

## The Sacraments

In the Protestant church two sacraments are recognised – those of water baptism and holy communion. The Roman Catholic Church and some other liturgical denominations recognise others such as confirmation, matrimony, penance and confession, holy orders and anointing of the sick.

A sacrament may be defined as a natural act where the Lord is present in a special way. Something *spiritually significant* happens when we do these outward things.

As I perform or watch our two sacraments I wonder in what way the Lord is (especially) present. Let me suggest some thoughts:

### Water Baptism

I have always believed, and practiced, total immersion for adults who are giving testimony that they are born again and identified with Jesus in His death and resurrection. It was not until I was forced to do a Bible study on this theme that I discovered just how little the Bible tells us about water baptism, though Jesus demanded it and the early church performed it. Paul teaches some things in only two places while Peter does so once.

Summarising these references we might write:

- Romans 6:3-6            We are baptized so we can walk in newness of life. Our old man is crucified and the body of sin destroyed.  
Colossians 2:10-13    Baptism is likened to a ‘circumcision’, not physical but a cutting away of the body of sins, dealing with the trespasses and ordinances that were against us.  
1 Peter 3:21            Baptism is like Noah’s deliverance in that it gives a clean conscience (*freedom from bondage and guilt*).

Thus, I believe, at baptism, God does a work on ‘the old man’, cutting him off, putting him to death, removing his influence and condemnation, cleansing our conscience – removing what has become known as ‘original sin’. It was typified in the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea where Moses declared, “These Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see no more forever.” (Ex 14:13).

To the Jews, water baptism was not something new that came with the NT church. It had been practiced by them as an act to welcome into the Jewish faith, those Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. By such, and circumcision, they became part of the covenant people of God. To the Jew, circumcision was the witness that he was a member of the covenant. By water baptism we also become members of a (new) covenant, cut off from our (original) sins and walking in newness of life.

*I now begin to understand why the early church instituted infant baptism in an age where many died in infancy, without the (parent’s) peace of knowing they would be accepted by the Father, having had ‘original sin’ circumcised away.*

### Communion

Our Lord instituted the sacrament of holy communion the night He was betrayed and died. We read of that upper room in John’s Gospel, chapters 13 – 16 where He entertained His disciples for the last time before His death, knowing that would come tomorrow. I believe He dealt with *priorities* in all He did and said at that table. He promised them, and us, many things: a *peace* the world could not replace, a *joy* that would be full, the *Holy Spirit* to dwell in them and lead them into truth and revelation, a *future home* with Him, and more. He asked of them just three things: that they *refresh one another* (wash one another’s feet)(13:14); that they *love one another* (13:34) and that they *obey His word* (14:15). I believe He has kept His word – he wants us to do the same.

When He instituted the communion meal, He said, “this is the cup of the *new covenant*”. A covenant is an agreement between two parties – the drinking of the cup is a sign of agreement to the terms of the covenant. In the upper room Jesus was making a covenant with His disciples (and us). He would give us all the blessings He promises; we would respond by serving His people, loving His people and obeying His word. To take the cup without this commitment is taking it unworthily!

He signed His name to the terms of the covenant in blood on a Roman cross; he invites us to make our agreement, to 'sign our name', each time we take the communion elements.

Each time I take the bread I (consciously) say "thank you Lord that I am part of the body of Christ" looking around at members of that body I fellowship with. Every time I drink the cup I (consciously) say "Lord, I agree to the covenant. I will serve your people, love them and obey your word".

Though I do take the elements 'in remembrance' of Him and 'until He come', their greatest meaning to me is the opportunity to renew my covenant vows to Him – vows He accepts by the Holy Spirit's activity in transforming me to become a godly man after His own heart.

How wonderful it would be if, every time we attend a baptism or partake of the communion elements, these teachings would be known and the sacramental work of the Lord recognized – then we could truly celebrate!