

THE GIFT OF GOD: BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER AS SACRAMENTS OF THE CROSS

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Introduction

BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

They would appear to be simple actions, accessible to all. Wash someone in water: 'baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19). Share a meal of bread and wine: 'Take, eat . . . Drink from it, all of you' (Matt. 26:26–27). Jesus, with an unerring sense of human makeup and needs, imparted what he had to give not just by words but also by actions. They are indeed simple and accessible signs that go deep to the heart, and have remained powerful through the centuries. We might expect that here is one area of practice and teaching where Christians could readily come to understanding and be one in agreement.

Yet few areas of Christian theology and practice have been made more complicated. Baptism and the Lord's supper have been philosophised, metaphysicalised, liturgised and even commercialised almost beyond recognition. And nothing has divided Christians more deeply than the teaching and practice of these simple actions that are that are given for us to be one in. It would appear that much is at stake here, and that it is here that the devil's attacks have been among his most subtle and deadly, with sinful human flesh, backed up by the jeering world, only too willing to take up his ploy.

Is there a way back to the simplicity, depth and unity of these actions given to us by Jesus? It might appear almost too much to hope for. We may have good grounds for fearing that our very attempt might only add to the complication and division. Any such attempt would need to be approached with needful humility and love. Yet we cannot abandon the field to the evil one, and it is incumbent upon us to seek to enter into these gifts with all our heart and mind and strength.

The contention of this series is that two things in particular bedevil our understanding and practice of baptism and the Lord's supper. (1) They become detached from the primary action of God, to take on the character of human actions promoting self-redemption, and (2) they become dissociated from the offensive scandal of the cross of Christ, to be made into generalised religious occasions that fall little short of idolatry. While some demolishing of intellectual, doctrinal and liturgical accretions may be necessary, at the heart of our examination is a reassertion of the centrality of God's action in these gifts, and of their inseparable connection with the saving death of Christ on the cross.

Jesus said to the woman at the well, 'If you knew *the gift of God*, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water' (John 4:10). Jesus himself, in person, is the gift of the Father: in his sacrifice of himself on the cross, and in the new life that flows in all who believe in him as the risen Saviour and Lord.

Baptism and the Lord's supper are powerful signs given to us by Jesus that use words and simple gifts of God's creation—water, bread and wine—for us to participate by faith in his saving death and resurrection, and in all the good things gained for us by him in this world and the next.

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The word 'sacrament' is used here as a handy designation of both these actions. It is not a biblical word, and is not used in any way as a starting-point to understand their nature and function. It is recognised that some Christian traditions eschew the use of the word altogether because of certain connotations it may have. Its use here does not presuppose any particular 'sacramental theology'.

What has been our experience of baptism and the Lord's supper?

What significance have they held for us?

What experience have we had of these actions being made complicated, or divisive?

How do we see them in relation to the action of God, and the cross of Christ?

Study One

THE GIFT OF GOD: CREATION

All Things Come from God

A basic question we must ask in coming to a consideration of the sacraments is: Do we live from God, or from ourselves?

The underlying assumption behind much of modern life is that we live from ourselves—our life is built out of our own independent resources. The Bible brings a very different perspective:

I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps (Jer. 10:23).¹

Rather, we are made for faith in God, from whom our life has come, and in whose hands it still is:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones (Prov. 3:5–8).

This biblical understanding goes back to the beginning, and covers the whole of creation:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1)

This is not just a statement of the way things are. It has a personal dynamic: life, and breath, and all things come to us from God in a personal way, gift-wise:

he himself *gives* to all men life and breath and everything (Acts 17:25).

In many cultures, a gift implies some sense of obligation on the part of the recipient to the donor, which can be relieved by some appropriate payment, which then releases the recipient from the obligation. Underlying this is a preferred sense of independent separation between the two. It comes as a not-always-welcome surprise to us that God's giving has none of that kind of obligation or separation—it is purely the giving of love.²

Even so, it remains inescapably true that, as John the Baptist said:

No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven (John 3:27).

¹ In using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible here, we adopt the literal meaning and conventional usage of the biblical languages that the masculine includes the feminine.

² This is expressed in the prayer of Ignatius Loyola: 'to give, and not to count the cost . . . to labour, and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will' (Frank Colquhoun, comp. and ed. *Parish Prayers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967, p. 194), where our giving is to be after the manner of God's.

This is expressed also in these other statements of Paul the apostle:

What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

all things are from God (1 Cor. 4:7; 11:12)

Do we generally assume that we are to live from ourselves and from our own resources?

When have we found that our way is not in ourselves?

What is our experience of obligation-laden giving?

What is our experience of obligation-free giving?

The Unity of All Things

As God is the one source of all things, then we may expect that all things God has made will have a certain unity—of origin, purpose, movement and destination. We find this to be the case:

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen (Rom. 11:35–36).

We find that this unity is grounded in a oneness that exists within the Godhead, between the Father and the Son:

for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:6).

Paul also speaks of ‘the one Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:13), who works in concert with ‘the same Lord’ and ‘the same God’ (1 Cor. 12:4–6).

We find this unity reflected in the oneness of the human race, in origin and in destiny. First we are told that God made all nations ‘from one’ (Acts 17:26); that is, from ‘one ancestor’, or of ‘one blood’.³ Doubtless this implies also that we are to be one, as Paul goes on to say, in our seeking and finding of the one God, and our relating to Him together as our one Father. Similarly, we find that the man and the woman are made from one—‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh—to be ‘one flesh’ (see Gen. 2:21–24; compare Eph 5:31–33). This unity of the human race is to be headed up in Christ, in whom ‘all things hold together’ (Col. 1:17)—as indeed ‘all things have been created through him and for him’. Out of the disunity that has come (as we will see below), this unity has been effected when in Christ God reconciled the sinful world to Himself by dealing with sin in the cross of His Son (see 2 Cor. 5:19)—‘by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col. 1:20)—to make one ‘new humanity’ in Christ (Eph. 2:15 NRSV). We see this coming to fruition in Hebrews 2:10–13, when the Father, ‘for whom and by whom all things exist’, has given His Son to bring ‘many sons to glory’; and the Son, who shares the ‘one origin’ with those who are sanctified, and ‘is not ashamed to call them brethren’, stands before the Father to say: ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me’.

The destiny of the whole creation hangs on this destiny of the human race. We see that God’s original intention and ultimate purpose is ‘to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:10), as the whole creation comes to participate with us in ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom. 8:21 NRSV).

³ See NRSV translation and footnote.

*What sense have we had of the unity of all things?
When have we known that unity to be disjoined?*

Sin and Disjunction

We will find that these things are germane to any right understanding of the sacraments. We also need to clear the ground of certain ways of thinking that are not in keeping with God's ways as these are revealed in the Bible, that can discolour everything we hear.

Paul says that the rot set in when the human race, although we knew God, 'did not honour him as God or give thanks to him' (Rom. 1:21). This means we no longer saw all things as coming from God, to work according to His purposes, but began to see them as coming from ourselves or somewhere else, with a separate purpose that we could implement for ourselves. Thus we 'exchanged the truth about [or of] God for a lie' (Rom. 1:25), and oriented our lives in worship towards things that God has made rather than to the One who made both them and us.

With this, 'they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools' (Rom 1:21–22). This means that we cannot make a true assessment of the world and the way things are, without the cleansing and revealing reorientation that comes from the Father through Christ by the Spirit of God. Without this, we will come up with all sorts of seemingly wise religious and philosophical approaches to life, but our 'wisdom' will be false and foolish. Every religion and philosophy must be brought to the bar of Romans 1:18–32, and judged in its light.

There we also find the proliferation of degrading human impurity, perversity and wickedness, with its attendant guilt, shame, and attempts at self-justification. Apart from the redemption that is in Christ, all of our religions and philosophies will partake of and serve these things also.

These things may affect even our understanding of the Christian sacraments. That is why we must seek to understand them with a cleansed mind and heart. We will look at a couple of things in particular that can give us a distorted view of the sacraments.

Spirit and matter

Sacraments are often seen in connection with a distinction that is made between matter and spirit.

In God's good creation there is a valid distinction between spiritual and material beings and things. There are angels, and there are rocks. But it is a mistake to set one against the other, or to place a gap between them that must then be bridged by something else.

For example, Plato and the pagan Greeks used to say that the spiritual is better, and higher and more real than the material things, and that matter is low, and tainted, and evil. They saw themselves as having a spark of the divine in them, which needed to be released from its material prison, and they shaped their philosophies and religions accordingly. Much western education and thought, and much of what passes for Christian thinking, is grounded in such assumptions as these.

