

## SACRAMENTS

A *sacrament* is a ceremony that symbolizes and seals the experience of a spiritual reality. Jesus instituted two sacraments (also called “ordinances” because they were ordained by Christ) that have been practiced by the church ever since its inception: baptism in water and holy communion. These sacraments have an important place in the life of every believer.

### **What is water baptism?**

Water baptism is the sacrament of entry into the Christian life. Unlike holy communion, which is repeated again and again, baptism is a onetime ceremony that needs never to be repeated. It symbolizes our entrance in the Kingdom of God, and our new birth into His family.

Water baptism is not a means of salvation. Baptism in itself has no power to save. We are saved through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Without this faith, the only thing baptism can do is get us wet! Still, we must not underestimate the importance of baptism as a seal and symbol of what happens to us when we are saved.

Water baptism is a death-and-life experience. It signifies both the death of our old self and the new life we have received in Christ. Submersion beneath the water denotes the death of the person we used to be without Christ. The old life, built around me and my desires, is dead and buried (Romans 6:4). When we allow ourselves to be taken under, we let go of the old life, together with all the sin that beset it. We recognize and affirm that this life is worthy of death and must be left behind.

But thank God that baptism does not end there! After death comes resurrection (Romans 6:5). To be raised up from the water denotes the birth of our new life in Christ. We leave behind the old life in order to take up the new. From now on we are dead to sin, but alive to God (Romans 6:10).

In baptism, we affirm our union with Christ. We are united with Christ in His death, and so we die unto sin. We are united with Christ in His resurrection, and so we live a new life unto God (Romans 6:11). Through baptism, we identify with Christ, declaring our faith in His death and resurrection and our experience of these things in our own lives.

### **Why should we be baptized?**

Baptism cannot save us, nor is it a requirement for salvation. Why then should we be baptized?

- Jesus voluntarily submitted to baptism, though He had no need to. He serves as our example (Matthew 3:13-15).
- Jesus instructed that those who become His followers should be baptized (Matthew 29:19), and the apostles echoed these instructions (Acts 2:38).
- Water baptism is a testimony before God and before the world that we belong to Christ and His church. Baptism is a public affirmation that we have been welcomed into the family of God (Acts 2:41).
- Water baptism gives us the opportunity to enact the experience of what Christ has done for us, and gives God the opportunity to affirm and reinforce its reality in our lives. Baptism can and should be an unforgettable spiritual experience, confirming our conversion and commitment to Christ.

### **Who should be baptized?**

Baptism is not for infants, but rather for those who know what it means to sin, and to repent of sin and find forgiveness through Christ. A person should be baptized by his own choice, affirming his own decision to give his life to Christ.

Baptism is not just for those who have proved themselves “worthy” of it, or those who have attained a certain level of Christian maturity. Baptism is a sign of faith and commitment. It

should be one of our first acts of obedience as Christians, performed as soon as we can understand and assent to what we are doing (Acts 2:41). Everyone who believes in Christ should be baptized!

### **Why do we celebrate the Lord's Supper?**

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion was instituted by Jesus on the night before His crucifixion. Sharing a final meal with His disciples, He spoke to them of His approaching death, and used the bread and wine to symbolize the life He was offering as a sacrifice for them and for the world. In receiving the bread and wine, His disciples symbolically received the sacrifice of Christ, and the life He laid down for them (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24).

In continuing to re-enact this ceremony of the bread and the wine, we remember that night and the holy and horrible events of the day that followed (1 Corinthians 11:26). Through the Lord's Supper, we proclaim and commemorate the sacrifice of Christ, and affirm our own share in it.

### **What does the bread symbolize?**

The bread symbolizes the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23, 24). Jesus called Himself the "bread of life," come down from heaven to give life to the world (John 6:48-51). Without Christ, we are spiritually dead, separated from the God who is the only source of life. God offers us His own glorious and eternal life to revive us, and we receive this life in Christ (1 John 5:11).

Receiving the bread of Holy Communion represents receiving the life of God come down to earth in the body of Christ, and offered to us in Him. Eating the bread is the perfect symbol of our dependence upon Christ for our life. Our bodies need nourishment on a continual basis, and so do our spirits. We repeat the Lord's Supper regularly in acknowledgment of the fact that our spirits must continually feed on the life of Christ. We are

sustained spiritually by nourishing our souls on Christ, for He is our life.

Whenever you eat the bread of Holy Communion, remember that Christ's life is given to *you*. Jesus died, not only for the world, but for you personally. He offers His life to you; receive it by faith.

### **What does the cup symbolize?**

The cup of wine or juice symbolizes the blood of Christ, which purifies us from sin (1 John 1:7). In the Old Testament, the people of Israel celebrated the feast of Passover to commemorate the day when they were spared from God's judgment, and delivered from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 12). The people were told to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts in order to protect themselves from the angel of death. Jesus is the Lamb of God (John 1:29). His blood applied to our hearts saves us from God's judgment upon our sin, and delivers us from bondage to it.

The blood of Jesus Christ sealed the new covenant He came to establish between God and humanity (Luke 22:20). This is the covenant of grace, under which God promises to forgive our sins, and undertakes to redeem and purify us for Himself (Hebrews 8:7-12). When we drink from the cup, we renew this covenant before God, receiving God's offer of forgiveness and salvation, and offering ourselves to Him in return. The Lord's Supper is a periodic remembrance and renewal of our covenant relationship with God.

Whenever you drink from the cup of Holy Communion, remember that Jesus shed His blood, not just for the world, but for *you* personally. Receive God's offer of grace, and offer Him your life in return.

### **How should we celebrate the Lord's Supper?**

When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we must always do so in a reverent manner, fully aware of the significance of what we are doing (1 Corinthians 11:27, 28). We must never treat

lightly the elements that symbolize the body and blood of our Lord. We are to examine our hearts before we eat and drink, confessing our sins unto God in order to receive forgiveness and cleansing. In addition, we are to recognize and re-affirm our unity with the body of Christ in the local church and around the world, for we all share in together in the life of Christ. If there are broken relationships among us in need of reconciliation, this is the time to seek and extend forgiveness.

Whether we partake of one loaf or individual wafers, whether we drink from a single chalice or from individual cups – the particular elements we use are not as important as the attitude of our hearts. The elements are material symbols of a spiritual reality, and they contain no magical power. However, when received with faith, they become more than symbols: they become channels through which God's grace and power flow to us. Taken in faith, they impart to us that which was contained in the body and blood of Christ: His very life.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

**Read Romans 6:1-14.**

1. What does water baptism symbolize?
2. Why is it important?

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.**

3. Why do we celebrate the Lord's Supper?
4. What does the bread symbolize?
5. What does the cup symbolize?
6. How should we partake of the Lord's Supper?