

Sacraments of the Church: Essentials or *Adiaphora*, a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective

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Introduction

The title of this paper gives a false impression of certainty regarding what the sacraments of the Church are, presumably, leaving the issue remaining to be decided as the one concerning the need or otherwise of the sacraments. Unfortunately, what the true sacraments of the Church are remains a disputed issue among the churches. For this reason, it is important to revisit some of the historic discussions, issues which, at their core, concerned the nature of sacraments as such. Fortunately, taking some time to examine the nature of the sacrament *per se* is not such an unnecessary detour since a proper understanding of the nature of sacraments is critical to the decision regarding their usefulness or not. These preliminary considerations provide us with an outline to be followed in this presentation. First, we will look at efforts to define the sacraments; second, we will explore the connection between sacraments and Church. On each of these two points, we will try to present a general overview and give the perspective of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Finally, on the basis of the discussion under the two main points, we will more specifically address the necessity or otherwise of the sacraments in the Church.

Defining the Sacrament

The subject matter of the following discussion is certain sacred practices of the Christian Church which have attracted considerable debate and reflection over the centuries of its history. The way a Christian community formally characterizes these rites already speaks to its understanding of the meaning of the rites.

Sacrament or Ordinance?

The Roman Catholic View During the early period of Christian thought, the dominance of the Greek language led Christian thinkers, especially in the West, to designate the practices that are the subject of this presentation with the term *mysterion* (mystery in English).¹ In the Latin East, on the contrary, theologians used the term *sacramentum*, which basically referred to a sacred pledge of sincerity or fidelity.² For the Eastern theologians, the use of the term captured the central essence of the rites, as sacred objects

¹ John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), for example, is noted to have referred to the Lord's Supper as a "mystery," see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 281.

² The apologist Tertullian (d. c. 220), is noted as the first known theologian to have used the term *sacramentum* to denote the ritual of baptism as a pledge of fidelity by an initiate to the Christian faith. See Joseph Martos, "Sacrament", in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 515

and solemn sacred observances. Whereas the West saw mystery and “hiddenness” in the rites, the East saw sacred and solemn obligation. It is interesting to note that the Latin *sacramentum* was also used to translate the Greek *mysterion*, in the sense of hidden realities such as found in the sacred rites of the Eastern mystery religions.³

In due course, the idea of the rites as a solemn pledge of fidelity gave way to the concept of mystery. As early as Augustine, a distinction begun to be introduced between the rites themselves and the grace that the Spirit imparts in the rites. Thus the sacrament came to be defined as an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. The mysterious, invisible aspect of the sacred rites is of the essence to the definition of the rites as “sacraments.” The result of defining the rites (sacraments) in this way was to open a way for theologians to work out the relationship between the outward sign and the inward reality.⁴ By the Middle Ages, an elaborate sacramental system had been developed whereby the sacrament had become a *means* of grace. In other words, it was taught that God uses the sacrament as a means of dispensing grace. Grace was conceived no longer “as God’s precious presence but as a reality distinct from God, a supernatural power God infuses into the soul.”⁵ Besides, the efficacy of such diffusion depended neither on the spiritual condition of the recipient, nor the one who administered it. In so far as the recipient does not resist God’s actions in the sacrament, grace will be infused by the very administration of it (*ex opere operato*). A related development of this system of sacramentalism was sacerdotalism, a system whereby the ordained clergy of the church became God’s chosen instruments and channels of divine grace.

The development outlined above represents the basic traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments. In this view, all of life is wrapped up in grace; a certain type of grace; sacramental grace. Thus it is that the Roman Catholic Church maintains *seven* sacraments to provide supernatural nourishment for the significant phases of human life, since “the sacraments are the seven mouths into which the stream of the divine life of grace, which has its spring in the cross of Christ, empties itself in the wilderness of human existence.”⁶ Underlying the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacrament is what Berkouwer calls the “concept of infused and again-to-be-infused grace.”⁷ In the Roman Catholic system, the supernatural grace that is infused in the sacrament of *baptism* is only a beginning which must be continued in the context of the Church. Thus the sacrament of *confirmation* increases the grace first infused at baptism and brings it to perfection; the sacrament of *extreme unction* infuses grace for life’s distress, *penance* for post-baptismal sins, *order* to give the priest power of consecration and forgiveness, *marriage* for the supernatural efficacy of marriage, and *eucharist* (also called Lord’s Supper) to give efficacy to all the sacraments.

