## Sacraments

The word “sacrament” refers to ordinances practiced in Christianity, which, in the opinion of some, communicate grace to the participants, while others feel that they simply symbolize that grace. The issue of communicating grace is actually the most essential and debated question for our understanding of sacraments. All Christian confessions agree that God sent His Son as Savior of the world. Disagreements, however, arise as to how that salvation is communicated to God’s people and the need for sacraments in that regard.

We can delineate several opinions among Christians on the question of the impartation of God’s grace. Some, as noted above, propose that sacraments themselves are God’s channel of the grace of Christ, while others feel that personal faith in the gospel is all that is necessary. Still others teach that grace can come to us through both channels: sacraments and gospel preaching.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this chapter, we will describe and evaluate the attitude toward sacraments in major Christian movements, namely in Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, among the followers of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, and among the Quakers. We undertake a more detailed study on the primary sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, in subsequent chapters.

### А. Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Sacraments

Clark shares the following observation about the “pre-history” of water baptism and the Lord’s Supper: “Christ did not create the sacraments entirely *de novo*, but rather took existing rites and practices and creatively transformed them.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, water baptism and the Lord supper are derived from the Old Testament practices of circumcision and Passover.

Wallace relates that in the first-century Church, water baptism and the Lord’s Supper were closely connected with the *kerygma*, that is, the preaching of the gospel.[[3]](#footnote-3) They served as visible representations of what was preached in the *kerygma*. For those who observed these ordinances, the message of the *kerygma* became living.

In their original meaning, these ordinances connoted “the re-presentation of Christ as the fulfillment of God’s renewing and restoring purpose.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Wallace comments, “These sacraments derive their force and meaning only from the reconciliation that Christ, the true sacrament, achieved once and for all in His own person and work.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In time, the idea developed that these ordinances were comparable to the Incarnation of God’s Son, i.e., the Word who became flesh. In other words, the ordinances of the Church were considered an “incarnation” of God’s grace. They were part and parcel of the “mystery of Christ,” which was expressed by Paul in the words “(God) was revealed in the flesh” (1 Tim 3:16). Therefore, these rituals became knows as “mysteries” or “sacraments.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This association of church ordinances with the incarnation led to the conviction that they contain God’s grace and communicate it to their recipients.

Bornkamm advances the thesis that this alteration in the Church’s understanding of sacraments is rooted in the Greek “mystery religions,” which were widespread at that time. According to the “mysteries,” through participation in certain rituals, mysterious, supernatural power flows to people, deifying them and bestowing on them immortality.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Gavin perceives some aspects of sacramental theology in Old Testament faith, which abounds in ritual worship of Yahweh.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet, there was no understanding of any impartation of grace through them.

Moreover, in distinction from the contemporary understanding of sacraments, the Early Church considered any “sacred” act of God or His people to be a sacrament. They placed emphasis not on the physical items employed in the ritual, but on the action performed. For them, “*The sacraments are actions, not things*. They are actions, which the assembly performs, not ‘things’ that we ‘receive.’”[[9]](#footnote-9) However, later in church history, the Church began to understand sacraments not so much as an action, but as a thing that communicates grace.[[10]](#footnote-10) Due to this change in perception, grace began to be understood as a substance infused into the soul of those who participate in the sacraments.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Augustine defined sacraments as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Wallace comments that due to that understanding, people began to think of sacraments not in their original sense in connection with the person of Christ, but as objects that communicate grace in and of themselves.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Augustine also promoted the concept *ex opere operato*, which means that sacraments operate autonomously, independent of the spiritual state of the one performing them. This history dates back to the Donatist controversy. At that time, the question arose as to whether sacraments were valid if they were performed by a bishop who compromised his faith during persecution. Augustine defended the position that such sacraments are indeed valid according to the principle of *ex opere operato* (see *On Baptism*, 4.16-18).[[14]](#footnote-14)

So then, according to Augustine, the validity of sacraments does not depend on the worthiness of the minister, but on the worthiness of the one who instituted them, i.e., God.[[15]](#footnote-15) Lane comments, “The sacraments remain valid even when administered by an unholy minister because it is *Christ* who gives the sacrament.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Augustine felt that sacraments performed outside of the Catholic Church are also valid (that is, they do not need to be repeated). Yet, they become effective (i.e., able to impart grace) only when the recipient returns to the fellowship of the Catholic Church.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the West, the doctrine of *ex opere operato* was officially endorsed by the Council of Trent.[[18]](#footnote-18)

