

Today we conclude the series Sacred Assembly, our study of the church. For those who have not been here, we have defined the church, using the language of the Bible:

1. the church: THE BODY OF CHRIST/THE BRIDE OF CHRIST – that Jesus Himself is sanctifying and building up His church
2. the doctrine: GOD’S BUILDING – we are being built up into a spiritual house of God in which we are the pillars and buttresses, holding up the Word
3. the leadership: HOUSEHOLD/FAMILY – God has set His church to function like a family, with leadership/submission/love
4. the covenant: HOLY NATION – the church is God’s people (a people of His own possession), made His through His atoning sacrifice and His effectual call on our hearts.

Today we are going to expand a bit on last week, the covenant. We are going to talk today of how God manifests His promises to us in the sacraments.

As we have seen in four weeks of defining the church, the church is much more than we often think of it. We tend to present the church in either/or fallacies, while in reality, the church is more of a both/and:

1. The church is both fellowship AND commitment.
2. The church is both organic AND structured.
3. The church is both loving AND disciplined.
4. The church is both communal AND missional.

All of this makes defining the church in any objective way difficult. The most common way to make an objective, straightforward definition of the church is to present it in terms of its marks: or the basics by which we know it is a true church. Modern writers have added to the original list, you may have heard of a book called *Nine marks of a Healthy Church*, good book that outlines nine distinguish characteristics of a church that is healthy. I read a blog in which the author outlined 18 marks, impressive, certainly the highest number I had seen, and in many ways problematic because in the process of defining the church, the author disregarded 95% of the churches in the world. If you take everything away, if you say what is necessary for a church to exist: it comes down to two. During the Reformation, John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, says:

Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists (IV.i.9).

So the two things absolutely required for a church to exist are:

1. Right preaching of the Word

## 2. Administration of the Sacraments

We know what the Word is, so what are the sacraments and how is it that they should be administrated?

### **THE SACRAMENTS**

A sacrament is an outward visible action that relates to an inward spiritual reality. How those two things relate, how the outward action relates to the inward reality is what distinguishes sacraments from mere symbols or rituals.

The two sacraments that the church administers are: Baptism and Communion. These are not merely traditions that were started by some persona and then passed down so that we could have something to do when we get together as a church. These are divinely instituted acts, given to us by Jesus, and commanded to be part of the mission of the church. The sacraments were not just random acts that God gave us and said: DO THIS. They are woven into the reality of the covenant that we talked about last week.

As we have gone through this study of the church, one thing has become abundantly clear, **THE CHURCH IS ABOUT GOD, NOT ABOUT US.**

1. We are certainly members of the body, but He is the head.
2. We are bricks of the building, but He is the builder.
3. We are members of His family, but he is the Father.
4. We are characters in the story, but He is the author.

As we come to that reality, and we look at His covenant promises, it begins to make us feel really small. In that smallness we can begin to doubt. Begin to wonder whether or not God would really want us as part of His body, building, family, and nation. In all of this, we want some sort of assurance that this is real, some tangible way to really feel what we think we understand. And so God blesses us with the gift of His sacraments.

What we see is that while we physically go through the process of baptism and communion, the sacraments are not OUR works, they are the testimony to us of God's work. In these somewhat simple actions, we get a greater understanding, something that goes beyond the act itself to something deeper. The relationship between the outward act and the inward reality is understood in its relationship to the God's covenant.

In the sacraments, we are given the sign and seal of the covenant of grace.

## SIGN

As a sign, Baptism and Communion point past themselves to a deeper reality. As a sign, we are not talking about a road sign. Though a road sign that says bridge out certainly contains in its message much more than it is in its essence, and it would be wise to look for that deeper reality before plunging to death. But when we talk about sign of the covenant, we mean something that is

given to us by God to reveal what He is doing behind the scenes. Since God is working behind the scenes, **He alone gets to design the medium of communication.**

We have said, God speaks through His Word, but we see that contained in that word are images. God created our minds; He knows how they work. He knows that people communicate most freely and fully through words. But He also knows that sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. Sometimes a picture can describe a sunset like no poet could do justice to. It can reach us on an emotional level that words cannot. The first thing to note, God designs the signs.

We see this in the covenant with Noah. God puts a rainbow in the sky and uses it to proclaim His justice and mercy. Why a rainbow? There is an inherent beauty in the rainbow that people, Christian or non, can appreciate (And if it's a double rainbow...). Many colors coming together to form a single entity. An entity that can be seen, but is also transparent; not really substantive, in the way that most of the created world is. With colors that blur together, rather than stay distinct and easy to separate...

If God is the creator of the sign, than **He alone gets to dictate what they mean.** If they are an outward sign of an inward reality, and only God sees and understands the inward reality, than we must be careful not to play mind gymnastics with the relationship. We must be sure that we are reading the signs carefully, not reading

into the signs. Reading into the signs means that we make connections that God never makes, assume things He never tells us, or complicate the sign so deeply that no one knows what it means. The sign is meant to make the signified more clear, not more confusing.