To summarize the Roman Catholic definition of the sacrament, it is formally a *means* of grace, supernaturally and autonomously infused through material, visible *signs*, under the efficient power of the Holy Spirit, to provide supernatural nourishment and renewal.

³ Ibid .

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 513.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Eugene Bizer, *Das Christusgeheimnis der Sakramente*, 1950, quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 40.

⁷ Berkouwer, 34.

The Issue of Instrumentality and Means of Grace Before we move on to consider Protestant views on the sacraments, we need to emphasize and clarify a cardinal point of distinction between the Roman Catholic tradition, and those who take a different approach. Catholic theology on the sacred rites is *sacramental* because the elements of the rites are considered, *instrumentally*, to be in reality “means of grace.” This means that the sacraments are “real conduits” of grace. As we will see, while Protestant groups like Lutherans, Methodists and even Presbyterians try to make the effect of the sacrament dependent on the faith of the recipient, the instrumental nature of the sacrament remains. In this sense, groups sharing this view may be classified as reflecting sacramental theology.

The Reformation View All the different parties of the Reformation objected fundamentally to the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church. Basically, the Reformers rejected the Roman Catholic claim that the sacraments function autonomously, i.e. *ex opere operato*. They maintained that a valid sacrament required faith on the part of the participant. In other words, the sacraments are incomplete in themselves without the Word, a factor which for the Reformers restricts the number of sacraments only to the two expressly commanded by the Lord (baptism and eucharist). Beyond this basic agreement, the Reformers themselves evidenced some degree of distinctions in their views.

Lutheran On the part of the Lutherans, although they rejected any claim of autonomy for the sacred rites, they continued to maintain certain key aspects of the Roman Catholic position. For example, they maintained the formal nature of the sacraments as an *instrumental* means for the infusion of grace. Similarly, Lutherans understand the purpose of the sacraments to be “the attestation and conferring of the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith in this forgiveness.”⁸ On the efficacy of the sacraments, Luther remained close to the Roman Catholic position, for while he affirmed the necessity of faith, he believed that the material elements of the sacraments had residing in them a real objective virtue of grace. His position is clearer on the eucharist. Although he could not go along with the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* (i.e. the elements of bread and wine being changed substantively into Christ’s body and blood) his doctrine of *consubstantiation* still endowed the elements with a resident virtue of grace. The difference in Luther’s doctrine is that instead of a *transforming*, there is a *co-mingling* of the bread and wine in, with, and under Christ’s body and blood.

Reformed The Reformed view stands in contrast to the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions with regards to the formal nature of the sacraments and their efficacy. First, in the Reformed view, the sacraments are not, formally, means of grace that function *ex opera operato*. The divine Word does not of necessity, and inseparably, endow the sacrament with a supernatural, divine virtue. Rather, the elements *become* seals by virtue of divine grace.⁹ Notice that there is a ‘transformation’ of the

⁸ C. M. Horne, “Sacraments,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 5:194.

