

ORDINANCES & SACRAMENTS

Are they the same thing?

By David E. Moss

Semantics is the study of the meanings of words. In this regard, two people may appear to disagree on a particular subject because they use different words to define their beliefs. Yet, both may be saying essentially the same thing in spite of their different vocabularies. We would say the difference is merely a matter of semantics. The words used are synonyms and there is no substantive difference between what the two people are saying.

Some Christians think that the only real difference between denominations is semantical. While we may use different words to explain our doctrinal beliefs, we all really believe the same thing.* On this basis, many churches easily join hands in fellowship and cooperation in spite of the differences outlined in their doctrinal statements.

*There is a flip side to this consideration which we would call "neo-orthodoxy." Neo-orthodoxy came about when theologians continued to use the same traditional doctrinal terminology, but assigned different definitions to the words. In this case, it would appear that two people believe exactly the same thing because they are using exactly the same words; when, in fact, they believe two entirely different things because they define the words they are using in very different ways.

Our subject at hand is a case in point. Some use the word "ordinance" to refer to things as baptism and communion. Others use the word "sacrament" to speak of the same things. Are these words interchangeable? Do they mean the same thing? Is their only difference semantical, or are there real substantive differences in the meanings of these words?

I. SACRAMENTS

The contemporary definition of "sacrament" originated with Augustine in the 400's. He said a sacrament is "the visible form of an invisible grace." The Council of Trent in 1547 changed the definition to say that "visible forms were sacraments only when they represented an invisible grace and became its channels" (I.S.B.E. p.2636).

In other words, a sacrament is something man can do to obtain the grace of God. The grace he acquires through these activities is not merely enablement for victorious living, but is the grace of salvation, adding to a "believer's" hope of being saved.

The Catholics believe there are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Order, and Matrimony. Their own words show what they mean by these terms.

Baptism. A Sacrament which cleanses us from original sin (and from actual sin in case of adults); it also makes us Christians, children of God and members of the Church. It is necessary for salvation.

Confirmation. The Sacrament by which we receive the Holy Ghost in order to make us strong and perfect Christians and soldiers of Jesus Christ.

Holy Eucharist. The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the true Body and Blood of

Jesus Christ, together with His Soul and Divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine. When the words of the consecration ordained by Jesus Christ are pronounced by the priest in the Holy Mass, there is made a conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood; which conversion the Catholic Church calls Transubstantiation. Under either kind alone Christ is received whole and entire and as a true Sacrament.

Penance. The Sacrament by which sins we have committed after baptism are forgiven. This forgiveness is conveyed to our soul by the priest's absolution, joined with contrition, confession, and satisfaction.

Extreme Unction. The anointing of the sick with holy oil, accompanied with prayer. It is given to the sick when in danger of death. Its effects are to comfort and strengthen the soul, to remit sin, and even to restore health when God sees it to be expedient.

Holy Order. The sacrament by which Bishops, priests, and other ministers of the Church are ordained and receive power and grace to perform their sacred duties. A Bishop possesses the fullness of the priesthood, that is, he has not a part, but the whole of the power of Order which our Lord gave to His Apostles, having the power of conferring the Holy Ghost by the imposition of hands, and so continuing the Church's hierarchy.

Matrimony. The Sacrament which sanctifies the contract of a Christian marriage, and gives a special grace to those who receive it worthily.*

*Definitions taken from the "Short Dictionary of Catholicism," Published in 1958 by arrangement with and cooperation of the Catholic Truth society. Type set at The Polyglot Press, New York, and edited by Charles Henry Bowden of the Oratory.

The efficacious nature of each of these is clearly stated by these phrases: cleanses us from sin; by which we receive the Holy Ghost; Christ is received whole and entire; sins we have committed are forgiven; to remit sin; receive power and grace to perform sacred duties; and, gives a special grace.

It is further enforced by what Catholics believe is the consequence for not participating in the sacraments. In baptism, Catholics believe they are liberated from condemnation of original sin (the condition he was born in as a descendant of Adam). However, he must still find relief from the consequences of the sins he commits on a daily basis. He may do this only through the sacraments. If a Catholic does not earn enough sacramental grace to offset his venial sins, he faces time in purgatory.

Lutherans also believe in the bestowal of the saving grace of God through sacraments, though they believe there are only two: baptism and communion. The Book of Concord states: "It remains for us to speak of our two sacraments, instituted by Christ. Every Christian ought to have at least some brief, elementary instruction in them because without these no one can be a Christian....It is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved....What is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of the Lord Christ in and under the bread and wine....We go to the sacrament because we receive there a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins."

The word "sacrament" means that the designated activity is necessary for salvation and the forgiveness of sins. Any Christian who uses this word believes this to be true, or

irresponsibly fails to understand the meaning of the word.

II. ORDINANCES

The term “ordinance” is not a synonym of “sacrament.” Ordinances offer nothing efficacious to man. They are merely activities ordered by God as the duties of man. When performed, they evidence the genuineness of one’s faith by virtue of his willingness to obey God. They are not the substance of one’s faith through which he obtains additional favor with God.

In the Old Testament, ordinance is synonymous with statute. (Both words have the same number in Strong’s Concordance.) Ordinances and statutes are ceremonial and religious regulations decreed by God. For example, regarding the Passover, God said, “This day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever” (Exodus 12:14). As a ceremonial ordinance, the Passover served merely as a reminder of the deliverance God provided in the original event. There was no repetition of deliverance in each observance.

