



The Blessed Sacraments

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Introduction

In what follows, I have laid out the primary matters of the meaning, nature, and purpose of the holy sacraments of Christ's church: baptism and communion. At the outset let me say that what follows is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject. For a more comprehensive study of the subject I would recommend a complete systematic theology such as Millard Erickson's Christian Theology or that written by Lewis Sperry Schaeffer. What I have prepared is at a "what-you-need-to-know" level. I have also included sermons I delivered that deal with the broken body of Christ and the blood of Christ. My goal in preparing this booklet is to drop a beam of light on the path toward a richer and fuller understanding and practice of the sacraments.

The Christian life, as I have often said, is about strapping on your sandals, picking up your walking stick, and following after the Master of Mercy, Jesus Christ! Prayer and meditation are vital to the Christian life, and the reading of Scripture is essential to spiritual growth. To follow Christ we must engage Him through the sacramental life. Dear child of God, it is my prayer and earnest hope that what you find in the following pages will aide you along the journey of faith as you grow deeper in your relationship with God, as you find your sins washed away in baptism and your soul renewed in the life of Christ that has been imparted unto us through the broken body and shed blood of our Savior and Lord!

Baptism: Sign and Seal of the Covenant

Glorious mystery of baptism! What is baptism? It is the outward sign and seal of the New Covenant, the Covenant of God's Grace. I affirm both the "paedobaptist" (infant baptism) and the "craedobaptist" (believer's baptism) models as valid and in keeping with the message of the New Testament. In Romans 6:3–4 the apostle Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (ESV). The primary purpose of baptism is the identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

There are those who will contend that one mode of baptism is more valid than the other. Some even argue that unless a person is baptized in just a certain way, the baptism is not legitimate. There are others who are of the impression that it is the act of baptism that brings salvation into a person's life. To these I say that the Bible is clear that faith alone is the right response to the offer of God's grace that brings a person into a saving relationship with God. Romans 3:28 says, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (ESV). Faith saves because it is the means by which we receive the free offer of God's grace in Jesus Christ. No works, not even good and appropriate works such as baptism, bring us into a right relationship with God unto eternal life.

Baptism is the outward symbol of the covenant. When infants are baptized we are setting them apart for the Lord and welcoming them into the covenant family of faith. We are promising that we will hold fast in the faith and raise those children in the admonition of the Lord so that one day they, like us, will be able to personally proclaim faith in Christ. Upon children confirming their baptism through the formal process of confirmation, in a sense they "ratify" their baptism, making it complete according to faith. Until that day comes they are held

fast by the promise of God's grace. All children are the gift of God and they are secure in Him from the moment of their conception. With regard to the eternal security of infants, suffice it to say this: the baptism of infants is not a means for securing salvation for them; that, they already have. It is a means of declaring the truth that they are the Lord's.

Baptism is a public proclamation of faith. When we baptize an adult convert or a child who was previously dedicated to the Lord as an infant and still requires believer's baptism; it is a public and personal proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ. Whereas infants who are baptized publicly proclaim their faith at the time of confirmation, the adult or adolescent believer who is baptized for the first time publically professes faith in Christ. In either case, the purpose of baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace is accomplished through the two necessary components: the symbol of water and that of God's saving faith according to His perfect grace.

It is my contention that the method of baptism is not nearly as significant as the means. Whether one is fully immersed in water, has water applied through pouring, or is sprinkled with water, the symbolic act of the application of water accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ is what matters. Just as God flooded the entire earth with water in Noah's day, that He might wash away the terrible sin and corruption of humanity, so too, baptism is symbolic of the washing away of our sin and the renewal of life that it brings. Just as it was God's sovereign act in Noah's day, so too, God saves according to grace, not by the manner in which we baptize.

Baptism is beautiful and it is important. It is right that all of God's people should participate in it. The ultimate beauty of baptism is that it symbolizes that God washes away sin and imparts the life of Christ unto us, His children!