⁹ Berkouwer, 46-47.

elements which, though not along the lines of *transubstantiation* or *consubstantiation*, become “consecrated.”¹⁰ Thus the sacraments “are truly termed evidences of divine grace, and, as it were, seals of the goodwill which he entertains toward us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith.”¹¹ Consequently, with regards to the efficacy of the sacraments, Charles Hodge distinguishes the Lutheran and Reformed views by pointing out that “the latter attribute their sanctifying power to the attending influences of the Spirit; the former to the inherent, supernatural power of the Word which is an essential part of these divine ordinances.”¹² On the purpose of the sacraments in the Reformed view, the concept of covenant plays an important role. It was noted above that for the Reformed theologian, the sacrament is a sign and seal of God’s grace. Since it is argued that the covenant, i.e. God’s promise of grace, is the basis of the Christian’s justification and salvation, the sacraments, then, “are signs and seals of God’s working out the covenant which he has established with the human race.”¹³ On this view, baptism is an act of faith which brings a person into the covenant to experience its promises whereas the eucharist seals the love of Christ to the believer while assuring them that the promises of the covenant and the gospel are theirs as a divine gift. The significance of the covenant concept to the Reformed understanding of the sacraments is reflected in their practice of infant baptism. Part of their justification for the practice is that from a covenantal perspective, “What really matters is not one’s subjective reaction, but one’s objective initiation into the covenant with its promise of salvation.”¹⁴

Radicals Included under the radical view is the position of some groups such as Anabaptists who adopted Zwingli’s position on the sacraments. For the radical Reformers the shadow of magic still seemed to surround Luther’s view of the sacraments. What was required, in their view, was a radical break with “sacramentalism,” a task to be completed in part by rejecting the word “sacrament” itself.¹⁵

The sacred rites of the church, in this view, are formally designated “ordinances” and not sacraments. The rites owe their existence to the command (from Latin *ordo*, meaning an order) from the Lord (hence there are only two of them, baptism and the Lord’s Supper); they were *ordained* by him. Participation in them is a sign of obedience to the one who ordained them. The ordinances are a sign of obedience. At its core, then, the ordinances are human acts, which provide occasion for the participant to testify to the spiritual truths they symbolize. God does not impart grace to the participant in the ordinance. Augustus H. Strong writes: “The Lord’s Supper, like baptism, is the symbol of a previous state of grace. It has in itself no regenerating and no sanctifying power, but is the symbol by which the relation of the believer to Christ, his sanctifier, is vividly expressed and strongly confirmed.”¹⁶ Neither baptism nor the Lord’s Supper brings any spiritual change in the participant. In other words, the elements of these rites, water, bread and wine are not, *instrumentally* speaking, means of grace. The purpose of the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, XIV, 7.

¹² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981), 3:507.

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1093.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1095.

¹⁵ Grenz, 514.

¹⁶ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 964.

ordinances is simply to serve as a means for the participant to demonstrate obedience to Christ.¹⁷

Seventh-day Adventist The foregoing discussion was to help us to situate the Adventist understanding of the sacrament within the broad sweep of Christian traditions. Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the sacraments stands closer to the position of the radicals, although it moves beyond it on a few crucial points. Writings of the church show a preponderance use of the term “ordinance” in characterizing the sacred rites; thus its formal understanding of the sacraments reflects an ordinance-based theology. The church understands that in connection with the new “way” that Christ inaugurated, He “appointed beforehand certain definite rites that all born-again disciples would be called to observe, i.e., baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁸ For brevity, I will use the phrase “Lord’s Supper” in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the sacrament as inclusive of *foot washing*. The conjunction of the Lord Supper and foot-washing is seen in the passion narratives of all four gospels. In particular, the gospel of John’s rather brief mention of the meal (John 13:26) is set in the immediate context of the account on foot-washing. “Therefore, it seems best for Christians to celebrate both ordinances in conjunction, with the foot-washing preceding the Lord’s Supper and preparing the participant for it.”¹⁹

Ordinance-based theology of the sacred rites means that obedience to the Lord’s command is foundational to the church’s practice of the ordinances. In this specific sense, the rites are a sign of obedience. Nevertheless, Seventh-day Adventists do not understand the rites merely as ordinances in the sense that their sole purpose is to serve as a means of demonstrating their obedience to Christ. Certain factors characterize the Adventists’ understanding of the rites that together bring out their religious significance. We will take a closer look at these by examining their positions on the Lord Supper (including foot-washing) and baptism.