At various times in church history, between five and thirty sacraments were recognized. Hugh of Saint Victory, for example, included among the sacraments: holy water, vessels used in the liturgy, liturgical garments, and the dedication of a house of worship. Augustine included: the kiss of peace, blessed salt, the confession of faith, the Lord’s prayer, and ashes for repentance.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, Wallace notes that although the Church Fathers recognized a variety of sacraments, they always gave pride of place to the ones Jesus Himself established: water baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The first mention of seven sacraments appears in the writings of Peter Lombard in the twelfth century and by Michael Palaiologos in thirteenth.[[21]](#footnote-21) In the West, the seven sacraments were officially adopted in 1439.[[22]](#footnote-22) Guzie makes this comment:

The numbering of the seven sacraments did not come out of reflection on biblical data or the life of the early church. It came from the actual liturgical practice of the medieval church and observation of what was universal in practice, with some influence from the fitting symbolism of the number seven.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It is also interesting how the timing of sacraments altered.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the Early Church, candidates received water baptism and confirmation (or chrismation) at the same time. However, since the bishop, who must officiate at the confirmation ceremony, could not attend every baptismal service, the Western Church separated these rites. In the East, though, they are still observed together. The West begin using the designation “confirmation” in the fifth century.

Another important fact from history is the debate between Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. Scotus taught that when sacraments are performed, God directly acts in the heart of the participant and applies His grace. Aquinas believed that God infuses the element itself with grace. The Catholic Church adopted Aquinas’ view.[[25]](#footnote-25)

### B. Catholic View

The twelfth-century teacher Hugh of Saint Victor expresses the Catholic view of sacraments in the following statement: “A sacrament is a physical or material element set before the external senses, representing by likeness, signifying by its institution, and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Let us clarify this teaching. A sacrament is a physical object or a physical action that is required for transmission of the grace from God that it pictorially represents. In Hugh’s definition, the phrase “representing by likeness” means that the physical properties of the object or action correspond to that which it represents. For example, wine is similar to blood, and bread is similar to the body, etc. Yet, the correspondence is more than symbolic – the sacrament actually contains and communicates this grace.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The sacrament’s effectiveness is due not only to the presence of grace within it, but also because Christ personally accomplishes the sacrament: “They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Here we see an acknowledgement of both Duns Scotus’ and Aquinas’ view.

A key element in the Catholic teaching on sacraments is their understanding of the idea of a “symbol.” For Catholics, a sacrament is a symbol that directly connects the worshiper with spiritual realities.[[29]](#footnote-29) Guzie defends this view: “A symbol is its own reality, and *in* its own reality it leads us into the profound mystery which it signifies.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

An ordained priest is authorized to perform the sacraments. He receives this authority from the bishop, who, in turn, is authorized by the pope. The pope, it is presumed, receives his authority from the apostles through the process of “apostolic succession.” The apostles, in turn, received their authority from Christ:

The ordained ministry or ministerial priesthood is at the service of the baptismal priesthood. The ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church. The saving mission entrusted by the Father to his incarnate Son was committed to the apostles and through them to their successors: they receive the Spirit of Jesus to act in his name and in his person.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The Catholic understanding of sacraments operates off the principle of *ex opere operato*.As previously explained, this Latin expression means that the sacraments are intrinsically able to pass on grace themselves. All that is necessary for a sacrament to accomplish its work of grace is the blessing of a priest who stands in the line of apostolic succession. The spiritual condition of the officiating priest has no effect on the communication of grace through the ritual.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In regard to the role of the participants in the sacramental rite, the traditional positions claims that according to the principle of *ex opere operato,* participants are guaranteed that physical participation in the sacrament secures the impartation of grace, except in cases where participants are guilty of a mortal sin.[[33]](#footnote-33) Still, the Catechism of the Catholic Church qualifies, “The fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.”[[34]](#footnote-34) The Council of Trent stipulated the need for a “minimal disposition” of the heart, but did not specify what that involves.[[35]](#footnote-35) One must also consider that a person’s readiness to partake of a sacrament already indicates a positive heart’s attitude.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Also interesting is the Catholic’s view on the relationship between sacraments and faith. On the one hand, they claim that hearing the Word and believing prepares an individual to receive God’s grace that is offered in the sacraments: “The sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word.[[37]](#footnote-37) In return, participation in the sacraments strengthens faith. On the other hand, “The Church's faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This means that sacraments can aid recipients even without their exercising personal faith because the Church may exercise its faith on their behalf.

