

Welcome to The Book of Common Prayer

The Sacraments and Sacramental Rites

Today, let us first look at “Sacraments”.

Sacraments are defined as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace” (857). Grace is “God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (858).



So, sacraments are an external manifestation of something that happens internally. Still a little difficult to understand? Let’s use a real-life experience to illustrate the expressions of what a sacrament is: When we baptize someone, the outward sign is water, but inside, the person is changed.

Although we receive God’s grace in the sacraments, the sacraments are not the only way to receive grace. The grace of God’s love comes to us in our daily lives in many ways. Yet, when we receive the sacraments we can be confident of receiving God’s grace.

Sometimes we hear other people saying that sacraments are only symbols. This is not true. In the Holy Eucharist, for example, the bread and wine are not simply reminders of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. The bread and wine become Jesus’ body and Blood. Jesus is truly present in the eucharist, and when we receive Holy Communion, we receive God’s grace.

We should note that Anglicans (including Episcopalians in the US) do not always agree on the number of sacraments. During the Reformation period of the 1500s and 1600s the early Anglican Church focused on two sacraments: baptism and eucharist. Later, mostly in the nineteenth century, Anglicans began to speak of seven sacraments, which was, and remains, the teaching of the Roman Catholic church. Today, the sacraments are often divided into two categories. The two sacraments taught by Jesus (dominical sacraments) are baptism and eucharist (858). The five sacraments taught by the church (ecclesial sacraments) are confirmation, anointing of the sick, reconciliation, marriage, and ordination. The BCP usually calls the first two “sacraments” and the last five “sacramental rites.” But, as the authors of “Walk in Love” say, “In terms of our theology though, all seven are clearly sacramental: They are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.”

Now let us turn our focus to one of the sacraments and the sacramental rites that define it: Holy Baptism. I recommend you read Holy Baptism in the catechism at (858-9) if you have a BCP.



Baptism is the first sacrament. It is the first one Jesus taught. It is often called the Sacrament of Initiation because it is the sacrament by which all Christians begin their Christian life. The Church says “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble” (298).

When we say baptism is the first sacrament taught by Jesus, we do not mean that he invented it. Jesus took an existing practice and completely redefined it. Many early religions used cleansing rituals and many Jews

considered it to be a way of washing away sins. Even John the Baptist was using baptism in this way. But when Jesus was baptized by John, Jesus' baptism added new dimensions, just as John had foretold. At his baptism, Jesus was blessed by God's presence and able to see. This introduced the coming of the Holy Spirit in baptism, and from then on Jesus and his followers continued the belief that a baptism is by water and the Holy Spirit.

Today we understand baptism to be a mix of interrelated actions. We believe baptism is "union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit" (858).

*[An interesting fact is that of all the sacraments, baptism is the only one that can be performed by anyone, anywhere, in an emergency.]*

Baptisms are usually performed as part of the normal Sunday Eucharistic service. This is so the entire church community can join in the celebration. Much of the service is like every other Sunday service, but there are a few differences. Among them are the following. After the priest asks the candidate (infant or adult) to come forward, specific questions are asked and required promises are given (301). All assembled repeat their Baptismal Covenant (304) and the water to be used for the baptism is then blessed.

The baptism is formalized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (307). This is the required formula for a Christian baptism. As long as a baptism involved water and was done in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is considered valid. Nearly every Christian church will recognize each other's baptism.

That concludes our study for this week. Next week we will explore the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. See you then.

Yours in Christ, Deacon John

"Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer" by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

"Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices" by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

"Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer" by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016