connects to the Levitical sacrifice of the peace offering. In fact, the pre-Passover meal is viewed as a sort of proto-peace offering.¹⁴ The peace offering was the sole offering in the sacrificial system that was enjoyed as a meal by both the priests and the family who offered it. Intended to bring the supplicants into the *shalom* (English: “peace” or “rest”) of God, this communal sacrifice was comprised of a sacral animal, a grain offering of unleavened *bread*, and a drink offering of *wine*.¹⁵ When Jesus presents the bread and cup of communion, he does so as a priest presenting the grain and drink offerings... but *without the sacral animal*. Just as Jesus substituted himself with the sacral animal of baptism, so too is he substituting himself with the sacral animal of the peace offering.¹⁶ The emphasis of communion on the *shalom* of God is also why a covenant member should refrain from communion if s/he is at odds with another covenant member, i.e. peace has been disrupted.¹⁷

Why is this biblical summary such a big deal? It reveals that in both baptism and communion, Jesus doesn’t overturn the sacrificial system but rather fulfills it.¹⁸ This summary demonstrates that Jesus has provided a complete and final sacrifice for our forgiveness and ritual purity, a better salvation than Passover, and an ongoing access to the *shalom* of God in which all can participate.

Q :: What happens to the bread and wine in communion?

Since the Reformation, much ink has been spilt over the mysterious way communion is described in the New Testament. The two ends of the interpretive spectrum are the “Transubstantiation” and “Memorial” views. Those who hold the Transubstantiation view believe that the ordinary bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Jesus. This assumption comes from Jesus’ own words “This is my body” and “This is my blood.”¹⁹ The confusion comes when Jesus adds the clause “do this in remembrance of me.” The Memorial view primarily focuses on this last cause, assuming that the practice of communion today is done in memory of and as a mere representation of Jesus’ original sacrifice. So which is it? Do the bread and wine we take each week become the *literal* body and blood of Christ, or are they merely symbols?

The answer is: “that’s not the right question.” Focusing on what happens to the bread and wine is distracting because asking about it causes you to miss what communion is really about. Remember that the peace offering had 3 components: a sacral animal, a grain offering, and a drink offering. When Jesus, while holding the bread and wine, says “this is my body” and “this is my blood,” he is identifying himself, the bread, and the wine as the 3 components of the peace offering. In other words, after his death and resurrection, no other sacral animal will be needed – *the bread and wine are enough to complete the peace offering*. In fact, the unavoidable implication of Jesus substituting

¹⁴ See “The Eucharist As Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read The Bible” by C. John Collins, WTJ 66:1 (Spring 2004)

¹⁵ Leviticus 3:1-17; 15:1-7

¹⁶ Hebrews 9:11-14

¹⁷ 1 Cor 11:17-29; Matt 5:23-24

¹⁸ Matthew 5:17-18

¹⁹ Luke 22:19-21

Himself as one of the 3 peace-offering components is that He is *mysteriously and spiritually present with us* when we take the other two (bread and wine)... hence the name "communion." It doesn't matter whether or not anything mysterious happens to the bread and wine because the miracle is that the sacral animal is no longer needed!

Q :: Can you take the sacraments and not be "saved"?

As mentioned above, Paul cites the historical example of the exodus community as a warning to New Testament believers that full covenant members can fall away. This reality has led interpreters of scripture to coin two new terms: "Visible" and "Invisible" church. The "visible" church are those members of the historical church who have engaged in both covenant making and covenant participation. The "invisible" church are those members of the "visible" church who held right beliefs,²⁰ who acted rightly,²¹ and who had a right relationship with Jesus.²² The Old Testament described this difference as those who were circumcised in the flesh ("visible" church) and those who were also circumcised in the heart ("invisible" church), a theme that Paul picks up on in the New Testament.²³ So it would seem that you can make the "holy oaths" of baptism and communion and not be a member of the "invisible" church. The warning passages throughout scripture, then, are appeals at motivating those in the "visible" church to want to belong to the "invisible" church. This does not mean, however, that members of the "invisible" church can fall away. On the contrary, there are numerous passages throughout scripture that declare that God preserves His people,²⁴ and that they cannot lose their salvation.²⁵

Q :: What Are the Proper Modes of the Sacraments?

Though much discussion in the historical church has occurred around the proper modes of sacrament taking, none are explicitly described in scripture and are thus a matter of wisdom exercised by the church that observes them. Baptism may be done by full submersion or sprinkling. Communion may be done by common cup, intinction (dipping) or many tiny cups taken all at once, and may be done annually or weekly.

Conclusion

As we have seen, baptism is more than a bath and communion is more than a meal. By recognizing that the sacraments rightly belong to the category of redemptive covenant *making and participating*, we see now how important they are to the life of the church. Each sacrament weaves together unique facets of the biblical narrative and connects the individual to them in a tangible way. God's desire is that all members of the "visible" church are also members of the "invisible" church, and the sacraments are embodied practices that work God's redemptive plan into the believer's heart in a way that mere intellectual assent cannot.

²⁰ John 20:30-31

²¹ James 1:22-25

²² Matthew 7:22-23, Jesus indicates that saying and doing the right things are of no consequence if He doesn't know you. Being in an active relationship with Him is crucial to salvation.

²³ Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 9:25-26; Rom 2:29.

²⁴ Ps 37:28; 121:3,7-8; Jer 32:40; Heb 12:2; 1 Peter 1:4-5; Jude 1

²⁵ John 6:39, 10:27-29