First, with regards to the joint ordinance of the Lord’s Supper and foot-washing, it is understood from Christ’s command, “Do this in *remembrance* of me” (1 Cor. 11:24), as a memorial rite of his redemptive death. Yet, it is a memorial which serves as a present reminder of the participant’s union with one another because of their union with Christ (1 Cor. 10:16, 17), and provides a forward eschatological perspective of Christ’s second coming (1 Cor. 11:26). Hence, as a memorial which expresses the meaning of the gospel and its distinctive truths, these ordinances make a proclamation to the world. On this point, Adventists share the conviction of Baptists, for example, who also believe that “the communion is a festival of commemoration,—not simply bringing Christ to our remembrance, but making proclamation of his death to the world.”²⁰

But Seventh-day Adventists believe that the “Lord Supper is more than a mere memorial meal, for Christ is present by His Holy Spirit.”²¹ This observation raises a very critical issue in Adventist understanding of the sacred rites. Although the ensuing

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 554.

¹⁹ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Seventh-day Adventists and the Lord’s Supper,” *Ministry* April 2004, 10.

²⁰ Strong, 961.

²¹ Dederen, 604.

discussion properly belongs to the *efficacy* of the ordinances, it helps in the clarification of the Adventist understanding of the ordinances. The issue is the one about “instrumentality” noted above. The question is *is* there an objective benefit that is obtained by participating in the ordinance? If so, by what means is the benefit brought? Sacramentalists are clear on these questions. The elements of the sacrament are means, instrumentally, by which grace is mediated to the participant.

Like all theology based on the “ordinance motif,” Seventh-day Adventist understanding on the issues raised in the questions above presupposes *faith* on the part of the participant. Yet, it is not so much that the believer’s faith brings Christ to the sacred rites as that the ‘sacrament’ brings Christ to the participant. Seventh-day Adventists believe that at the Lord Supper, for example, Christ meets His people, and energizes them by His presence. Consequently, all who neglect these seasons of divine privilege will suffer loss.²²

The Bible clearly teaches that objective spiritual benefits attend the ordinance, including fellowship with Jesus and one another (John 13:8, 1 Cor. 10:16,17), and blessings of happiness (John 13:17).²³ Clearly, Seventh-day Adventists believe that an objective benefit accompanies the sacred rites, quite apart from the believer’s faith, namely the presence of Christ at the ordinance. On this point, Seventh-day Adventists differ from groups who while correctly rejecting sacramentalism, swing to the other extreme of making the ordinances essentially a memorial, i.e. a bare symbol. Here, the Seventh-day Adventist position on the objective benefit of the ordinance brings it closer to the Reformed view, with one essential qualification. Whereas the Reformed idea of the sacrament’s “becoming a seal” appears to imply a metaphysical change in the *elements*, albeit different from *transubstantiation* or *consubstantiation*, the Adventist notion of Christ’s presence is quite apart from the elements (Matt. 18:20). Ellen White explains: “Christ by the Holy Spirit is there to set the seal to His ordinance. He is there to convict and soften the heart. Not a look, not a thought of contrition, escapes His notice.”²⁴ The benefit from the ordinance, in the Adventist view, is not inherently attached to the ordinance’s material elements, but to the personal presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The immediately preceding comment is not to suggest that in Adventist understanding the material elements of the Lord’s Supper are of no consequence. Indeed, Adventists believe that in the Lord Supper, “...the symbols that represent His body and His blood are...holy.”²⁵ The bread and wine are holy in the biblical sense where holy things possess no inherent sacredness, but only have a derivative sanctity from the presence of the living God.²⁶ Just as the ground on which Moses stood was holy because of the presence of the Lord in the burning bush (Exod. 3:5), so the bread and wine are holy by the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit at the Lord’s Supper.

On the efficacy of the ordinance, then, it is the presence of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who is the primary efficient cause. Yet, the nature of the ordinance as a

²² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 656.

