HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

ORDINANCES / SACRAMENTS

What are they, and what do they accomplish?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Augustine: The Sacrament as a Visible Word

Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 80 (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine reflects on Jesus' statement that the disciples are clean through the word spoken to them. He asks why Christ speaks of cleansing through the word rather than simply through the water of baptism. His answer is that the physical element by itself is only an element. Water remains water. What gives the sacramental act its Christian meaning is the divine word joined to the visible element.

For Augustine, the sacrament therefore has both an outward and an inward aspect. The outward sign can be seen and touched; the divine promise to which it is joined is received by faith. The sacrament is not powerful because a sound has been pronounced over matter as though the words were magical. Its efficacy belongs to God's word and to the reality that word announces and promises.

This is why Augustine can speak of a sacrament as a kind of visible word. The visible action presents to the senses what the spoken gospel presents to the ears. The physical sign and the divine promise belong together. The sign is not empty, but neither should it be detached from the word and treated as though the material element possessed saving power in itself.

Augustine's formulation became enormously influential. Later Western theology repeatedly returned to the relationship among the visible sign, the word of institution, the spiritual reality signified, and the faith of the recipient.

Reading 2 - Thomas Aquinas: What Is a Sacrament?

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Third Part, Questions 60, 62, and 65 (13th century) - condensed reading

Aquinas begins his treatment of the sacraments by asking what kind of thing a sacrament is. He places it within the category of signs: something sensible is used to point beyond itself to a sacred reality. Human beings learn through bodily senses, so God fittingly uses visible and tangible things to communicate spiritual realities. The sacramental sign is not merely a reminder of something religious; it is ordered toward human sanctification.

Aquinas then distinguishes several dimensions of sacramental meaning. A sacrament can point backward to Christ's saving work, show what divine grace is doing in the present, and direct the believer toward the glory still to come. The sign therefore joins past, present, and future: Christ's passion, present grace, and final glory.

He also argues that the sacraments of the New Law are instruments through which God gives grace. The power does not originate in water, oil, bread, wine, or human ministers. The principal cause is God; the humanity of Christ and the instituted sacramental actions serve God's saving purpose as instruments. Aquinas therefore speaks more strongly than a merely symbolic account: the sacrament not only signifies grace but is used by God in the giving of grace.

Aquinas accepts seven sacraments - Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders, and Matrimony. He explains the number by analogy to the needs of spiritual life and the needs of the Christian community. Some initiate, strengthen, restore, or nourish the individual believer; others order and sustain the community.

This medieval synthesis is important because it provides much of the conceptual framework that the later Roman Catholic Church would defend at the Reformation: sacraments are visible signs instituted for sanctification, they truly communicate grace, and the Church recognizes seven of them.

Reading 3 - The Council of Trent: Sacraments in General

Council of Trent, Session VII, Canons on the Sacraments in General (1547) - condensed reading

The Council of Trent addressed the sacraments directly in response to Reformation-era challenges. It affirmed that Jesus Christ instituted seven sacraments of the New Law: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders, and Matrimony. The council rejected the claim that the number should be reduced, and it also rejected the idea that the seven are identical in dignity or purpose.

Trent taught that the sacraments are not merely optional religious ceremonies or outward badges of Christian profession. They are connected to the giving of saving grace. The council rejected the claim that faith alone makes the sacraments unnecessary, while also recognizing that not every sacrament is required of every individual Christian.

The council further rejected the idea that the sacraments exist only to nourish faith as reminders or teaching symbols. It affirmed that grace is conferred through the sacramental action when the recipient does not place an obstacle in the way. This conviction is often associated with the phrase ex opere operato: the sacrament's efficacy rests on Christ's institution and promise rather than on the personal holiness of the minister.

At the same time, Trent did not treat the sacramental action as an automatic mechanism detached from human response. The recipient can resist grace, and the minister must intend to do what the Church does. The council also taught that Baptism, Confirmation, and Orders imprint a spiritual character and therefore are not to be repeated.

The result is a strong sacramental theology: Christ established seven sacraments; the Church administers them; God truly gives grace through them; and their validity does not rise or fall with the moral quality of the minister.

Reading 4 - John Calvin: Signs that Confirm God's Promise

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, Chapter 14 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin defines a sacrament in relation to God's promise. God gives believers an outward sign in order to confirm and strengthen faith in the promise already given in the gospel. The sacrament does not create a new gospel or add a different saving message. It seals and displays the same Christ who is offered through the preached word.

Calvin therefore refuses two opposite errors. On one side, he rejects the idea that sacraments possess grace in themselves or work mechanically merely because the rite has been performed. On the other side, he also rejects the idea that sacraments are bare symbols with no divine function beyond reminding the participant of absent truths.