Communion: *An Invitation to Receive Christ*

Oh precious and holy communion! There are few moments in the worship life of the church that are more satisfying to this pastor's heart than the celebration of holy communion. Jesus Christ died for the world. John 3:16–17 tells us that Jesus came into the world as an expression of God's unsurpassable love that we, through faith in His Son, might be reconciled unto God. He did not come to condemn the world, though it was lost in sin; He came to make the very real and valid offer of salvation to all who will place their trust in Him. It is for this reason that at First Congregational Church of Peru we practice an open communion table.

All that is required to partake of the Lord's Meal is personal faith in Jesus Christ. I would greatly encourage you, though, to do as the Scriptures tell us —to examine your own heart prior to receiving communion. This is a time when we confess our sins to God and thank Him for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who took the place of our punishment on the cross. God, in His infinite mercy, provided His own Son to satisfy the wrath that human sin had incurred. God is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful; He is holy and full of grace. In order that we might be reconciled unto Him and enjoy the relationship with Him that was intended, He made a way for forgiveness.

Blessed saint, if you are found alive in Christ through faith, your sins are forgiven, God's grace is poured out over you, and the gulf that once separated you from God has been bridged! The sacrifice of Christ and His resurrection are an invitation to receive forgiveness and new life. We shall never be perfect in this life but oh, the blessed assurance of the life to come that is secured in the sacrifice we commemorate in Holy Communion!

Sermon 1: A Costly Meal, John 6:1–15, 35

A church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. “I’ve gone for 30 years now,” he wrote, “and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can’t remember a single one of them. So, I think I’m wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all.” This started a real controversy in the “Letters to the Editor” column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher: “I’ve been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals but I do know this. They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!”

When you are down to nothing, God is up to something! Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible! Thank God for our physical and spiritual nourishment! In what follows, we will examine the most costly meal of all: Jesus the Bread of Life! Chapter 6 of the book of John records the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand. It is interesting that this is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That fact alone should alert us to the significance of this miracle.

While the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) most often use the phrase “miracles” to describe the mighty works of Jesus, John alone focuses on seven “signs” of Jesus. He uses the word “signs” to indicate that Jesus was divine. The seven miracles of John’s gospel are presented as signs to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John says that the sheer number of signs Jesus performed were innumerable; they could not possibly be recorded. The number

of signs Jesus performed in light of the seven John records indicates to us the great weight that should be given to them.

These particular signs were not chosen to be recorded by happenstance. John is precise in His gospel, as he wrote in John 20:30–31, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” I love the gospel of John. Indeed, I have studied it more frequently and return to it with greater passion than the other Gospels. While they are each of extreme value and are divinely inspired, John’s gospel presents the eight signs of Jesus and the eight “I AM” statements of Jesus that point to His divine nature, and the message of John’s gospel centers around two key words: believe and live.

In his gospel, John in essence declares, “Here is Jesus, the one who came in signs and wonders too numerous to recount, here are the eight of them that show us that He indeed is God. Here is Jesus, the one who declared Himself to be divine not only by His miraculous works, but also by plainspoken declaration, and here are eight ways He spoke it plainly, using the phrase of self-existent deity: I AM. Here is Jesus, His words, His acts, that upon hearing you may believe and upon believing, you may live unto eternal life!”

Upon entering my text, it is with fear and trembling that I handle such a profound and precious truth as this. It is with great weight of heart and earnestness of mind that I implore you to lend me your ear and the Holy Spirit access to your very will that in listening you might hear and in knowing you might be known. May it be we who are nourished this day by the Bread of Life! In John chapter 6, a great crowd has gathered unto Jesus. The people were very curious about Jesus. Word was spreading about the man who had performed so many miraculous healings of the sick and who spoke with such authority to the religious leaders of the day, even with regard to

their sin! Jesus was something of a celebrity and people wanted to see what all the talk was about. A great crowd had gathered and it was growing late in the day. In Jesus' concern for the welfare of the people, we learn a great lesson for the church. While Jesus is primarily concerned for the spiritual well-being of people and their eternal destiny, He also cares about our here-and-now needs.

