

What is a Sacrament?

Technically a sacrament has five parts;

1. Sacred Act
2. Instituted by Christ
3. Uses Earthly elements
4. Connected with God's word
5. Gives Spiritual Blessings

More informally we could say, any act the Lord commands and through which he promises blessings.

Jesus has given to us two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In an informal sense the bible is full of many other sacraments. Many of them have physical promises attached to them rather than spiritual, so they are technically not true sacraments. But they help us to understand how God works. This is a normal thing for Him. That is He often gives blessings, whether they are spiritual or physical, through some task or ritual often a small insignificant task.

Namaan the Leper is a perfect example. Here the Lord told him to bathe in the Jordan seven times and through that bath. The Lord restored his health.

Does that mean that if we have leprosy we can bathe in a river seven times and be clean? Absolutely not. The Lord gave that promise to Naaman and Naaman alone. Which brings up a good point. The promise, the promise is the central point of a sacrament. The promise is what makes it a sacrament.

Bathing in the river, that accomplishes nothing. Eating a wafer and a sip of wine, that accomplishes nothing. Unless we have a promise from God. God promises Naaman healing through that ritual, God promises us forgiveness through this ritual. God must do what he promises

Another good example is the Passover, which has a very intimate connection with the Lord's Supper. Here the children of Israel were told that they should paint the blood of a lamb on their door posts and everyone who did so would be granted life. Specifically their eldest son would not be killed.

Why should it be so? Is the blood of a lamb some kind of magical ward against the angel of death. Of course not, not even remotely. It was so because the Word of God said it was so, not because of some incantation or some magical properties of the blood.

Unfortunately this is the way that many people viewed, and some even today view, the Lord's Supper. In the middle ages the common people saw the priests speaking strange words and doing this ritual and they were told this is now the body and blood of Christ. So they thought, ahh what great magic there is in these words. In fact the words "Hocus Pocus" come from this very misunderstanding; "hoc est corpus meum" is latin for "This is my body."

The power comes from the Word of God. Not the ritual, not my speaking of the Word, not my faith, not your faith. It doesn't matter if I speak the words holding my hands over the cup. It doesn't matter if I speak the words once twice or thirty times. It doesn't matter if I speak in Latin or Greek or Hebrew or English. What matters is that we eat and drink in remembrance of Him. When we do this the Lord promises to bless that eating and drinking with the gift of His body and of forgiveness of sins.

The Flood – the role of faith

Another example is the Flood. Now here we have an example that is specifically mentioned as a type of sacrament by the Apostle Peter. He specifically connects this event with the sacrament of baptism.

Noah was saved through the building of an ark and through water. But what was it that saved Noah was it the building of a boat? No, I'm certain that there were other people living in Noah's day that had boats, yet none of them were saved. Even if another had built an ark, to the exact specifications that God gave Noah, do you think that Ark would have survived the flood. No I'm certain it would not have.

It was the power of God working through the earthly ark that saved Noah. It was the Lord fulfilling His promise that kept Noah safe, not the ark. Although the ark was the earthly means through which the Lord's power worked.

And why did Noah build the Ark? Because he believed the word of God, and because he believed he did what God commanded. As is true in all these examples.

If Noah hadn't believed God, he would not have done what God said, and he would not have been saved. The promise would still have been valid. But Noah would not have received the benefit without faith.

The power is in God's word, which works through the earthly element, and which is received by faith.

There are many other examples, The Raising of Lazarus, The tree in the middle of the garden, the healing of the man born blind. But these we have seen already are sufficient for this evening to teach us the mystery of the sacraments.

The Lord gives a promise, those who hear and believe do as He says, thus showing their faith, the Lord fulfills His promises, giving His grace to us. The act itself is nothing. There is no power in the actions of man or in our faith. The power comes from the God and works through the word and promises of God. Faith is nothing more than the receiving of this gracious promise from God.