In the light of Romans 1:18–32, we can understand why the Greeks did this. They found themselves in a world where evil was active in them and around them, and where they were separated from God and from the good things that God has prepared for those who love Him. Being made in the image of God, they sensed that they were intended for something better than this. Being sinners, like the rest of us, they wanted to be able to persist in their

independent stance against God, without necessarily coming to repentance from their sin to the faith in God for which they were made. They also still wanted to be able to see themselves in the best possible light. So they rationalised their situation accordingly, using the gifts of brilliant intellect that God had given them. But because their basic stance was still founded upon the anti-God lie, there was no way their 'wisdom', however brilliant, could be anything but false and misleading.

The modern secular materialistic world makes the opposite mistake to the Greeks. We say that material things are what is real, and these are what life is all about. Spiritual things are less real, or irrelevant, or optional for those who like that sort of thing. The secular world says to the church: 'We will look after the real, practical everyday things, and you attend to the spiritual side of things', and the church is sometimes happy to oblige in this minimal way. This secular approach is again an evasion of the real issues that confront us in our society: of relationship with and obedience to God.

As a reaction to and a refuge from materialism and its attendant evils has come a renewed popular interest in 'spirituality' of many forms: eastern, pagan, and 'new age'. All of these, however attractive, in so far as they resist repentance and faith in Christ, partake in the confusion and darkness of the rebellious human mind. The church can sometimes say: 'At least these people are looking for what is spiritual, and we have what is spiritual, so we can go along with them'. We forget that it is possible to be very spiritual and still be evil—as the demons know only too well⁴. Indeed, it is in the demons' interest to foster and pander to this misunderstanding and misjudgement.

All of this is based on a false dichotomy. Spirit and matter—from angels to rocks—are all part of God's one creation. The Bible is not particularly interested in any distinction between spirit and matter. It is much more interested in the distinction that we have messed up: between the Creator and the creature; between God and what He has made. In the light of that, the Bible is interested in whether we are being obedient to God or disobedient; rebellious against God or reconciled to Him; enemies or sons; empty or fulfilled; thirsty or quenched; dead—or living!

How have we thought in the past regarding a distinction between the spiritual and the physical or material?

How do we consider that now?

'Flesh' and 'spirit' in the New Testament

With this in mind we can consider what the New Testament understands by the terms 'flesh' and 'spirit'. Generally, 'flesh' is the human heart and mind and will and body set against God and attempting to operate apart from Him. 'Spirit' is generally the Holy Spirit given by God, and our capacity to receive and appreciate and use the gifts of God. If we look up what Paul says about flesh and spirit in Romans 8:5–11 and Galatians 5:16–26—along with 1 Corinthians 2:1–3:4—we will see that the distinction there mainly has to do with sin and righteousness, with rebellion and service, rather than with what Plato and the Greeks say. But it is Plato and the Greeks that most of us are brought up on—in our culture, folklore and educational system—and so we can easily misread what the apostle is saying.

Thus when Jesus says to the woman at the well:

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24),

⁴ See James 1:19: 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!'

he is not saying that we must be super-spiritual to worship God. He is simply saying that we must worship God truly by all that comes from God, acknowledging the way things really are—that everything comes as His gift. He is saying what he said in verse 10:

If you knew *the gift of God*, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water (John 4:10).

As we shall see, Jesus himself is the gift of God in person.

Similarly, Jesus said in John 6:63:

It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Here he was not elevating the spiritual and denigrating the material. He was simply saying: I am giving you the truth of God and, in that, all the life that comes from God; but the rebellious human flesh resists that truth, and ends up getting nowhere.

The 'sacramental principle'

Some people base their understanding of the sacraments on what is called the 'sacramental principle'; that is: 'God takes and uses *material* things to express and convey *spiritual* truth and grace'.⁵ True as this may be, if you want to express it that way, to build a whole theology of the sacraments on that could be doing it on a very shaky foundation. How does it stand in the light of what we have been saying?

Once again, it would appear, this understanding is rooted in a false dichotomy between matter and spirit that has more to do with Plato than with Moses, Jesus, or Paul. Why not simply say: '*God does what God does, through the whole of His creation*'?

These Gifts of Your Creation

Meanwhile, we may reflect on the significance for us now of these words that are used in the practice of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper:

we thank you for the gift of water to cleanse and revive us

we thank you for these gifts of your creation, this bread and this wine.⁶

What renewed appreciation do we have of God, and of creation as His gift?

Assignment Question

What does it mean in practice to say, 'All things come from God'? How does this relate to the unity of all things? How does our rejection of this reality discolour our understanding and actions?

⁵ Dr K. Rayner, Archbishop of Adelaide, 'Sacrament and Life', in *Catholic Renewal in the Anglican Church: Advent Addresses*, Anglican Board of Christian Education, Adelaide SA, 1982, p. 17 (emphasis added).

⁶ Anglican Church of Australia. *An Australian Prayer Book*, 1978, pp. 529, 147.

Study Two

THE GIFT OF GOD: REDEMPTION

Dependent on God

We made the point in the first study that all things are from God. In this it is clear that all creation is dependent on God for everything.

As far as the human creation is concerned, we see this in the creation of the man in Genesis 2:7:

then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

That this is not just an initial kick-start, but an on-going moment-by-moment thing, is shown in Psalm 104:

These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground (Psa. 104: 27–30).

We are at all times utterly dependent on God our Creator for ‘life and breath and everything’ (Acts 17:25). God only needs to take away our breath, and we are back to dust. When that has happened, this psalm says, God sends His Spirit (or ‘breath’) to create us afresh, and to renew the creation. He is the God who not only ‘calls into existence the things that do not exist’ but who also ‘gives life to the dead’ (Rom. 4:17). In this revival and restoration, as in our original created state, we are no less utterly dependent upon God.

Independence: the Great Lie and the Great Sin

The temptation of the serpent in the garden of Eden, that we gave way to, was: ‘you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ (Gen, 3:5). As we were already in the image and after the likeness of God, it must have meant something more than this. We were being led to think that we could be *as* God ourselves, in the place of God, able to determine for ourselves what was right or wrong, without any need for dependence on God—actually in defiance of God and all His provision, love and care.

To be as God ourselves is clearly impossible, since we are not God. God is God, and we are His creatures. Nevertheless, we fell for the deception of ‘that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world’ (Rev. 12:9), the one Jesus called ‘a liar and the father of lies’ (John 8:44). Paul says that we ‘exchanged the truth about [*or* of] God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator’ (Rom. 1:25): the creature Satan first of all—our ‘father the devil’, whose desires we now will to perform—then ourselves as creatures in the place of God, and then whatever created things (‘idols’) we could get to serve our own purposes instead of and over against serving God.

This is not just a tragic deception; it is a wilful rebellion against the One who is our true Father. To be in the image and likeness of God is to be related to Him as children to their Father (see Gen. 5:1–3). So God laments through the prophet Isaiah:

Sons have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me (Isa. 1:2).

The whole creation is called upon to be appalled at this:

they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns,
that can hold no water (Jer. 2:13).

There can be no future in this. God said to the man and the woman concerning the forbidden fruit:

in the day that you eat of it you shall die (Gen. 2:17).

Though the devil sought to reassure us that this would not be the case, how else could it be? Not only because we have separated ourselves from the source of all our life, but also because God brings His full judgment to bear against it: death, in all the anguish and guilt of sin. Human death is now neither natural nor neutral: ‘The sting of death is sin’ (1 Cor. 15:56). We are now necrosed:

dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1–3).

The amazing thing is that it is out of this culpable death that God saves us and makes us alive.

What manifestations do we see, in ourselves or others, of the propensity to take matters into our own hands?

What do we see of the grisly outcomes of this?

Self-Righteousness

While it is patently obvious that we are no more capable of getting ourselves out of this predicament than we were of bringing ourselves into existence in the first place, nevertheless, in our deceived sinful state, we really believe that we can do it ourselves. Self-love and self-righteousness give rise to arrogant attempts at self-salvation.

One of the delusions we maintain in our state of sinful independence is that we have some righteousness of our own. This was never the case—not even in our original created condition, let alone our sinful state. If ‘he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything’ (Acts 17:25), and if ‘No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven’ (John 3:27), then this must include righteousness and goodness. When we are told to ‘put on the breastplate of righteousness’, this is the ‘armour of God’ (Eph. 6:13–14)—the

armour that God Himself wears (see Isa. 59:17: 'He put on righteousness as a breastplate'), that He invests us with. It is righteousness from God, not from ourselves.