A church that nourishes the spirit but refuses to nourish the body neglects a significant portion of the ministry of God. Indeed, Jesus' primary purpose in all His miracles or signs was to demonstrate His divine origins and power. This is clear from a plain reading of the Scriptures. However, time and again the Bible declares that Jesus took compassion on people. God is primarily concerned with matters of eternity, but His love for us extends to the immediate needs and circumstances of our lives as well. Just as God provided the manna that rained down from heaven to feed the Israelites on their journey out of captivity from Egypt, so too, when we are submitted to God's will and authority in our lives, the Scripture says that He will provide all of our needs.

God has not promised to make us rich, oh, but by His riches He has promises to supply our needs in Christ Jesus! The season in which the provision of manna took place was near the Passover feast in the spring. The Passover commemorated the "passing over" of the Spirit of the Lord on the houses of the Israelite people who had sprinkled their doorposts with the blood of a lamb at the time when God would judge the king and the nation of Egypt for their cruel treatment and unwillingness to free God's people.

The events of the Passover and the provision of the manna that fell from heaven to feed and sustain the Israelite people are so closely linked to the life of Christ that any conclusion other than a clear connection is unavoidable. The slaying of the lamb whose blood covered the doorposts of the people of Israel was a shadow of the spotless and blameless

lamb, which was to come in Christ. The manna, the bread that fell from heaven, was a picture of the Bread of Life that was to come in Christ. In Jesus' feeding of the five thousand near the time of Passover, He declares that it is He who has come to ultimately fulfill the promise of God shadowed in the manna from heaven. He is the Bread of Life. He is the bread of God's sustenance and provision!

Jesus, always the master teacher, sets the scene in preparation for the miraculous sign when He asks Philip, "Where will we get bread enough to feed all of these people?" Philip replies that eight months wages would not be enough even for each person to have a bit of bread! Philip's answer is like so many of our answers in the face of difficulty and challenge. Sure, his answer was truthful and perhaps he had even calculated the amount with fair accuracy. The trouble was that his answer was distinctly unimaginative. It is very often the case that our "realism" flies in the face of the gift of faith we have been given. Faith's potential and power in our lives is something so much greater than optimism can possibly be or become. Where realism only points out what cannot be done and where optimism's great pitfall is its tendency to walk blindly while saying that it can all be done, faith instead looks at what God has done in the past and declares boldly, "He can do it again!" Faith looks at what God has said and shouts, "Surely God will live up to His word!"

Precious few bridges to opportunity are built on the back of realism. But faith is the bridge across doubt and trouble, built on the framework of God's promises. Where Philip speaks the truth with a lack of imagination, Peter comes closer to faith in telling Jesus there is a little boy who has five barley loaves and two fishes. Peter, though terribly unsure of how this information will help, brings it to Jesus. We all do well to bring our fears, our doubts, our dreams, and our possibilities to Jesus. Surely Peter had no idea what was about to happen next. Just as we don't know what will happen next in our lives.

What a sight it must have been to see the disciples distributing the loaves and fishes, as they tore away a piece of bread and yet more remained. What an excitement must have swept through the crowd as the people realized what was happening. In John 6:14 the amazement of the people is recorded as they said, “This is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” The next verse recounts Jesus retreating from the masses, knowing the intent of their hearts—that they wanted to take Him by force to become their king not because of His message, but because of what He could do for them. Imagine a king who can do such miracles.