It is important to note that according to Catholic teaching, participation in the sacraments (in particular, baptism and the Eucharist) is necessary for salvation.[[39]](#footnote-39) The Council of Trent pronounced anathema on those who rejected this dogma.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The seven sacraments of the Roman Church are as follows:[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. Water baptism
2. Eucharist, i.е., the Lord’s Supper
3. Confirmation, by which an individual receives the power of the Holy Spirit for Christian life and service
4. Penance, by which sins are forgiven
5. Holy Orders, i.е., ordination to ministry
6. Matrimony
7. Last Rights, or Reconciliation, which originally was a prayer for physical healing, but now is a sacrament to prepare for death

Catholics divide them into three groupings:[[42]](#footnote-42)

1. The Sacraments of Christian Initiation (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist);
2. The Sacraments of Healing (penance, reconciliation);
3. The Sacraments at the Service of Communion (holy orders, matrimony).

Three sacraments not only impart grace, but also leave an indelible spiritual mark on the soul: baptism, confirmation, and holy orders. Therefore, these sacraments cannot be repeated.[[43]](#footnote-43) One can lose the grace of baptism through mortal sin, but it can be restored after confession. Confirmation and reconciliation strengthen the grace received at baptism.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In order for sacraments to be valid, they must have “sanction,” which means that they must be instituted by God.[[45]](#footnote-45) Contrary to the Protestant claim that the only true sacraments are those instituted personally by Christ, namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Catholicism asserts that the Church, as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, has the right to establish sacraments. Nevertheless, Catholics seek biblical sanction for all seven sacraments as well. For example, it is thought that the sanction for the sacrament of matrimony is given in John chapter 2, and for penance and holy orders in John chapter 20.[[46]](#footnote-46) The Church itself is considered a sacrament in the sense that is it an expression of Christ and His work in the world.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In addition, Catholicism sees a certain symmetry in the seven sacraments, since they cover the entire spectrum of a person’s life from birth to death: “The sacraments are the seven mouths into which the stream of divine life of grace, which has its spring in the cross of Christ, empties itself into the wilderness of human existence.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

What eventually became the sacrament of penance started with the practice, begun in the second century, of placing individuals who had committed serious sins under church discipline for a period of three years after confession before a bishop. (From the sixth century, the Church allowed private repentance after confession instead). In time, the concept of penance developed, where repentant persons must perform some act in connection with their repentance in order to “redeem” their transgression. Horton suggests that this practice found justification through an incorrect translation in the Vulgate of the Greek term μετάνοια (*metanoia*), i.е., “repentance,” with the Latin expression *poenitentium agite*, i.е., “perform redemption.”[[49]](#footnote-49) In connection with this, the practice of indulgences also arose, where persons could give money to redeem their sins.

Starting in the 1970’s, emphasis was placed more on reconciliation with God and others than on listing personal sins committed. This sacrament of penance can be performed by a personal interview with a priest, or during a church service devoted to this theme.[[50]](#footnote-50) What is sought is not obtaining forgiveness, but accepting the forgiveness already offered by the Lord.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Changes also occurred in the practice of “Last Rights,” now called “Reconciliation.” There is movement toward its original significance as a prayer for physical healing through anointing with oil.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Besides the sacraments, Catholicism acknowledges so-called “sacramentals.” Examples include laying on of hands, sprinkling with holy water, the sign of the cross, various blessings, exorcism, and others. Sacramentals do not impart grace, but “by them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

Along with sacraments and sacramentals, the Catholic Church also recognizes some elements of popular piety. These latter practices occupy a lower level of sanctity than the former. They may include veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc.[[54]](#footnote-54) The church hierarchy evaluates practices of popular piety to determine their appropriateness for sanction by the Church.