Jesus is one person whom we may think has a righteousness of his own. But he denied it. 'Why do you call me good?' he asked. 'No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18). He was not denying that he had goodness. He knew that he was without sin (John 8:46), as his closest followers testified (1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5; 2:29). Jesus was pointing to where the goodness he had comes from—and must come from for us all—the Father.

Thus Paul desired to be found in Christ:

not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, *the righteousness from God* that depends on faith (Phil. 3:9).

Indeed, he was even so bold as to say that on the cross God made Christ, who himself knew no sin, to be sin for us, 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21)!

Alongside this, any attempt to garner some righteousness of our own appears pitiful, even despicable. Nevertheless, we persist. If we have not received the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God that has come to us in the cross of Christ through faith-dependence on what God has done for us in him, then we will try in all sorts of ways to do ourselves the very thing that God has done for us, which we refuse to accept: atone for our sins, and prove our right standing before God.

This will bedevil especially our practice of the sacraments. If we sense that in some way we are still 'children of wrath', then it will be vitally important to us somehow to 'do the right thing'—either out of fear, or out of defiance.

The rite itself

One of the things we do will be to carry out the rite as a thing in itself. If we 'get it right', we may be able to keep God at bay for another week at least. This could be one reason why people are so unwilling to allow liturgical change. They realise that they are dealing with something that could explode on them at any moment if it is not handled carefully. So correct procedure must be followed. The performance of the rite week after week becomes important as a thing *of itself*. It may even be something that we become proud of on our own account, as an item of our own righteousness.

God is sickened by that:

I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21–24).

Why does that sicken God? Because here we are seeking to use these things, that God has given us, to establish our own righteousness, when all the time righteousness is to 'roll down' upon us—from where? From above!—from God. So while we think we are doing the right

thing, according to all that God has laid down for us—even to going beyond the call of duty—all we do partakes of the nature of sin, and we are pleasing no one but ourselves:

“Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days;
offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened,
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”
says the Lord GOD (Amos 4:4–5).

How can God not take offence, if we reject the gift of His Son, and ‘the free gift of righteousness’ (Rom. 5:17) that is in him, and substitute for it something of ourselves that we think is better—one hour or so in ‘church’!

Our commitment

A subtle perversion of that is that God needs our faith, our commitment, our decision for Christ, in our baptism or regular worship, and *that* is what we bring Him; *that* is what makes us a Christian. ‘I am not just a Christian—I am a *committed* Christian’!

Commitment is an act of our will. Necessary as it may be if we are ever to do anything, what part does it play in our becoming a child of God? Look at John 1:12–13:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

New birth is not of us or of our own will. It is of God. As Jesus said, it is ‘from above’, ‘of the Spirit’ (John 3:3, 7, RSV footnote; 5, 6, 8).

The Scriptures tell us that faith, repentance, obedience, good works, and even the suffering that ensues, are not of ourselves. They are all gifts granted to us by God:

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to *give* repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31).

Then to the Gentiles also God has *granted* repentance unto life (Acts 11:18).

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and *this is not your own doing*, it is *the gift of God*. . . For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which *God prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8, 10).

For it has been *granted* to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake (Phil. 1:29).

the Holy Spirit whom God *has given* [past] to those who obey him [present] (Acts 5:32).

So we can say again, of our redemption no less than of our creation:

No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven (John 3:27).

What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (1 Cor. 4:7).

How does our self-righteousness manifest itself in the ways we go about our worship and our Christian life?

How does this get in the way of our knowing and living in the righteousness that comes from God?

Something to Offer?

In our unregenerate state, we love to think that we have something to offer; some sacrifice from us that will be pleasing to God, to make Him favourable towards us. This is the rationale behind nearly every religion. It is how some Israelites may at times have thought of the ancient sacrifices. It can be how we often think about the action of the sacraments as, for example, in some understandings of 'the sacrifice of the Mass'.

What were the Israelites doing in the Old Testament sacrifices, and what are we doing in the New Testament sacraments? Leviticus 17:11 is very enlightening on this score. It is an injunction not to eat the blood of any sacrifice. The reason is given:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls (Lev. 17:11).

Humanly speaking, we may think that the action of a sacrifice is that we give something to God. God says, No. The sacrifices that He has ordained are primarily given by God on our behalf: '*I have given it for you*'. The faithful Israelite was not giving something to God. The whole sacrificial system was given to Israel by God. In offering the sacrifices, Israel was participating, in obedience to God, in God's provision for the forgiveness of sins and whatever else the sacrifices provided. The sacrifices did not win God's favour—they stemmed from it. As P. T. Forsyth wrote on this passage:

the sacrifice is the result of God's grace, and not its cause. It is given *by* God, before it is given *to* Him.⁷

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews makes the point that these Old Testament provisions are 'a copy and a shadow' of the true sanctuary and of the final work of Christ that was to come (Heb. 8:5, see especially chapters 8–10). Both sacrifices and sacraments are gifts *from* God. Both relate to the gift *of* God: His own Son on the cross.

The Sacrifice of Praise

King David had it right:

Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For *all things come from you, and of your own have we given you*. For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our

⁷ P. T. Forsyth. *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood SA, 1984, p. 185.

ancestors, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you (1 Chron. 29:10–18 NRSV).

There remains for us only ‘the sacrifice of praise’—the grateful acknowledgement of what *God* has done, and our full participation in all its benefits and enablings:

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb. 13:15).

Is this why one of the names given to the Lord's Supper is ‘Eucharist’ (which means ‘thanksgiving’)?

Nothing in God's creation or redemption is ‘of itself’. It is all ‘of God’. The sacraments are not ‘of themselves’. They are ‘of God’. And they are of the cross.

Some people seem good at giving, but find it difficult to receive. Why might this be?

How do we feel about receiving freely from God?

What implications does this have then for our participation with God in His action?

Assignment Question

Describe the mindset of the unregenerate person. How can this discolour our approaches to worship, the sacraments, and daily living? What difference does the receiving of God's salvation make in these areas?

Study Three

SACRAMENTS OF THE CROSS

The Sacraments are a Proclamation of the Cross

It comes as a surprise to many that the sacraments relate primarily to the action of the Cross of Christ. This comes through most clearly with regard to the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11:26:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's *death* until he comes.

The focus on the Lord's death is there no less in baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his *death*? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into *death*, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4).

There may be those who come to the Lord's supper rightly looking for a time of intimate communion with their Lord, for whom any necessary association of this with his death could be quite repugnant. There may be those who come for baptism, particularly parents bringing their young children, for whom burial into Christ's death is the last thing they are looking for, or could make any sense of. Paul says that 'the word of the cross' is offensive to the religious, and nonsense to the intellectual (see 1 Cor. 1:22–23). We can expect the same to be true of the sacraments of the Cross.

Paul does say that while 'the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing', nevertheless 'to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18). The same may be said of the sacraments. For those of us who have been brought by the Spirit of God to a conviction of sin, who know that we are without excuse and without any leg to stand on, who are utterly undone, and know there is nothing for us but a well-deserved death—for us it is a wondrous surprise to find that Christ has gone to that death for us, and that he has taken us with him into that fierce and final judgment; not to destroy us, but to bring us through it with him and out the other side with him into his resurrection life:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

If we can say this with the apostle Paul, then the sacraments as a participation in Christ's death and all its benefits will be for us a great source of reassurance and power for authentic righteous living.

There are Christian traditions which give the name 'sacrament' to other happenings: confirmation, absolution, marriage, anointing of the sick or dying, ordination, and even to the professing of a person into a religious order. It would be good to show how all of these relate to what God has done in the Cross of Christ. However, in these studies we are concentrating on the two great 'Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord'.⁸

⁸ 'The Articles of Religion' XXV, in The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Shorter Edition, Broughton Books, Alexandria NSW, p. 481.

How much have we been prepared to see the sacraments primarily in relation to Christ's death? What have we seen them as?

What does it mean for us to say, 'I have been crucified with Christ'? What difference does that make to our appreciation of the sacraments?