Oh, how often do we, like that crowd, and want to take Jesus away by force to be the king of our own desires? How many in our day look unto Christ purely for what He can do for them in this life, rather than laying down their lives to Christ and declaring, “Take me, a sinner, and make me whole!” Precious saints of God, Jesus’ ultimate purpose in feeding the five thousand was not for the temporary satisfaction of physical hunger, although, as I have mentioned previously, God is concerned with such things. Jesus’ ultimate purpose in feeding the five thousand is explained in this simply profound statement, “Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:35).

Christian speaker, Terry Bell, relates a memorable experience: “The year was 1969. It was my first “real” mission trip. I was in a little village in South India and terribly homesick. I was 20 years old and starving for a “good ole” American cheeseburger. I had not had one in 2 ½ months. The land around me was semi-jungle, semi-bush. Tarzan would have felt right at home, but I did not. One boring afternoon I whiled away the hours by playing with the monkeys that forever enlivened our premises. Standing out on the balcony, I teased the little primate creeps by giving them dough balls made from a loaf of bread I was holding. A hairy hand (or is it a paw?) would reach over the edge of the roof, I would place a morsel in

it, and like lightning, it was retracted to the squealing and grunting delight of his monkey-minded buddies. What a great game!

Suddenly I realized that on the street below my balcony a crowd had gathered. They were not nearly as entertained by this “monkeying around” as I was. One thin-faced, sickly looking boy looked up at me with bulging eyes. In broken English, he said, “Master, feed poor boys, not monkeys.” It was like a stab in the heart. In the street below were orphans, beggars, lepers ... the off-scourings of humankind. Mothers and fathers who had starving children. Children who watched malnourished parents die. Parents who would watch their hungry children watching them die, knowing they left them to a miserable life on the streets. And there I was, playing games with the bread that for them was so precious. I was cut to the heart.”

We, like those children playing the street are starving for the spiritual food which will nourish us unto eternal life! We, like those poor boys, desperately need the nourishment of the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, through faith in Him. And how many church goers are there who sit in seats of padded pews week in and week out and feed the monkeys of our own making, rather than tending the needs of the poor boys of our streets? Precious people of God, the feeding of the five thousand was a terribly costly meal, not because one little boy had to share his five loaves and two fishes, but because in the feeding of so many Christ taught us of the purpose of His coming into this world. He showed us that it would be His broken body that ultimately provides the eternal spiritual nourishment for which we all hunger.

Oh, it is a costly meal because once we have eaten of the Bread of Life, once we have become partakers of the beautiful offer of the manna, the bread from heaven, we must share such a meal with those around us. Even as we spread the message of Christ crucified for sin we must also lovingly share of our five loaves and two fishes with the starving boys of our

streets, whoever they may be and whatever form they may take.

While we celebrate the broken body of our Lord in the sacrament of communion, it is in a life lived in likewise sacrifice, reflecting the love and grace of God in Christ, that our Lord is glorified and that we are satisfied fully, in Him! Amen.

Sermon 2: *Brought Near by the Blood, Ephesians 2:11–22*

John Wesley rode across Hounslow Heath late one night singing a favorite hymn; he was startled by a fierce voice shouting, “Halt,” while a firm hand seized the horse’s bridle. Then the man demanded, “Your money or your life.” Wesley obediently emptied his pockets of the few coins they contained and invited the robber to examine his saddlebags which were filled with books. Disappointed at the result, the robber was turning away when evangelist cried, “Stop! I have something more to give you.” The robber, wondering at this strange call, turned back. Then Wesley, bending down toward him, said in solemn tones, “My friend, you may live to regret this sort of a life in which you are engaged. If you ever do, I beseech you to remember this, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanseth us from all sin.’” The robber hurried silently away, and the man of God rode along, praying in his heart that the word spoken might be fixed in the robber’s conscience.

Years later, at the close of a Sunday evening service with the people streaming from the large building, many lingered around the doors to see the aged preacher, John Wesley. A stranger stepped forward and earnestly begged to speak with Mr. Wesley. What a surprise to find that this was the robber of Hounslow Heath, now a well-to-do tradesman in the city, but better still, a child of God! The words spoken that night long ago had been used of God in his conversion. Raising the hand of John Wesley to his lips, he affectionately kissed it and said in tones of deep emotion, “To you, dear sir, I owe it all.”