The signs mean what God says they mean; **He alone gets to define their value.** It is not up to us to say, Baptism and Communion are ineffective tools, they are not our tools. They are God's tools for proclaiming His truth to us. Be wary of anyone who downplays the value of the sacraments, because in essence they are proclaiming to you: I KNOW BETTER THAN GOD. But also be wary of those who attach more value to the sacraments than God does. For those who say that the sacraments are a means of grace; something NECESSARY for salvation. In this, the sign takes on the power of the thing signified.

They are more than just a symbol, but they are less than the same thing. The sacraments do more than just point to the covenant, but they, in themselves are NOT the covenant. They are a SIGN, but they are also a SEAL; we need to understand both aspects to grasp what we are doing.

## SEAL

As God, the great covenant-maker unfolds His plan; He gives promises. Over and over again we see these promises are for HIS PEOPLE: they will be my people and I will be their God. As a sign,

the sacraments say something to God's people about Him, but as a seal:

**The sacraments are God saying something about His people.** We see this in the Abrahamic covenant. God comes to Abraham, calls him out from all of the people in the world and declares that through Abraham, He will make a holy nation. He then gives Abraham a sign and seal of that covenant: circumcision. This was not just an act to prove that they were worthy; some sort of coming of age rite. It was God declaring who they were. **Romans 4.11** says:

He received the **sign** of circumcision as a **seal** of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

As the foreskin was CUT OFF, so His people would be cut off from the world. They were a people consecrated to Him. They were sealed.

**The sacraments mark God's people as His.** The term seal refers to an official mark. In our culture, if you have a job that requires a lot of paperwork, you will eventually have to get something notarized. This means finding a notary with an official seal, confirming what you have written down. You make the promise, and the seal officially binds that agreement.

But a better idea of seal would have been evident to the Biblical authors. A king's seal meant much more than a notary seal. It

carried with it power, authority, and specificity. A letter that was wax sealed with the king's ring insignia brought with it a sense of awe. In the sacraments we are sealed by our king. He puts His mark on us, calls us His. Would a letter still be a letter without the seal? YES. Would it be recognized as important? NO.

The seal then places the authority and power of the covenant maker on to His people. **The sacraments assure us that the covenant promises are for us specifically.** When God seals us He says something to the world around us, declaring us His, but He also says something to us: YOU ARE MINE. The promises I made are for you specifically. And we need that assurance...that confidence.

When Jesus came into the world, He fulfilled the covenant promises that we looked at last week. In His fulfillment, new signs and seals were given to His people. Jesus Himself told us to practice Baptism and Communion to: see more clearly, to be reminded, to be sealed as His, and to be assured of our salvation. Let's look at how these two sacraments, as practiced by the church, fulfill this.

### **DEATH AND NEW BIRTH: BAPTISM**

Flip your Bibles open to John 3. Most people know John 3.16, having it plastered all over NASCAR events and football players' eye black. But the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus leading up to this is full of amazing statements by Jesus. Nicodemus is a Sadducee, a religious leader in Israel, and he comes to Jesus at



night to inquire about what a person must do to be saved. In verse 3, Jesus answers him:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus makes reference here to rebirth. He ties rebirth to being born of the water and the Spirit. At this point, baptism had yet to be instituted. John the Baptist was baptizing, but his baptism was different, it was a baptism of repentance and cleansing, the baptism that Jesus refers to here is a rebirth.

At this point in His life, He was the fulfillment of the promise, but had not finished the work that He came to do. What Jesus came to do is to die so that we may have new life. Jesus, the firstborn from the dead, as He is referred to in Colossians, had to go through a baptism of blood in order to bring the covenant promises to reality. He refers to this:

I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! **Luke 12.50**

Jesus refers to His death and resurrection as His baptism. **Romans 6** takes this to the next level by showing us how our baptism links us to His:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

**Baptism is** a public funeral symbolizing the individual's crucifixion with Christ and a public celebration of new life in Jesus Christ who now reigns as Lord and King in the life of the individual. It is the outward sign in water, of the spiritual reality in Spirit, of the New Life.

Baptism is also a seal. Going back to **Luke 12**, Jesus speaking:

I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." **Luke 12.50-53**

This isn't usually the Jesus we think about. This sounds nothing like unity. Tolerance. Jesus says here, I have come to mark out those who are mine and divide them from those who are not. To seal my people with a distinction, they are different. They are the church... the called out ones. **THEY ARE MINE!**

**Baptism is** a biblical rite of initiation into the universal church (**1Cor 12.13**) as well membership in the local church (**Acts 2.41**). It is the point at which you are marked as being God's. Abraham was called by God before he was circumcised, but the circumcision set him apart.

We see this dividing in our world today. In Muslim and Jewish families, taking on Christ is a big deal. But there is a certain amount of tolerance as long as you don't identify. You can talk about it, believe it, **BUT** if you get baptized, if you are marked as being part of the church, you get disowned. At that point you have the seal of Jesus Christ on you, there is no going back.