Sacrament and Word

In 1 Corinthians 11:26 the word used for 'proclaim' (*kataggellō*) with regard to Christ's death and the Lord's supper is the same as that used for proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Acts 13:38. The sacraments, no less than the spoken word, are a proclamation of the Cross and all that comes with it. It is a mistake to make a distinction between God's word and God's sacraments in a way that sets one over against the other. The word and the sacraments are all of a piece. They are all the action of Christ, the Word who was made flesh, in whose flesh sin was condemned (see John 1:14; Rom. 8:3):

The Word and the Sacraments are the two great expressions of the gospel in worship. The Sacraments are the acted Word—variants of the preached word. They are signs, but they are more than signs. They are the Word, the gospel itself, visible, as in preaching the Word is audible. But in either case it is an act. It is Christ in a real presence giving us anew His Redemption.⁹

Sometimes the priority given to the word over the sacraments has more to do with Greek-style rationalism of the eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment' than with biblical reality. As we know with the gift of 'tongues' (see 1 Cor. 14:14–15), God's gifts to us are not limited by or to our rational faculties, but minister to our whole created being. The sacraments are not just mere illustrative signs. Together with the word, they convey something to us that could not be communicated to us in any other way. To quote Thomas Watson (one of the 'Puritans'):

In the word preached the saints hear Christ's voice; in the sacrament they have his kiss¹⁰.

What has been our experience of hearing the word of God? What has been our experience of God in the sacraments? How are these different from each other? How are they in concert with each other?

Dynamic Effects

Since the sacraments are a proclamation of the Cross, they will have the same dynamic effects as the spoken word, for blessing or for judgment:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10–11, NRSV).

God's word carries out God's will, and effects judgment accordingly.

⁹ P. T. Forsyth. *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1917, p. 165.

¹⁰ Not that this is to be taken sentimentally; it is more in the order of 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other' (Psa. 85:10, *The Liturgical Psalter*, © English Text 1976,1977, © 'inclusive language' version 1995, David L. Frost, John A. Emerton, Andrew A Macintosh, in *The Anglican Church of Australia. A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, Alexandria, NSW, p. 312).

We see this dynamic at work in John 3:19–21. Jesus has been talking with Nicodemus about the new birth from above, and has said that this will come by believing in ‘the Son of Man . . . lifted up’ (3:14–16)—on the cross. He then draws the distinction between those who believe and are not condemned, and those who are in condemnation through unbelief. He goes on:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God (John 3:19–21).

This is the effect of every action of Christ. We see in John 9, for instance, after the healing of the man blind from birth, a progressive polarisation between the healed man, as he is drawn closer to Jesus, and so comes to the light, and the Judean leaders who increasingly set themselves over against Jesus and are, in effect, blind.

We find the same thing with the sacraments. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, the cup that we bless and the bread we break are a participation in Christ’s body and blood—in the benefits and blessings of Christ and his Cross. The same action will show up anything that is not right in the hearts and lives of those who participate:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor. 11:27–30).

Clearly this is not just a game, or something ‘nice’ that we do. For a community attending to the sacraments it is a matter of life and death. We find the same thing in baptism: in Acts 8 with Philip and Peter and John in Samaria, we see that many believed and were baptised, and there was great rejoicing. It was also after the occult magician Simon ‘the Great’ believed and was baptised that what was in his heart came out: his desire to bribe and manipulate God to his own ends (see Acts 8:4–24). No doubt also Ananias and Sapphira had been baptised and had shared in the breaking of the bread, and we know what happened to them when their hearts were not right before God, while many others went on to great blessing and healing (see Acts 5:1–16).

Although the sacraments are given to us for our blessing (see Acts 2:41–47), church deadening, just as much as church enlivening, can be a result of the sacraments. When we see a congregation where the sacraments have been celebrated repeatedly week after week and year after year, and the worship has become dreary and dead and the numbers low, we may be tempted to say: ‘The power has gone out of those sacraments’. Not at all: in all those years, the power of those sacraments has been operating—in judgment—to show that congregation up for what it really is: dead in trespasses and sins. The sacraments themselves have been drying them up, to call them to repentance and new life through the total forgiveness of the Cross.

With regard to the action of the Messiah—Christ—in our midst, in word, sacrament or other happening, we cannot remain neutral, or unaffected.

*In what way have the sacraments been a blessing to us?
In what way have they pulled us up sharply?*

The Dynamic of the Cross

Forgiveness of Sins

What is the action of the Cross? Peter puts it succinctly:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24)¹¹.

The action of the Cross was a bearing and taking away of sin, with a view to God's righteousness. The Letter to the Hebrews goes on to say that this action was full, final, decisive, and over all:

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3).

Jesus himself said that his blood was to be 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:28). After the events of his death and resurrection, he said that, in accordance with the Scriptures, this 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47).

As the gospel comes to us, so this reality of the forgiveness of sins is applied to us. This is what happened, for instance, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius's household:

"To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word (Acts 10:43-44).

Whatever the past, this is now the reality for all who repent and believe:

you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11).

*What has been our experience of the forgiveness of sins, and where has it come from?
Is it a once-for-all thing, or does it come in dribs and drabs?*

The Sacraments and the Forgiveness of Sins

The sacraments relate to this reality. As Jesus was giving his disciples the Lord's supper:

he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:27-28).

So also, as Peter addressed the crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, he said:

Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Ananias said to Saul of Tarsus: 'be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on his name' (Acts 22:16). We are told in Acts 9:17-20 that Saul, who later became Paul the apostle, was filled with the Holy Spirit, was healed, was baptised, and immediately began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

¹¹ NRSV reads: 'so that, free from sins, we might live . . .'

How have we seen the sacraments in relation to the reality of the forgiveness of sins?

New Life in the Spirit

Note that all this is an action of the Spirit of God, through and through. Paul says in Galatians 5:25:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

As far as the sacraments are concerned, we could say that baptism, as a once only thing, relates to our *coming to life* by the Spirit (as Jesus said: 'no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit', John 3:5 NRSV), and Holy Communion, as a repeated action, relates to *continuing to walk* by the Spirit ('I am the bread of life'¹² . . . It is the spirit that gives life . . . The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life).¹³

How did we need the Spirit of God to get started in the Christian life?

How do we need the Spirit of God for its continuance?

Where are we if we consider in practice that we do not need the Spirit for either?

The Life of the Age to Come

Both baptism and the Lord's supper look towards the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the new heavens and new earth:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes* (1 Cor. 11:26).

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have *eternal life*, and *I will raise them up on the last day* (John 6:54).

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, *we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that *we will also live with him* (Rom. 6:4–8).

To what extent have we seen the sacraments relating to our present life only, and not to the life of the age to come—that we can participate in even here and now?

The Cross and the Sacraments

Thus the sacraments, no less than the preached word, are a proclamation of the whole gospel. There have been times in church history, when preaching of the word has been thin on the ground, when the sacraments have been, in the faithfulness of God, virtually the only extant proclamation. James Denney wrote:

¹² Bread is something we tend to eat every day, as a staple part of our diet. Jesus did not say, 'I am the roast turkey of life'—to be reserved for special occasions once a year!

¹³ We will see in later studies the extent to which these passages in John 3 and 6 actually relate to baptism and the Lord's supper.

The sacraments contain the gospel in brief; they contain it in inseparable connection with the death of Jesus; and as long as they hold their place in the Church the saving significance of that death has a witness which it will not be easy to dispute.¹⁴

In an evasion of this, some try to give the sacraments an exclusively creational thrust¹⁵, but in the New Testament they are thoroughly redemptional (and new-creational!)

Assignment Question

How are the sacraments related to the action of the Cross, and to the word of the Cross? What is the effect in the life of the church and of individual people if the sacraments in practice are detached from this reality?

¹⁴ James Denney. *The Death of Christ*, Keats Pub. Inc., 1981, p. 85.

¹⁵ As in e.g. Teilhard de Chardin, 'Hymn of the Universe', reproduced in the Song Book *Travelling to Freedom*, compiled by Tony Newman and Peter Stone, LPS [Living Parish Series] Publishing, Harbord NSW, 1971, p.7, where the author envisages the whole of creation and humanity as his offering to God, without any reference to the Cross of Christ.

Study Four

BAPTISM

Baptising Them Into The Name

Jesus' explicit command to baptise is given in Matthew 28:16–20, after Jesus has risen from death:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (NRSV).

Note that this is in the context of Jesus' present Lordship over the whole of creation, and in particular over all the nations. The nations are to be brought into this action of discipling and baptising (as it is the nations that will come for judgment before the Son of Man on the throne of his glory in Matt. 25:31–32). This is on a larger scale than that of individuals. It is also with a view to 'the end of the age'—the final goal and purpose of God's plan for His creation.