Wesley replied softly, “Nay, nay, my friend, not to me, but to the precious blood of Christ which cleanseth us from all sin.”

What can take away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus can take away our sin. What can make us whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus can make us whole again. But, we need to ask two questions: 1) What is the power of Jesus Blood? and 2) What does the Apostle mean when he says that we have been brought near by the blood of Christ? (Is he referring to the liquid that fell from His body on the Cross? Is he referring to the celebration of communion in a worship service?) I will seek primarily to answer these two questions as well as give some historical background to enliven our understanding.

This is an ambitious undertaking for just one sermon, so it will not be exhaustive, but I trust that after having considered its meaning, you will be further compelled to move beyond understanding the foundation of the blood of Christ to understanding its ultimate fruit, experiencing the blood of Christ! At the outset I want to answer the two questions that I have raised already directly and plainly. I fear that there is a great deal of confusion in the minds of many believers with regard to the manner and nature of the meaning of the saving power of the blood of Christ. In this area of doctrine there are two major errors of biblical interpretation and application of this teaching.

There are many who are of the impression that this passage and those like it ought to be interpreted in light of Matthew 26:28 and the institution of the sacrament of communion. The idea is intrinsically linked to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition and among some high church Anglicans. While I respect greatly the sincerity of those who hold faithfully to their teachings, for the sake of doctrinal clarity, in light of what the Scriptures teach, it is important that we not make this error. There is no efficacy, no saving power, in the “liquid” of

communion just as there is no particular efficacy in the actual liquid blood that fell on Calvary's cross.

This is of course not to say that the blood has no power. Here in the text the apostle Paul says that we who were once outside of the covenants of God, we who were once distant from the grace and mercy of God, have been brought near by the blood of Jesus. The real question is what is meant by the blood. Jesus died a horribly bloody and painful death for you and me. When Paul speaks of us having been brought near to God by the blood of Christ he is saying that we have been brought near by the power of the sacrifice.

Indeed, we have been and are saved by the blood of Christ. We are brought near to God by the power of Christ's sacrifice! In the Old Testament, the people of God made a sacrifice of animals, offering the blood of the animal for the purification or cleansing of personal sins and the sins of the people. Leviticus 17:11 says, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." The blood symbolized the life of the animal, since without the blood nothing that lives can live.

When Paul tells us that we have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ, he is pointing to the allusion of the Old Testament to the New Testament. He is drawing a parallel between the sacrificial systems of the Old Testament— where God's chosen people alone could make sacrifices for their sins— and that of the New Testament where Christ has made a sacrificial atonement for all people, of all tribes, of all races, and of all nations! Where there was once a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile there is now no wall between any of God's children. We have received the life of Christ by the sacrifice of Christ, as represented by His blood. The painful death He suffered on our behalf highlights two things: man's inability to get life on His own and mankind's lost state and brokenness in sin. God sends a Savior when we are in

desperate need of love and forgiveness, and even then we routinely reject the beauty of God.

When Pilate stood before the people and offered to free Jesus, the man who had committed no sin, or Barabbas, a murderer and thief, they cried out, "Give us Barabbas! Give us Barabbas!" Pilate, prophetically (and likely unknown to him the majestic nature of his statement) said, "Let this man's [Jesus'] blood be on your heads and the heads of your children." At once Pilate pronounces the truth that the people whom Jesus had come to save rejected Him, and also that the very blood of that rejected sacrifice, the death of Christ, would indeed be on their heads. Covered in the blood of Christ we find the place of forgiveness for Jew and Gentile, for slave and free, for you and me!