We need to regain this depth of understanding when it comes to Baptism. Not so that people are afraid to get baptized in fear that they are not good enough, or ready to make that commitment. But so people see the need, and desire to go through the action of dying with Jesus Christ and rise with Him in newness of life, being sealed with the seal of our King as part of His people, a member of His church.

Baptism is a one time public declaration:

1. by God of what he has done
2. by the believer of what God has done for them.

If you have not been baptized. If you have trusted in Jesus Christ, if He has called you into His family, if you believe that you are a sinner and that your only hope is in dying to yourself so that you may be raised with Christ, I implore you BE BAPTIZED. There is no reason to wait.

In **Mark 10**, we get another great conversation of Jesus. He is walking along with His disciples and James and John make a request to be His wingmen in glory. Jesus replies to them:

You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized

Here Jesus ties His death to two things: baptism and the cup. And so we move from the first, now to Communion, which you can guess we hold in high regard since we are Communion church.

**CONTINUED NOURISHMENT: COMMUNION**

Flip over to John chapter 6. Once again we go to the words of Jesus Christ. In this instance He has just fed 5,000 people with 2 fish and five loaves of bread. Jesus withdraws from the crowd, to get away. His disciples take off across the sea in their boats, Jesus walks out to meet them. They sail on to the other side.

The people who Jesus has fed notice that He is gone, and they get in their boats and sail across to the other side to chase Him down. When they catch up to Him, they are desiring to have more sustenance. To which Jesus replies:

*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. v.35*

The people are understandably confused; they came looking for food, and Jesus tells them that He is the bread of life. They inquire a bit further and Jesus drops this:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” **John 6.53-58***

Jesus gives us the substance of Communion HERE, before He actually prescribes it at the last supper or fulfills it in His death. Once again we see Jesus telling the people something that they can not possibly understand unless their eyes are changed by the Spirit.

Jesus declares here that not only is there no other way to the Father but through Him, but that He is the only means by which we will be sustained until we get there. As a sign, Communion is a reminder in our need for the gospel. OVER AND OVER AGAIN. This is not a one time change, Communion points to the fact that like food, we need to keep feasting on the truth of Jesus Christ as the only thing that will satisfy.

Communion as a seal unifies us to Jesus Christ. It links us to Him in a way that is not just a side by side relationship, but we abide in Him, and Him in us. This abiding, this connection, this unity is not just about you and Jesus. You are unified in His body the church. You are sealed and linked together in Spirit with the people of God. This meal is for the people of God, for those who have been sealed in baptism and made new by the Spirit. Sharing this meal together to sustain us.

COMMUNION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING WE DO EVERY SUNDAY. We worship God in one voice, we hear God's Word declared, we respond by giving back to Him, but in Communion, God gives His people the strength they need to live.

We mysteriously receive the benefits of Christ through the consumption of His body and blood. People have tried to demystify this mystery:

1. Catholics transform the elements into the actual body and blood.
2. Modern Evangelicals have gone the other route and they have stripped it down to nothing more than a symbol, a representation for remembering.
3. In between you have the Sacramental Union, Consubstantiation.

Here's what I believe: Jesus promised us a nourishment from His body and blood through the celebration of Communion. He will be faithful to His promise. How exactly He'll do that, I'm not sure, but I'm with John Calvin:

*I would rather adore the mystery than explain it.*

I want to leave you with a quick picture of how these sacraments work together in the life of the church and then we will celebrate Communion together. 1 Timothy 2.2 compares the life of a Christian with a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. I find these three very helpful in understanding the complexities of Christianity. Last week we talked about the soldier in relation to the covenant, and this week we will take the athlete.

You have probably heard the saying, the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. If you ever run a marathon, which I don't

necessarily suggest, there is the moment at the starting line before the race begins. You are already a runner, by nature of the hours you have put into it, but you aren't actually in the marathon, not yet. Then the gun fires, and that gun is baptism. It is the moment that you go from being a person stretching in ridiculously tight or short clothing to being in the race. You start running, and as you run you get worn down, you start to wonder why you ever thought this was a good idea, if you can even do this. Along the way, your family is there holding out those little cups of water (about the size of communion cups at some churches), and their presence along with that little bit of extra nourishment allows you to go. This repeats and repeats and repeats until you finish. When you finish, you are a marathoner, it is your identity now, and the family is there, and you get to have a big meal, lots of nourishment.

It is the end that keeps us going and the sacraments are little pieces of the life to come. We will be baptized again into death and born again into our glorified bodies. The little bit of Jesus body that we receive now will be fully realized in the wedding supper of the lamb, **Revelation 19.**

As we go to Communion today I want to read Paul's description of the Lord's Supper from **1 Corinthians 11:**

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body



which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

An unworthy manner would be eating and drinking without recognizing what you are consuming. Too often we are told that if you have sin, or are weak that Communion is not for you. It is when you recognize your weakness that the table is for you.