This baptism is 'in [or literally *into*] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. To be marked with someone's name means to belong to that one (as in Rev. 3:12; 14:1). In this instance it means more than that: it is to be caught up into the character, purpose and action of the one into whom we have been baptised—into the concerted creative, redeeming and glorifying action of the Father, Son and Spirit, who work as one, with one 'name', in the Father's good purpose of love (see John 14:15–24).

The Defiled and Vindicated Name

In a similar way, Israel carried the 'name' of the LORD (YAHWEH) their God. But they defiled it with their worship of idols and their shedding of innocent blood. God's judgment came on them accordingly, and God scattered them among the nations in shame and ignominy. This, however, did the Lord's name no credit among the nations, to whom this judged and discredited people came (see Ezek. 36:18–20). God was nevertheless determined to vindicate the holiness of His name, by reinstating this sinful people as His own holy people who fully matched His own holiness (see Ezek. 36:21–23). This He undertook to do:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (Ezek. 36:24–27 NRSV).

Note how this corresponds with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 28:18–20, particularly with regard to 'teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'. This is now not for Israel only, but for all the nations, who were to be blessed by God through Israel (see Gen. 12:1–3).

To what extent have we seen our baptism in the context of the total plan and purpose of God?

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Family

God, as Father, is holy (see Isa. 6:3; 57:15), and so requires to have holy children. God's command to Israel was: 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy' (Lev. 19:2). God's ultimate purpose is to have us 'holy and blameless before him in love . . . as his children' (Eph. 1:4–5).

None of the human race, among all the nations, has turned out to be this way. However, by God's provision and appointment, there is one—His own son in human flesh—who is 'holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens' (Heb. 7:26). It is through him that God has chosen to act.

God's good pleasure in him as Son is shown by what the Father says when Jesus is baptised:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:13–17).

The fulfilling of 'all righteousness' is not concluded by the action of baptism in itself, but in all that this action signifies. What happened there encapsulates the entire career of the Messiah. Jesus went down into the water, as he had come to descend, on the cross, into 'the lower parts of the earth' (Eph. 4:9)—the abyss of human sin and death. He came up out of the water, as he was to rise from the grave: 'God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power' (Acts 2:24). The Spirit came down upon him—'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear' (Acts 2:33; compare John 7:39)—and he was 'declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom. 1:4). The fulfilling of all righteousness is the carrying through of all that the Father gave Christ to do in His righteous saving kingdom-action.

It is into all of this that we are brought through the baptismal action that Christ commanded to his disciples.

For Jesus himself, his 'baptism' was what he would go through in the action of the cross:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed! (Luke 12:49–50).

It was in this action of the cross, which at that point was still to come, that his disciples would be required to relate to him:

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with? (Mark 10:38).

It is by this action of the cross that the Father's name would glorified as holy and righteous, for it is by this action that God's purposed holy family would be formed. Shortly before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed that at this time the Father would glorify His name, and the Father undertook to do this. This was to happen when Jesus was 'lifted up' in his death, with all people drawn into him, when the world's judgment and the devil's doom

would come in him (see John 12:27–33; 13:31–32; 17:5, 11, 25). Those redeemed and made righteous by this action would be the ‘offspring’ of the suffering servant, the ‘children of the desolate woman’ (see Isa. 53:10–11; 54:1)—the Father’s holy family.

Thus would come into being the ‘body’ of the holy Son, the ‘temple’ where the Father is truly worshipped (see John 2:19–21; 4:23–24; compare Eph. 1:22–23; 2:14–22; 1 Cor. 3:16), into which we are now baptised:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

How does our baptism relate to:

- *the baptism of Jesus?*
- *the action of the cross?*
- *the Father’s holy family?*

Crucified with Christ

This reality for individuals is expressed by Paul in this way:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

This is the reality into which we have been baptised:

you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

Paul spells this out more fully in Romans 6:

How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:2–14).

This is not an instruction on baptism, but an exhortation as to how we are not to sin, now that the grace of God has come to us in Christ. In giving this, Paul assumes that his readers already know that through their baptism they have come into union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Accordingly, they can now live in a way that is free from sin, in anticipation now of the resurrection life to come. *Baptism is our identification with Jesus Christ in his death, burial and rising to life again, with a view to the resurrection-life of holiness and*

righteousness that is to come, that we can live in by faith even now. ‘In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith’, Paul says. ‘For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ’ (Gal. 3:27).

Note that Paul emphasises that we ‘have died’ to sin. This is a once-for-all reality, not a daily on-going process. Thus baptism also is a once-for-all event.

A Christian man was invited by friends into an R-rated cinema to watch a ‘blue movie’. ‘I can’t go in there’, he replied. ‘I’m baptised!’ What is the significance of his reply? Why is baptism generally taken to be a one-off event, and unrepeatable?

You Must Be Born Anew

John 3:1–21 can be seen as an exposition of the meaning of baptism:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ 8 The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can this be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.

The expression ‘born anew’, which can be equally translated ‘born from above’ makes clear that the new birth is an action of God. As John 1:12–13 says:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

What is meant by the reference in v. 5 to being ‘born *of water* and the Spirit’? ‘Water and the Spirit’ here has generally been taken in the church to have a baptismal reference. The discourse does have a baptismal setting. John is baptising with water (John 1:26, 28, 31, 33—sent by God, 23; 3:23; compare Mark 1:4; Acts 19:1–7), and so are Jesus’ disciples (John 3:22; 4:1–3). ‘Water’ in this connection may have a reference to the need for repentance and cleansing signified by John’s baptism with a view to the forgiveness of sins that will be brought by the Messiah (see Mark 1:4; compare Acts 2:38). Pentecostal theology (on the

basis of e.g. Matt 3:11–12) makes a sharp distinction between ‘baptism in water’ and ‘baptism in the Spirit’, with the latter as a necessary second stage. In reaction against a doctrine of ‘baptismal regeneration’ whereby it was claimed that the new birth is effected by the act of baptising of itself, there are those who have sought to dissociate this passage from baptism altogether. Some have taken ‘water’ here to be a reference to the ‘waters’ of natural birth, giving birth to ‘flesh’, as the Spirit gives birth to ‘spirit’ (see v. 6). Some take it to be a reference to seminal fluid in conception, and associate this either with natural birth or with the action of the Spirit in new birth (compare the imperishable ‘seed’ in 1 Pet. 1:23). Remembering the association of water with the Spirit of God in Ezekiel 36:25–27, it may be preferable to see them together, with water either as a metaphor of the Spirit’s cleansing action¹⁶ (‘of water, even the Spirit’ is a possible translation; compare Titus 3:5: ‘the water [Greek *washing*] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit’), or as the actual water of baptism, as an outward sign associated with the inner action of the Spirit in an undefined way (see Acts 22:16) that does not imply baptismal regeneration *ex opere operato* (by virtue of the action being performed) but sees the whole as the gift and action of God, by virtue of Christ’s cross.

It is important to read this passage right through to at least vv. 14–15—the reference to the Son of Man being ‘lifted up’—on the cross—like the snake on the pole in Numbers 21:4–9. It is on this that the whole matter of new birth (together with baptism and all that it signifies) actually hangs. Baptism is a sacrament of the Cross. Some readings are content to stop at the end of v. 8. This could give the false impression that new birth can come to the natural human person simply by some infusion of the Holy Spirit into sinful human flesh (if such a thing were possible!). No: there must be repentance and cleansing—a *death* to sin, the flesh, the world, and the evil powers, through the cross of Christ. Faith—believing—in Christ and in what God has done in him is essential (see Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36, 37, 38; 16:30–34). This is what baptism is all about. The Spirit effects this, and supplies the fullness of life for us as God’s ‘sons’.

Note also how the new birth issues in eternal life (vv. 15, 16), and works that have been ‘wrought in God’ (v. 21).

What does the new birth mean to us? How do we see it in relation to our baptism?

Assignment Question

Use a Concordance or Bible software to list every reference to baptism in the New Testament. Summarise your findings, and say what your baptism means to you.

¹⁶ ‘The Spirit wash you clean/ From every stain’, in the song ‘I saw Him standing there’, Martin Bleby, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 109, verse 4.

Study Five

THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Last Meal

What did Jesus do at his last meal with his disciples the night before he died, and what was its significance? We look at Matthew's account:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it¹⁷ he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt. 26:26–29).

What are the elements of what is happening here?

What is their possible significance?