The sign is joined to the promise by God's appointment. Because God is truthful, the believer is not looking at an arbitrary human ceremony. God accommodates human weakness by giving visible signs that correspond to his spoken promises. In this sense the sacrament acts like a seal attached to a document: the seal does not create the promise, but it confirms and authenticates what has already been declared.

Faith remains essential. The sacraments do not benefit unbelief simply by being received outwardly. The Holy Spirit makes the sacramental sign effective by directing faith to Christ. The true gift is not locked inside the material element; the gift is Christ and his benefits, received through faith as the Spirit works.

Calvin recognizes two sacraments instituted by Christ for the New Testament Church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This limitation becomes one of the major Protestant disagreements with Rome. For Calvin, a Christian sacrament requires Christ's institution, an outward sign, and a divine promise attached to that sign.

Reading 5 - Westminster Confession: Signs and Seals of the Covenant of Grace

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 27, 'Of the Sacraments' (1646) - lightly modernized reading

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, instituted by God to represent Christ and his benefits and to confirm the believer's interest in him. They also visibly distinguish the Church from the world and solemnly bind Christians to the service of God in Christ according to his Word.

In every sacrament there is a spiritual relation between the outward sign and the thing signified. Because of this sacramental union, Scripture can sometimes use the name or effect of the one when speaking of the other.

The grace exhibited in a sacrament is not conferred by any power residing in the sacrament itself. Nor does the sacrament's efficacy depend on the personal piety or private intention of the minister. Its efficacy depends on the work of the Holy Spirit and on Christ's word of institution, which joins a command to use the sacrament with a promise of benefit to those who receive it rightly.

There are only two sacraments ordained by Christ in the Gospel: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The confession also teaches that the sacraments of the Old Testament, with respect to the spiritual realities they signified and exhibited, were substantially the same in purpose as those of the New Testament.

Westminster therefore keeps strong sacramental language while rejecting the Roman Catholic system of seven sacraments and rejecting any idea that the rites operate by an inherent power. The sacraments are real means appointed by God, but their efficacy belongs to the Spirit working through God's promise.

Reading 6 - The Second London Baptist Confession: Ordinances

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 28, 'Of Baptism and the Lord's Supper' (1689) - reading

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his Church to the end of the world.

These holy appointments are to be administered only by those who are qualified and called to administer them according to the commission of Christ.

The wording is deliberately spare. Compared with Westminster's language of 'holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace,' the Baptist confession emphasizes Christ's command and the Church's obedience. The acts are called ordinances because they are ordained by Christ. This terminology later became especially common among Baptists and other evangelical groups that wished to avoid the suggestion that the rites convey grace by their own sacramental operation.

The difference in vocabulary should not be overstated. Many Protestants who use the word sacrament deny automatic sacramental grace, and many who use the word ordinance still regard Baptism and the Lord's Supper as profound, God-given means by which the Church confesses and experiences the gospel. The central historical question is not merely which word is used, but what the Church believes God does through the instituted act.

Reading 7 - The Historical Divide: Sacrament or Ordinance?

Course reading - synthesis of the historical positions

Across the Christian tradition, most sides agree on several basic points. Christ gave the Church visible practices; those practices are joined to his word; they identify the Christian community; and they point to realities greater than the physical actions themselves. The major disagreements concern how many such rites Christ instituted, how grace relates to them, and what exactly happens when the Church performs them.

The medieval Roman Catholic tradition came to recognize seven sacraments and to describe them as effective signs through which grace is truly conferred. Trent defended that structure against the Reformers. The Reformers generally reduced the number to two because Baptism and the Lord's Supper possess a clear command from Christ together with visible signs and gospel promises.

Within Protestantism, however, there was still disagreement over the strength of sacramental language. Lutherans and Reformed Christians continued to use the word sacrament and insisted that God genuinely acts through the rites, though they rejected the Roman Catholic account. Reformed theology often spoke of signs and seals used by the Holy Spirit to strengthen faith.

Many Baptists preferred the word ordinance. The term emphasizes that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are practices ordained or commanded by Christ. In many Baptist settings this terminology also protects against the idea that the rite itself regenerates, justifies, or communicates saving grace apart from faith.

The historical debate therefore turns on a cluster of questions: Is the rite primarily a sign of grace, a means through which grace is given, or both? Is its efficacy located in the action itself, in God's promise, in the Spirit's work, in the recipient's faith, or in some relationship among these? Why should the Church recognize two rites rather than seven? Those questions created the categories that Christians still inherit when they speak of sacraments or ordinances.