This is the view of Baptists and other Separatists* concerning the Ordinances (as opposed to sacraments) which Christ gave to the Church. They generally subscribe to two such Ordinances: Baptism and Communion. They understand them to be memorials only and nothing more. They observe them as testimonies to the grace of God already bestowed upon the believer in his act of faith at the moment of his conversation. Neither by being baptized nor by participating in the Lord’s Table, is anything added to one’s salvation. By failing to participate, nothing is subtracted from one’s salvation. By obeying the Ordinances of Christ, one offers a sacrifice of praise to the Father for His benevolence to us. By failing to obey, the child of God misses the blessing of knowing he has done what his Savior has asked him to do.

*Historically, Separatists are those who point to their origin as being distinct from any association with the Catholic Church. Protestants are those who originated within the Catholic system and separated as a protest against some of its beliefs. Puritans were those who desired to stay in the Catholic system and reform it, many of whom eventually realized that it was not possible to do so. There is a movement today which attempts to reconcile those who protested with the “mother” church. Separatists will have no part in such a scheme since reconciliation is irrelevant for those who acknowledge no heritage in Roman Catholicism. Rather, they acknowledge only a heritage from the true Body of Christ which is distinct from any hierarchical system.

The Ordinance of Baptism. In the baptism that John the Baptist offered to Israel, he was very definite in his insistence that only those who had already repented could participate.

When the Pharisees sought to be baptized, he strongly rebuked them and admonished them first to “bring forth fruits meet for repentance” (Matthew 3:8). After they proved the genuineness of their repentance, they could be immersed in water as a testimony that they had done so. The same held true when Christian baptism was instituted. When the Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip what would hinder him from being baptized, Philip explained that faith in Christ was the only prerequisite (Acts 8:36-37). Once he had exercised that faith, he was free to testify of it by immersion in water.

To fully understanding the Biblical teaching on baptism, one must recognize that there are two kinds of baptism to which Scripture refers. One is symbolic baptism with water, the other is real baptism with the Spirit of God. In both cases, the believer is immersed. At the moment of his salvation, the believer is immersed into the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13).

The Holy Spirit acts as the baptizer and places us into the Church.* Some time subsequent to this moment, the believer has the opportunity to be immersed in water as a testimony to the fact that he has been immersed into Christ by faith. When interpreting Scriptural statements about baptism, it is essential that the passages be rightly divided into these two categories. Inappropriately applying statements concerning spiritual baptism to the ordinance of water baptism will lead the Bible student to serious doctrinal error.

*Please note the distinction of the Baptism of the Spirit, the Indwelling of the Spirit, and the Filling of the Spirit. Many Christians confuse these three things and make them synonymous. The distinction is much more than semantics, however. The Baptism of the Spirit is when the Spirit of God places us into the Body of Christ. The Indwelling of the Spirit is when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our body. The Filling of the Spirit is the exercise of control which the Holy Spirit generates upon our lives as we submit to Him. The first two occur once each at the moment of our salvation. The third may occur repeatedly throughout our Christian experience on earth.

The Ordinance of Communion. The unleavened bread and the unfermented wine are purely symbolic devices which remind the believer of the supreme sacrifice Jesus Christ made on our behalf. In the institution of this Ordinance, Jesus himself defined it as a memorial observance with the words, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). This is confirmed in I Corinthians 11:23-26. Jesus' words are repeated and then this additional clarification is given, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come." It is merely a showing by illustration, not an efficacious repetition.

Appreciating the value of such a memorial comes from understanding man's bent toward forgetfulness. Testimonies abound of how the Israelites quickly forgot the goodness of God in delivering them from their foes. Even when those deliverances were profound and miraculous, it was not long until their faith waned and they sought solutions from within their own imaginations. As a safeguard against such a thing occurring within the Church, God provided this marvelous means of remembering how He provided His mercy in the sacrifice of His Son. Partaking of it with soberness and a contrite spirit, a believer can be spiritually encouraged to be faithful to the marvelous Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, partaking of it never adds anything to a person's salvation.

Conclusion

The difference between sacraments and ordinances is not mere semantics. The difference is theology.

Sacraments belong to the theology that believes man must participate in a process of salvation. Through sacraments, God is appeased by human efforts. In response, He dispenses a portion of His grace for each duty performed. Unfortunately, in this theology, no one portion of God's grace is sufficient to assure the recipient of his eternal destiny. One must accumulate as much grace as he can in hopes of having enough.

Ordinances belong to the theology that believes man is saved by faith alone, and that saving faith is based upon what God did for him in Christ. No work needs to be done by man to obtain God's favor. No work can be done by man to obtain God's favor. God accepts man's faith in place of the works of righteousness which he cannot perform on his own. In response to man's faith in Christ alone, He grants an abundance of grace, sufficient to save and sufficient to keep for all eternity.

The lesson in this is not just that a person should be careful about the selection of his words. There is a greater concern. One must be careful about what he believes. Baptism and Communion cannot be both sacrament and ordinance at the same time. Only one can be true. The other must be false. Either man earns the grace of God, or it is purely a gift.

It is so much better to believe the plain Words of God rather than the imaginations of man. Please allow God to have the final word:

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us...” Titus 3:5.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting the? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.” Romans 3:24-27