Body and Blood

In the context of the meal, the actions with the bread and with the cup, which we tend to associate closely with each other, were probably separated by some distance in time. We are told in 1 Corinthians 11:25 and Luke 22:[20] that Jesus took the cup 'after supper'. It is likely that the action with the bread was earlier in the meal, and the action with the cup was later, and that there was a gap between them.

Jesus is telling his disciples of his coming death. He has told them this a number of times before (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:1–2), but they had not wanted to hear. Now, shortly before it is to happen, he tells them again, this time by graphic actions. His body and his blood are to be separated out. He is going to die, and by violent means—especially as the blood is to be 'poured out' (in 1 Cor. 11:24 his body is also 'broken for you').

Much discussion and dispute—even to burning at the stake—has ensued over the centuries as to the connection of the bread with Jesus' body and the wine with his blood. Some have come to take the word 'is' very literally: that the bread and wine actually become Christ's body and blood.¹⁸ Others insist that it must be taken symbolically—in the same sense as when Jesus said, for instance, 'I am the door' (John 10:7). For these, the benefit of the sacrament lies in and depends on the faith of those who receive it.¹⁹ Others occupy a position somewhere in between,²⁰ or prefer to leave the connection undefined.²¹ These differences all

¹⁷ There is no word for 'it' in the Greek—it is more likely that Jesus was blessing God.

¹⁸ The name 'transubstantiation' given to this doctrine depends for its understanding on Aristotelian philosophy, whereby the 'substance' or true being of the sacramental bread and wine becomes Christ's body and blood, while retaining the outward manifestation or 'accidents' of bread and wine.

¹⁹ 'Receptionism', associated with the reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531).

²⁰ As with the theory of 'consubstantiation' (sometimes rightly or wrongly associated with Martin Luther): that the body and blood of Jesus are 'in, with and under' the bread and the wine, and are received by believers to their blessing and by unbelievers to their judgment (as in 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:29).

²¹ As with some doctrines of the 'Real Presence' of Jesus in the sacrament. The following lines are attributed to Queen Elizabeth I of England (1533–1603):

'Twas God the Word that spake it;
He took the bread and brake it,
And what His word doth make it,

arise out of a focus on the elements of the bread and the wine, rather than on the whole action of the Supper in its immediate context of the death of Jesus. The bread and wine are never anything in and of themselves. They must be seen as part of the gift of God, in full connection with the death of Jesus on the cross.

For the disciples present at that meal, none of these later considerations would have meant anything to them. They could see and hear Jesus himself, in his real flesh and blood person present, and they could see and taste the bread and wine he gave them as real bread and wine. They may have sensed that he was telling them of something terrible that was about to happen: the breaking of his body and the pouring out of his blood on the cross the next day. It is likely that they could make little sense of it at the time, as with much that Jesus told them.

Paul later put it this way:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10:16).²²

What we share or participate in is, by nature of the case, something bigger than we are, not something smaller. We do not take bits of Christ's 'body' and 'blood' into us, in whatever way. We ourselves have become part of the greater reality of Christ and his death. It was to this that Jesus was calling his disciples at that meal.

What do we think Jesus meant by these strange actions and associations?

What does participating in the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper mean for us?

For Many

Jesus also indicated something of the meaning and purpose of his death, as far as the disciples and others were concerned: 'this is my blood . . . which is poured out for many'. It is not for himself. His words in v. 29, 'I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine', may indicate that Jesus himself did not drink from this cup—it was for his disciples. He made it clear that his death was not on his own account—not for anything he had done. Jesus himself is without sin, and undeserving of death.²³ His blood was to be 'poured out for many'. This is a reference to Isaiah 53:11–12: 'The righteous one, my servant, shall make *many* righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities . . . he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of *many*, and made intercession for the transgressors'. This provides an interpretative key to understanding the purpose and effect of Jesus' death.

The disciples are included among the 'many'. They were to eat and drink of this. This is specified in Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24: 'This is my body which is given/broken *for you*'. P. T. Forsyth speaks of the Lord's Supper as Jesus' act of making over to his disciples what he was about to do on the cross, in terms of a conveyancing, a legacy, or a deed of gift.²⁴

Do we see ourselves as included in the 'many'?

That I believe, and take it!

While this expresses undoubted devotion to the Lord Jesus and his word, it perhaps deliberately leaves unspecified or ambiguous what 'His word' actually 'doth make it'.

²² Again, Paul is not here propounding sacramental theology. The context is an exhortation against participating in the worship of idols and so partaking with demons, which does not fit with belonging to Christ.

²³ See John 8:46; Luke 23:4, 15, 22, 41, 47; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 2:29; 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 4:15.

²⁴ Op. cit., e.g. pp. 220, 223, 258.

Is this the significance the Lord's Supper has for us?

Sacrificial Significance

How would the disciples have understood Jesus' words: 'Take, eat; this is my body'? By association in the minds of the disciples, this would have invested his death with the character and significance of the sacrifices of the sin offering, the guilt offering and the offering of well-being, some of which was eaten by the participants (see Lev. 6:24–7:18): 'the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for the sin that you have committed, and you shall be forgiven' (Lev. 4:35), and 'as an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the LORD' (Lev. 3:5).

A much wider significance and efficacy, however, is attributed to this death than to these Old Testament sacrifices that needed to be repeated. This is by virtue of its once for all nature, and that it is 'for many'. Hebrews 10:1–18 needs to be studied closely in this regard. Also, its benefits are eternal. In John 6:51, Jesus speaks of himself as 'the living bread that came down from heaven', and goes on to say, 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'. Jesus identifies 'those who eat my flesh'—again a sacrificial reference—as 'whoever believes'. He says those who do this 'have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day' (John 6:47, 54, 57–58). None of the earlier sacrifices guaranteed this—they bestowed only temporal benefits.

Thus Jesus' death, and the Lord's Supper that goes with it, have sacrificial connotations, but cannot be contained within any sacrificial scheme—not even that of the Old Testament. They go way beyond that and, in the process, eliminate it. To revert, then, to seeing the Lord's Supper in any way as a sacrifice in itself (see Study Two: 'Something to Offer?') will end up making it more a constant 'reminder of sin' (Heb. 10:3) than a remembrance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ (see below).

Jesus words regarding the cup, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood', also brings us into something quite different. That the disciples should be told to drink what Jesus designates as 'my blood' takes them way beyond anything that is found in the Old Testament, where the drinking of blood was forbidden (e.g. Lev. 17:10). Yet the blood was central to what God provided in the sacrifice 'for making atonement for your lives' (Lev. 17:11). Once again, the Old Testament sacrifices point to something they can never achieve of themselves (as in Rom. 3:21–26; 8:3–4). Here, no doubt, 'drinking' again signifies believing, as in John 6:47 compare 6:54, and 7:38a.

If, as the gospels say, the last meal of Jesus with his disciples was the Passover feast, then in front of Jesus on the table would have been the Passover lamb. He could well have drawn out the implications of his death in terms of the Passover lamb (as Paul did later in 1 Cor. 5:7), but he chose to bypass it. A greater than Moses is here (compare Heb. 3:3).

How is the sacrifice of Jesus different from the Old Testament sacrifices?

What are the dangers of seeing the Lord's Supper as circumscribed by the Old Testament or some other sacrificial system?

My Father's Kingdom

'I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'. These words of Jesus, immediately following and part of the 'words of institution' of the Lord's Supper, but usually left out of liturgical texts, reveal Jesus' whole orientation, as he goes to his terrible death. It was 'for the joy that was

set before him' that Jesus 'endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God' (Heb. 12:2). Whatever he has to face, Jesus' heart and mind and whole being is set on the glorious outcome: 'that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'. This is a reference to the promised 'feast' of Isaiah 25:6–9, where God 'will swallow up death forever . . . and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth'. By comparison with that, and in sure anticipation and readiness for it, Jesus undertakes not to drink of 'this fruit of the vine' in the cup that is before them—a powerful avowal.

The Lord's Supper has a similar forward look and eager anticipation: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*' (1 Cor. 11:26).

How much do we see our participation in the Lord's Supper as a routine part of our daily lives?

How much do we see it as a participation in the life of the age to come?