### C. Eastern Orthodox View

From an Orthodox perspective, Demetrakopoulos defines sacraments as follows: “(Sacraments) consist of ceremonies, words, and material things and they produce an invisible action by the Holy Spirit.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Meyendorff offers the following, more detailed definition:

These sacraments are understood less as isolated acts through which a “particular” grace is bestowed upon individuals by properly appointed ministers acting with the proper intention, and more as the aspects of a unique mystery of the Church, in which God shares divine life with humanity, redeeming man from sin and death and bestowing upon him he glory of immortality.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Orthodox theology shares with Catholicism many convictions about the nature of sacraments. In particular, Orthodoxy teaches that through partaking in the sacraments, God’s grace is imparted to the participant. Metropolitan Ilarion writes, “In sacraments, God’s grace descends on us and sanctifies our being – both soul and flesh – communicating to it God’s nature, which animates, enriches, and edifies for eternal life.”[[57]](#footnote-57) According to Mantzaridis, “The sacraments are created media which transmit the uncreated grace of God.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

The Orthodox and Catholic also share a common understanding of a “symbol.” They both believe that the symbols used in sacraments not only represent the realities of redemption, but also have an ontological connection with them.[[59]](#footnote-59)

The Orthodox also acknowledge the same seven sacraments, although for many years they refrained from setting a specific number. Meyendorff comments here, “Byzantine theology ignores the Western distinction between ‘sacraments’ and ‘sacramentals.’ And never formally committed itself to any strict limitation of the number of sacraments.”[[60]](#footnote-60) In 1267, though, Pope Clement IV required the emperor Michael Palaiologos accept the seven sacraments. From that time, Orthodoxy recognizes seven sacraments, especially due to the symbolic importance of the number seven.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The distinguishing mark of Orthodoxy, however, is the conviction that sacraments communicate grace for the deification of believers.[[62]](#footnote-62) According to patristic theology, God became human so that humans could become god. The key element in this process of deification is participation in the sacraments, which impart deifying grace.[[63]](#footnote-63) Archimandrite Nikon states, “Deification is accomplished in the Church by the Holy Spirit. The most powerful means for deification are the sacraments of the church.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Quoting Lossky, Nikon writes, “We must feed on God – Lossky states – in order to attain deification.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

In connection with the above, we should add that this grace, which supposedly is transmitted through sacraments, is identified with God’s so-called “uncreated energies.” In chapter 1 of volume 3 in this series, we discuss in detail the Orthodox teaching about God’s “essence” and “energies.” The latter are equated with God’s actions and manifestations, yet they are still God Himself in one of the two “modes” of His existence. Since deification consists in the assimilation of God’s uncreated energies into human nature, it is necessary to “ingest” these energies by partaking of the sacraments in order to progress in this process.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Demetrakopoulos provides the following resume of the Orthodox sacraments.[[67]](#footnote-67)

1. “In Baptism man is born again and made a member of the Church.”
2. “In Chrismation he receives the strength and Gifts of the Holy Spirit for his growth in holiness and perfection.”
3. “In the Holy Eucharist he is fed the bread and wine by which the life of the soul in maintained.”
4. “In confession he cleanses away all since committed after baptism.”
5. “Matrimony is the Sacrament to sanctify the union of man and woman.”
6. “Ordination is the Sacrament which was instituted that the Church might be ruled by those whom God set over her to lead, guide and bless the faithful.”
7. Holy Unction was instituted for the healing of physical and spiritual sickness.”

Along with Catholicism, Orthodoxy holds that three sacraments leave an “indelible mark” on the soul, and therefore cannot be repeated: baptism, chrismation, and ordination. The Catholics and Orthodox also agree that only priests ordained in the line of apostolic succession are authorized to perform the sacraments.