The death of Christ also fulfills the promise of God foreshadowed in the sacrifice of animals in the Old Testament. I submit to you today, from the Holy Scriptures, that no man was ever saved by the blood of any animal, by the sacrifice of his hand, or by the good and obedient deeds of his keeping the law. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was but a type and a shadow of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ! His blood saves, this is true. But it saves not because of the elemental nature of the liquid, but because through the shedding of Christ's blood we have received the life of Christ!

Allow me to illustrate it this way. If a man who watched the crucifixion of our Lord had, having heard Jesus teach that he would be saved by His blood, run up to the cross after Jesus was removed and taken some of his blood and rubbed it on his head so that he might be "covered in the blood of Jesus," and if he had no religious devotion in his heart, no abiding love for the Savior in whose blood he was literally covered, then he would be no less lost in his sin than any other man who had ever lived. But, if that man watched the Savior die and placed his trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord and believed on Him for eternal life, then he, as the Scriptures say, would receive eternal life.

Through the sacrifice of Christ, through the shedding of His blood, we have received what that blood contains—the life of Christ!

All of the riches of Christ in His eternal glory have become ours! The Bible says that we are joint heirs with Christ. All of the righteousness of Christ which we could never earn in our fallen and imperfect state has become ours. We are not saved or given the grace of God because of our worthiness or any goodness in and of ourselves. We are saved from sin and its eternal consequences, because of the forgiveness we have received in Christ!

A sign in a convenience store read, “Check Cashing Policy: To err is human. To forgive, \$10.” It’s a funny way to recognize the fact that we make mistakes, but it is also evidence of the way many people think about forgiveness. To forgive is to accept within yourself the consequences of the sins of others. It means to accept the pain, the problems, and the burden that comes when someone sins against you. Forgiveness is neither an easy nor a frequent gift. This is what God has done for us: “...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18–19).

How is it that any man’s blood can atone or account for the sin of another? How is it that in Jesus’ death and subsequent rising from the dead we are made alive? How these things can be, our hearts cry out and our minds are left to wonder. It is because Jesus was not merely a man from the Holy Land. He was not merely another wise teacher or even a prophet of God. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us! Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, God incarnate, the mystery of God in the flesh that our minds cannot fully comprehend. This truth is that no truth can be fully apprehended from reading even the most wondrous of books and listening to the best of teachers, but only from communion with God.

The truth of Jesus' blood covering our sins, our having received His life, the life of Christ, the presence of God abiding within us by the power of the Holy Spirit is a truth so sacred that it can only be fully revealed from the spirit of God unto us. The Gospel is primarily about reconciliation with God. There has yet to be a rational person born under the sun who does not rightly sense that there is a God in the universe and know he must do something to correct the fact that he is somehow out of sync with Him. Religionists say that the way to correct our state of disconnection from God is to drink of the blood of the cross in a metaphysical, if not a physical, way in communion which has been prepared and presented in just the right way so that one might celebrate the real sacrifice of Christ weekly, even daily in communion. Moralizers say that the way to fix our disconnected relationship with God is to live according to the law, to live rightly, rigidly adhering to their standard of what that means.

The Bible, however, teaches that the sacrifice of animals was merely a shadow of the sacrifice of Christ and that the blood has made His life available through faith, not through the elements of wine and bread. Dear saints of God, won't you hear the word of the Lord today? It is the blood of Christ that brings us near unto God, not through physical elements and not through the ritual sacrifice of the works of our hands. The life of Christ is in His blood which has been poured out to satisfy the wrath of God toward sin. Therefore we do not stand condemned, but, in the words of Harry Green of Good News Prison Fellowship, we stand fully pardoned, having received the life of Christ through faith alone. We are not saved by good works that any man should boast, nor are we saved by the commemoration of the physical elements of communion that Christ's sacrifice should be repeated, as though it were originally in vain. Oh, precious grace, we are saved through faith in Christ and we are at peace with God as His Spirit abides in us! Amen.