The New Covenant for the Forgiveness of Sins

Thus, in readiness for that age of 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet. 3:13), the cup is 'my blood of the [new] covenant . . . for the forgiveness of sins'. The 'blood of the covenant' thrown against the altar and over the people by Moses at Sinai signified their obedient union with God in 'all the words that the LORD has spoken' (see Exodus 24:3–8). This was 'a covenant that they broke', after which God promised 'a new covenant' by which 'I will put my law within them . . . they shall all know me . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more'. This is in keeping with 'the fixed order' of creation and 'my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth' (see Jer. 31:31–37; 33:25–26). This promise, Jesus says, is being fulfilled in his death.

What connection do we see between the Lord's Supper and living the justified and righteous life of the age to come?

A Living Remembrance

In his account of the Lord's Supper, Paul includes the words of Jesus: 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor. 11:24, 25). Some, particularly in reaction against any notion of 'transubstantiation' or 'real presence' have taken this to mean that the Lord's Supper is a 'bare memorial' of Jesus—a remembering and nothing more. To this, P. T. Forsyth says: 'How can we have a mere memorial of one who is still alive, still our life, still present with us and acting in us?'²⁵.

'Remembrance' in the Scriptures is something much more actual and dynamic than a mere calling to mind. The widow of Zarephath, when her son became mortally ill, said to the prophet Elijah: 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' (1 Kings 17:18). That is something with more practical and dynamic consequences than a mere remembering! (We do not want the Lord's Supper to be that kind of 'reminder of sin': see above under 'Sacrificial Significance' on Heb. 10:3; compare 1 Cor. 11:30, in Study Three: 'Dynamic Effects!') Similarly Psalm 111:4 says of God: 'He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered'.

²⁵ Op. cit. pp. 215–216.

How has He done that? A reading of the entire psalm will show that it has not been by a mere recitation or liturgical enactment of them, but by His powerful and effective saving actions in the present. The 'remembrance' of Jesus in the Lord's Supper is of this order. No doubt Paul's sending of Timothy to Corinth 'to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 4:17) came not only by teaching but also by personal embodiment in living.

What are the implications for us of the Lord's Supper being more than a 'mere memorial'?

The Bread from Heaven

Jesus' discourse on himself as the bread of life follows John's account of the feeding of 'a large crowd' around Passover time (John 6:1–15). It has no direct reference to the Lord's Supper (John, indeed, does not refer to any actions with bread and cup at the meal the night before Jesus died), but it is replete with the meaning of our relationship with Christ by participation, through faith, in His saving death, that the Lord's Supper is all about. It speaks of living by the gift of God through Christ's giving of himself on the cross:

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30 So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" 43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came

down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” 70 Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” 71 He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him (John 6:25–71).

Jesus recognises that those who have come looking for him are seeking satisfaction for themselves, and seeking to do something of themselves (vv. 26, 28). He directs them to an action that the Father will do in the Son, which will result in their not perishing but having eternal life (vv. 27, 29). They look for him of himself to do a miraculous sign, such as they consider Moses did with the manna in the wilderness. Jesus redirects them to the Father’s action in Moses’ day, and even more so now to the Father sending ‘the true bread from heaven’ (vv. 30–33). They want this for themselves, and Jesus makes it clear that he is this all-satisfying gift. Jesus anticipates that some of them will not want this, but that those who believe and come and have eternal life will be those whom the Father gives to the Son (vv. 34–37). Jesus himself, in contrast to those he is addressing, lives entirely from the Father, and desires only to do what the Father has sent him for (vv. 38–40).

Then begin expressions of dissent—they object to the nature and the manner of the gift (vv. 41–42). Jesus reiterates the Father’s initiative and action for the gift of eternal life, that is to be found in himself (vv. 43–50). This is when he begins to speak of giving himself—his own flesh—a reference to the action of the cross (v. 51, which Joachim Jeremias treats as a variant of the words of institution at the Lord’s Supper).²⁶ This is further explicated in terms of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood—a participation by faith (compare v. 54 with v. 47) in Jesus’ violent and sacrificial death (vv. 52–59; see above on Matt. 26:26–28, under ‘Sacrificial Significance’).

This association of the bread of life with Jesus’ sacrificial death occasions deep offence that causes many of these unbelieving disciples to leave Jesus (vv. 60–66). The twelve remain, because they have been brought to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One from God, with the words of eternal life. Even so, among them is Judas, through whom the handing-over of Jesus to death will happen (vv 67–71).

Thus are clearly set out the issues: of living from God or attempting to live from ourselves; of living by faith, by ‘the spirit’ that is from God ‘that gives life’, through the death of Jesus, or of attempting to live from ‘the flesh’ that is ‘useless’, that issues in death. This is what we are faced with as we come to the Lord’s Supper.

Assignment Question

What was the significance of Jesus’ words and actions at the last meal he had with his disciples before he died? What is the dynamic significance of the Lord’s Supper for us?

²⁶ *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*

Study Six

SACRAMENTS, CHURCH, AND LIFE

Living from God

We began this series of studies with the question: Do we live from God, or from ourselves? Jesus' teaching from John 6 that we looked at in the last study was wholly an appeal to live from God, as we were made to do, in the gift of redemption that God has brought by the giving of His Son to death on the cross. All that we have seen of the meaning and action of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper bears this out, and helps to make this possible.

We have seen that any attempt to make the sacraments other than the sheer gift of God, or in any way dissociated from the action of the Cross of Christ, is to introduce serious aberrations in practice and consequent living. To see the sacraments, along with all else, as primarily the action of God, focussed on the giving of His Son for us on the cross, engenders a rightness and soundness of thought and action in life. This we shall now trace in the church and in the lives of Christian believers.

The Unity of the Spirit

The church in Ephesians 2:15 is described as 'one new humanity' (literally 'one new man'—*anthrōpos*—referring primarily to Christ himself, and then to us in him). This new humanity has direct 'access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph. 2:18). This has been made possible by 'the forgiveness of our trespasses', when God 'made us alive together with Christ' (Eph. 1:7; 2:5). A great cleansing has been made in the cross of Christ, effective for all nations, and available to all who believe, such that the 'commandments and ordinances' which previously distinguished between the clean and the unclean, God's people Israel and the Gentile nations, have now been abolished (Eph. 2:11–22; compare Lev. 20:25–26; Acts 10:9–16). The total forgiveness of sins, effected in the Cross, has removed the barrier between sinners and God, and also the barriers between sinners and each other. We are now one in Christ.

This has implications for how we now live together in the church. These are spelled out in Ephesians 4:1–6:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

We do not make or construct the unity—it is given. We are to maintain what has been given, and to live in it.

Note here the reference to 'one baptism'. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper relate centrally to this unity:

For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body (1 Cor. 12:13).

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17).

In the first study we saw the importance in God's purpose of the unity of all things. The church has a vital role to play in God's 'plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph. 1:10). Our unity with one another in the saving work of Christ is essential in this purpose.

How tragic and perverse, then, is the disunity of Christians in the very things through which this unity is brought and enhanced: the word of the gospel, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper! Nothing has divided the church of God more than our approach to and understanding of the sacraments—the very things that are given for us to be one in. When we realise, however, that Satan and the powers of evil are out to destroy God's purpose, we need hardly be surprised that these are the very things that will come under fiercest attack, that will enlist all the foibles and failings of human flesh, and the dead-set determination of the world, in its cause. The devil knows where to attack God's people; the flesh takes up his cause with great gusto; and the world applauds. All the more reason why we should be on the alert, and not be deceived, in these things.

What experiences have we had of disunity over the sacraments?

What experiences have we had of unity in and through the sacraments?

How, then, are we to live rightly in all that has come to us in the gospel through the word and sacraments, to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'?

Living in the Forgiveness of Sins

This is a church in which forgiveness has come to all; therefore all are to live together in forgiveness:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 4:31–5:2).

Jesus himself made forgiveness towards each other a *sine qua non* ('without which not') of being in the forgiveness of God:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14–15; compare 18:21–35).

Jesus also made relational reconciliation a prerequisite for offering any gift in worship, which could well be applied in our approach to the sacraments:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother [or sister] has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother [or sister], and then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5:23–24).

On this account, a number of churches now include a 'greeting of peace' in their celebration of the Lord's supper, to ensure that participants are 'in love and charity' with each other and with all.

What difference would it make if this principle was invariably applied to our participation in the Lord's Supper?

Varieties of Gifts, but the Same Spirit

In this church also we are brought to appreciate, honour and benefit from the different gifts of God in one another. After speaking of the unity of the Spirit in Ephesians 4, Paul goes on to Christ's gifting of his people. The gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are given 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ', as the body is built up in love (Eph. 4:12–13, 15–16).

Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that 'in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:13). Ethnic and social differences now count for nothing in Christ. Different giftings also are all 'by the one Spirit': no one can exclude or marginalise any other; all have need of each other (see 1 Cor. 12:4–26; also 14:26–32). Love—the kind of love that is from God—is the absolute necessity (see 1 Cor. 13).

Every Christian group has a particular emphasis or point of view regarding the understanding and practice of the sacraments. What differences are we aware of? How might these things be turned from points of division to mutual enhancement?

Largeness of Heart

Paul had encountered divisions and party-spirit among the Corinthian believers:

Now I appeal to you, brothers [and sisters], by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers [and sisters]. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." (1 Cor. 1:10–12).

Inevitably, some of the division had focussed on baptism and who different people had been baptised by:

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name. (I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power (1 Cor. 1:13–17).

Here Paul brings them firmly back to the person of Christ and his work of the cross. With this at the centre, he is able to encourage them into a largeness of heart that matches the greatness of God's gift:

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor. 3:21–23).

In what ways do we deny the greatness of God's gift by our small-mindedness or limited love? How could that be different?

Wait for One Another

Paul confronts this division also in the context of their coming together for the Lord's Supper:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Cor. 11:17–22).

Separation, and lack of consideration for 'those who have nothing', amounts to 'contempt of the church of God', and in no way participates in anything to do with the Lord. To address this, Paul reiterates what Jesus did the night before he died, and the significance he gave it, and summarises: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). Over against what they were doing at the Lord's Supper, Paul rooted it back to the action of the Cross, and what God was giving us there.

To be unmindful of this invites serious consequences:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

What does 'discerning the body' mean? The context should determine this. The word 'body' is used in 10:16 to refer to 'the body of Christ' as it was given over to the action of the cross. In 11:27 it has a similar significance. Yet 'without discerning the body' in 11:29 is equivalent to the division and lack of consideration shown in 17–22, which is to 'show contempt for the church, and in 12:12–27 the 'body of Christ' refers to the church. Can we say that 'discerning the body' in the Lord's supper has a reference in both directions? We are to be mindful of all that God has given us in the cross of Christ, and live by the good of that in the body of people that was forged there in union with Christ himself.

The implications for living in love for one another are clear:

So then, my brothers [and sisters], when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation (1 Cor. 11:33–34).

What are the implications of this for how we approach the Lord's supper; not only in our own fellowship, but also with others in the wider church?

Ritual and Ceremonial

Obedience to Christ with regard to the sacraments involves saying certain words and doing certain actions. 'Ritual' is used to speak of the words we say (the 'rite'), and 'ceremonial' is used of the actions done. These things are a necessary good—they are part of the gift. They come to have bad connotations when they descend into *ritualism* (or ceremonialism), which is

when the form becomes a thing in itself, and *of itself*—not of God, and not of the Cross. It then takes on the character of a human action wrought for its effect upon God and others which, as we have seen, is not the true nature of a sacrament, and may have more the character of idolatry.

Do Not Become Idolaters

Paul also needed to warn the Corinthian believers of the dangers of mixing idolatrous worship with the pure worship of God. In an unmistakable reference to Christian baptism and the Lord's supper, he made clear that their participation in the Christian sacraments does not necessarily protect them from the harm of idolatry—indeed, it may compound their judgment:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers [and sisters], that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised 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. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness . . . Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols (1 Cor. 10:1–5, 14).

Here Paul says that idolatry is actually participating with demons, and that cannot fit with participating in Christ and what God has done in him:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:21).

Idolatry arises out of a refusal to honour God as God and give thanks to Him (see Rom. 1:21–23). It continues if we refuse to trust wholly and solely in Christ for our salvation.

*How might our practice of the sacraments come to participate in idolatry?
How could that be avoided?*

The LORD is God

Having said that, we are also warned not to judge too quickly or brutally what is idolatry and what is not. When the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, after the conquest of the promised land, returned to their land on the other side of the Jordan river, they built by the Jordan 'an altar of great size', other than the altar that was already in the tabernacle. The other tribes took this to be idolatrous 'rebellion against the LORD', and were ready for war against them, only to find that this altar had been built, not as a rebellion, but as 'a witness between us that the LORD is God' (Joshua 22). Thus a dangerous misconstruing and lack of understanding was allayed by some timely and truthful communication. Similar helpful communication would not go astray between parts of the church today. It is always better to seek to know what is in the heart than to judge on outward appearances (see 1 Sam. 16:7).

When have we found that what is in someone's heart is different from what first appeared outwardly?

We are the Lord's

In the light of Paul's strictures against idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10, we would expect Paul to issue a total ban on eating meat offered to idols. This he does not do. In chapter 8 of the same letter he says that there is no harm in eating such meat, since all things come from God, and idols are big nothings. But there is an overriding consideration: out of love for those whose faith is still weak enough to be derailed by the exercise of such freedom, it is best to abstain for their sake.

In Romans 14:1–15:7, Paul speaks of those who eat meat and those who abstain; those who observe certain days and those who do not. He says it is possible for people to do either 'in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God', since all belong to the Lord, and are accountable to God. He says: 'Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding'.

In Acts 15, a strict application of the law of God would appear to require that Gentiles who come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah should be circumcised. A larger consideration of what God was doing, shaped by the cleansing power of the gospel through faith, in the light of the promises of Scripture, gave rise to the bold landmark decision not to impose circumcision on the Gentiles, but also to ask them to avoid giving offence to their Jewish brethren in particular matters.

Such a spirit of wisdom and understanding could well be applied between Christian believers today over differences in how we understand and practice the sacraments.

How is pursuing what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding different from just letting things be?

Contended Issues

Such a spirit may be necessary in the face of standoffs over questions regarding, for example, infant or believer's baptism, immersion or wetting, open or closed communion, formal or informal services.

At the risk of stirring the pot rather than settling the matter, I will make observations on a couple of these issues.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter urged the people: 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'. He then went on: 'For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:38–39). Does this refer to those who are children now, or to (adult) generations yet to come? We are not told. Those who baptise infants do not see doing this as any different in kind from the baptism of adult believers. Faith and repentance are still present, expressed in this instance by the parents (and godparents) on behalf of a family member who is included in the new covenant of grace (as children were included in the old covenant by circumcision; see Genesis 17:9–14; and Deuteronomy 6:4–9; see also 1 Corinthians 7:14).

The Greek word for 'baptise' in the New Testament generally means immerse or soak. While to some, who advocate total immersion in baptism, the amount of water used is important, and has significant symbolic value, the Greek word 'baptise' is also used in Luke 11:38 to refer to washing a part of the body only. The true focus of baptism is not the action of baptising, but the action of God in Christ.

Can we honour those who practice closed communion in their concern for the purity and integrity of the gospel, even as we feel and bear within ourselves the pain of separation?

I make these comments, not to settle the matters, but to open to wider considerations any who may have heard only one point of view and, up to now, may have regarded it as axiomatic.

A Purified Conscience

Peter in Acts 15 related how the Gentiles came to 'hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us' (Acts 15:7–9). That is our meeting-point, and our unity with each other. The most important thing, for all of us, is the knowledge of *a pure conscience* (that is, a conscience *purified* by the action of the Cross):

baptism . . . 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, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him (1 Pet. 3:21–22).

let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with *our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience* and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:22).

But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from *a pure heart, a good conscience*, and sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5).

Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from *a pure heart* (2 Tim. 2:22).

If we have this assurance that all sin has been fully and finally dealt with, then differences amongst believers will not worry us, and we will be able to cope with them constructively in love. If we have been pasteurised, we will not need to be homogenised! If we are not in that assurance, and so still think we have something we need to prove for ourselves, then our practice of the sacraments, and our different ways of going about them, will be for us occasions of more sin.

Knowing God's mercy and grace, we may even be able to give each other the benefit of the doubt. It is quite possible that the woman who surreptitiously touched Jesus' cloak for her healing did so in a superstitious way, hoping for some kind of magic power to cure her—hardly a good basis for the relational action of God. Jesus, however, took it to be an action of saving faith. However it started out, once she was face to face with him, saving faith is what it turned out to be.

It is not for us to look into or meddle with the hearts of other people. It is enough to be shown our own, and what God has done with that:

God's firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness." (2 Tim. 2:19).

What difference does it make in our approach to and understanding of the sacraments to know that our consciences have been totally cleansed?

Assignment Question

What is the connection between the sacraments and the unity of all things? What are the implications of this for our understanding and practice of the sacraments?