In conclusion, we will comment on the Orthodox practice of confession and Holy Unction.[[68]](#footnote-68) Since Orthodox faith minimizes the forensic character of sin, they place less stress on a formal remission of sins: “For this reason, confession and penance, at least ideally, preserved the character of liberation and healing rather than that of judgment.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The Orthodox nevertheless practice the sacrament of confession. Meyendorff describes the historical process of this sacrament’s development:

By the fifteenth century, however, private confessions to a priest, followed by a prayer of remission, was a generally accepted practice among laymen, with confession to lay monks existing as an alternative in monasteries.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Regarding Holy Unction, even though this sacrament was instituted for physical healing, accent has shifted to spiritual restoration:

Healing is requested only in a framework of repentance and spiritual salvation, and not as an end in itself. Whatever the outcome of the disease, the anointing symbolized divine pardon and liberation from the vicious cycle of sin, suffering, and death, in which fallen humanity is held captive.[[71]](#footnote-71)

### D. Lutheran View

We observe a marked similarity between the Lutheran and Catholic views of sacraments. Both confessions hold that they are a physical object or action “representing by likeness” the thing symbolized, by participation in which grace is transmitted. Consequently, sacraments contain in themselves grace and are able to impart it to those who partake of them.

In addition, sacraments require sanction, that is, some indication that God has instituted them. Lutherans insist that sanction is found only in God’s Word, the Bible. The Church has no right to institute sacraments without direct reference to them in Holy Scripture. Therefore, Lutheran faith limits the number of sacraments to two: water baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[72]](#footnote-72) Luther originally designated penance as a sacrament as well, but later clarified, “It has seemed right to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises of God which have signs attached to them,” i.e., baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[73]](#footnote-73)

In accordance with Catholic and Orthodox doctrine, Lutherans also teach that grace is imparted through physical participation in the sacrament. Contrary to the Catholic dogma *ex opere oparato,* Lutherans feel that partakers in the sacraments must exercise personal faith to receive benefit from them. Sacraments, in turn, strengthen the faith of the partakers.[[74]](#footnote-74) The Augsburg confession declares the importance of faith:[[75]](#footnote-75)

Of the Use of the Sacraments they teach that the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them. Wherefore we must so use the Sacraments that faith be added to believe the promises which are offered and set forth through the Sacraments. They therefore condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act, and who do not teach that, in the use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven, is required (*Article 13*).

Lutherans compare Christian sacraments with so-called “Old Testament sacraments.” They propose that the Old Testament people of God also observed two sacraments: circumcision and Passover, which, in essence, correspond to the Christian sacraments of water baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[76]](#footnote-76)

### E. Reformed View

The Reformed view of sacraments is well represented by the phrase “signs and seals of salvation.” The term “sign” means that sacraments serve as visible and public signs of that which people receive spiritually by faith from God. “Seal” refers to the conviction that partaking of the sacraments strengthens the faith of the participants.

So then, through the sacraments participants do indeed obtain grace since there exists a “conjunction between sign and that which is signified.”[[77]](#footnote-77) However, we must qualify that grace come not through physical contact with the elements, but rather by means of the action of the Holy Spirit upon the participant.[[78]](#footnote-78) God employs the figure of sacraments as a condescension to human weakness.[[79]](#footnote-79)

According to Reformed teaching, sacraments are linked to God’s promises in Scripture and derive their effect from them: “The signs become sacraments only by virtue of the Word of God,” “The integrity of the sacrament is immediately dependent upon its relation to the Word of promise.”[[80]](#footnote-80) In addition, faith is essential for sacraments to have effect. This conviction, though, is complicated by the Reformed practice of baptizing infants. We will address the issue of infant baptism in a later chapter.

The Reformed theologian John Murray describes what is meant by a sacrament as a “sign” of salvation:

“(God) not only unites His people to Christ but He also advertises that great truth by an ordinance which portrays visibly to our senses the reality of this grace. It is a testimony which God has been pleased to give to us so that we may the better understand the high privilege of union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Furthermore, Murray comments on the significance of sacraments as “seals” of salvation: “As a seal it authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Wallace summarizes the general Reformed position in the following words:

(Sacraments) are thus visible words which, as adjuncts and seals of the preached word, confirm and stimulate the faith of participants. They do not take effect by their mere administration but only as God works in and through them by the Holy Spirit to bring believers into living fellowship with the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ who is their proper substance, and as these believers receive them with the saving and justifying faith that finds its focus in Christ.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Berkhof also provides a helpful summary: “As signs and seals they are means of grace, that is, means of strengthening the inward grace that is wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Similar to Lutheran faith, the Reformed confessions acknowledge only two sacraments that serve as “signs and seals of salvation”: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The Westminster Confession Faith provides the following declaration on the doctrine of the sacraments (Chapter 27):[[85]](#footnote-85)

* 1. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God to represent Christ and His benefits and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.
  2. There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.
  3. The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it but upon the work of the Spirit and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.
  4. There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.
  5. The sacraments of the old testament in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the new.

