

#20 – What Is a Sacrament?

What is a sacrament? If we try to answer that question from the Scriptures, we have a problem. For the word “sacrament” is simply not found in the Bible.

The word “sacrament” was used by the ancient church to describe the most important “holy acts” in the life of a Christian. It was used to describe some special action performed in order to nourish the Christian life for its growth to the glory of God.

How Many Sacraments?

Just as Christian denominations today disagree on the number of sacraments, so it was among Christians in the church over a thousand years ago.

Some listed only a few sacraments. Others listed over thirty. Finally, the great twelfth century theology Peter Lombard tried to convince everybody that there were seven sacraments – no more and no less. Many Christians still agree with him.

Lutherans have always taught that the numbering of the sacraments is unimportant. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states: “We do not think it makes much difference if, for purposes of teaching, the enumeration varies, provided what is handed down in Scripture is preserved” (XIII, 2).

What then is important? It is important to preserve these rites and ceremonies which Scripture tells us Christ instituted, and which proclaim and seal God’s mercy and grace in the lives of men.

There are many religious ceremonies and practices described in the Bible (prayer, the washing of feet, fasting, etc.), but not all of them proclaim and seal God’s mercy and forgiveness.

The Church’s “Holy Acts”

The church has the right to create ceremonies, rites, and customs, to teach, guide, and train its members. But is it really wise to call such rites and ceremonies “sacraments” right along with those acts instituted by Christ? Doesn’t such a general use of the word tend to place all “holy acts” on the same level?

The Lutheran Church teaches that we should carefully distinguish between those acts instituted by Christ to actually communicate and seal God’s promises, and those acts created by the church to teach and remind people of God’s will. Luther said that God’s promises create the church, but the church doesn’t create God’s promises.

God’s “Holy Acts”

The Church of the Augsburg Confession recognizes three rites which deserve the name “sacrament” because Christ himself gave them to the church to save men. These three are: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution (Apology, XIII, 4).

Two other rites, ordination and matrimony, could be called sacraments with certain qualifications (Apology, XIII, 12, 14). Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the pastoral ministry, and God the Father established marriage; and both estates are involved with the forgiveness of sins and the general communicating of God’s saving grace. Yet, the ceremonies of ordination and matrimony were not instituted directly by Christ, and neither of them directly brings God’s forgiveness.

Once again, it is **not** a sin to call those other things “sacraments,” but Lutherans stress that it is unwise because it might weaken our special appreciation of those most precious gifts given directly by Christ to the church in order for the church to live.