### F. Zwingli’s View

The final Reformer whose view we will examine is Ulrich Zwingli. In his words, a sacrament is something that “God has instituted, commanded, and ordained with the Word, which is as firm and sure as if God had sworn an oath to this effect.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

Zwingli taught that sacraments were only symbols established by God for strengthening faith. They neither contain, nor transmit grace. Grace comes when the partaker’s faith is inspired thought his or her participation. Sacraments are “visible sermons” that inspire faith.

Thus, Zwingli’s understanding of “symbols” differs from that of Catholics or Orthodox. In Zwingli’s view, a symbol has no ontological connection with the thing it symbolizes. Symbols act only on the human mind to direct thought to the thing designated and inspire faith. It is by faith that grace is received for spiritual edification.

Zwingli also felt that sacraments aided in enhancing Church unity since the entire Church participates in them. Along with other Protestant denominations, Zwingli recognized two sacraments: water baptism and the Lord’s Supper.[[87]](#footnote-87)

### G. View of the Quakers

George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, advanced a unique view of sacraments in his time. Since they are mere symbols, Christians are not obligated to observe them. It is only necessary that one understands the significance of the symbol. Therefore, Quakers do not perform them in their meetings.

Wallace makes the following comment on the practice of the Quakers:

The Quakers took the extreme radical position of so focusing on the spiritual meaning that they dispensed with the external signs altogether, holding that Christ had instituted these signs only as temporary measures to enable the first believers to grasp the inner realities.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Quakers defend their position by citing several Scriptural texts. Romans 14:17 states, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.” In Colossians 2:16, we read the instruction, “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink.” Quakers consider that such passages release believers from obligatory observance of sacraments. On the basis of Acts 15:29, Quakers believe that sacraments were useful during the early development of the Church, but now they are obsolete and have no value.[[89]](#footnote-89)

### H. Conclusions

In assessing the doctrine of sacraments, we must first consider that the word “sacrament” never appears in Scripture, nor does the concept it represents. Berkouwer agrees, “This word appears nowhere in Scripture, nor is there any mention of the sacraments in general.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

The Bible does use the term μυστήριον (*musterion*), i.е., “mystery,” for example, in Ephesians 5:32, but “it is clear that Paul does not speak in Ephesians 5 of what we now call sacrament. The word *mysterion* is used in various contexts in the New Testament, and it certainly does not have the meaning of our ‘sacraments.’”[[91]](#footnote-91) The Church created the concept of “mysteries” as “sacraments.”

Therefore, we consider it mistaken to speak of “sacraments” as a special class of church ordinances that have “divine sanction” and “transmit grace.” It is more appropriate to simply speak of church ordinances specifically and separately from one another. That is, we can speak about *the biblical teaching on* water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, marriage, repentance, etc. Although some may note common features between some church ordinances, grouping them into an artificial class called “sacraments” can lead to misunderstandings and abuses, which we indeed have seen in connection with this doctrine.

Having said that, we admit that water baptism and the Lord’s Supper are central church ordinances, instituted by Christ Himself, which visually portray His redemptive work. Scripture speaks of other practices that also play an important role in the life of the Church, such as the laying on of hands (for various purposes like ordination, blessing, and healing).

Wallace summarizes the value of practicing symbolic rites:

When properly used, the sacraments discharge the same important function as biblical signs. Taking a more concrete form than the preached word, they make a wider appeal to the senses. Hence they set forth Christ and His promises with a new vividness and clarity, taking up the recipients themselves into an enactment of the word.[[92]](#footnote-92)

In conclusion, we reject the extreme position of the Quakers, that church ordinances are without value and we need not observe them. We also consider errant the other extreme position, that sacraments contain grace within themselves that is transmitted by physical contact. We will refute this latter view in detail in subsequent chapters devoted to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We find greatest resonance with Zwingli’s view that church ordinances are visible sermons that inspire faith in those partaking of them.

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