²³ See Ekkehardt Mueller, *Ministry*, April 2004, 10-12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ See *The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 16th Edition* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 2000), 73.

²⁶ See A. S. Wood, “Holiness,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 176-7.

‘memorial’ means that the cognitive faculties of the participant are brought to bear on the experience. These play a role in the Adventist understanding of the ordinances, especially, the Lord’s Supper. Adventists understand that the ordinance of Lord’s Supper speaks to our senses of the love of God. Our senses are quickened to lay hold of the mystery of godliness as we receive the bread and wine symbolizing Christ’s broken body and spilled blood. In imagination we join in the scene of the first Communion in the upper room, and thereby Christ is set forth crucified among us.²⁷

Second, with regards to baptism, the same principles that underlie the Adventist understanding of the Lord Supper apply. Formally, baptism is not considered a means of grace in the sense attached to it in sacramental theology. “Adventists have always rejected any view of baptism as an act which, in and of itself, imparts grace and effects salvation.”²⁸ It is a rite which, in its symbolism, reflects the gospel in terms of its plan of salvation. Hence, submission to the rite implies, first, a *spiritual union* with Christ, i.e., a *conscious* election on one’s part to be enmeshed in the saving events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-8). In the union is symbolized the preparatory events of forgiveness, washing, new birth and reception of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the life, as well as the future eschatological participation in the glorious fellowship of God with his people. Second, with the choice to be identified with Christ, is a change of loyalties. Adventists understand baptism particularly in the primitive sense of *sacramentum* as a “pledge” of fidelity. Baptismal subjects are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, thereby pledging themselves to renounce the world and to observe the laws of the kingdom of God.

Karl Barth’s reflection on the symbolism of baptism harmonizes with the Adventist position

Christian baptism is in essence the representation [*Abbild*] of a man’s renewal through his participation by means of the power of the Holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therewith the representation of man’s association with Christ, with the covenant of grace which is concluded and realized in Him, and with the fellowship of His Church.²⁹

The third implication of the union with Christ is union with the body of Christ, i.e., the Church (1 Cor. 12:13). On this point, Adventists have a particular understanding of the *efficacy* and *purpose* of the ordinance of baptism. While the rite does not function *ex opere operato*, Adventists believe that a real objective effect is accomplished through the rite of baptism, under the aegis of the Holy Spirit. At baptism, the candidates are received into the family of God, and their names are inscribed in the Lamb’s book of life.³⁰

It should be obvious at this point that Adventists’ basic understanding of the rite of baptism as a conscious profession to be identified with the realities of the gospel precludes infant baptism. Adventists practice believers’ baptism.

²⁷ Ibid., 660.

²⁸ Dederen, 591.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest A. Payne (London: SCM, 1948), 9.

³⁰ F. D. Nichol, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 6* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978; 2002), 1075.

Sacraments and the Church

So far, we have tried to outline the different ways in which Christian denominations have defined the sacraments. We have done this by looking at how different Christian traditions understand the essence of the sacraments, their efficacy and purpose. To be able to decide on the necessity or otherwise of the sacraments, it was important for us to know the phenomenon as such. Having defined the sacraments, it is now important to explore their relationship to the Church. Our concern here is to examine how the sacraments are formally connected to the Church. In the foregoing discussion, we have seen how particular Christian traditions relate to the sacraments/ordinances. That discussion, however, was secondary to the more fundamental one we wish to pursue here, which is to show how the phenomenon of sacraments is related *at all* to the Church.

Our point of departure is the notion of the “kingdom of God/heaven.” Scholars are generally agreed on the fact that the phrase “kingdom of God” refers to the reign or rule of God,³¹ which has both present and future realities.³² It is a realm which God has set up, and which has benefits associated with it. People may freely enter into it (Luke 16:16), or receive it as a gift from God (Luke 12:32). There is no question about the importance of the concept of “the kingdom of God” in Jesus’ teaching. He taught that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15), but more than teaching that the kingdom was at hand, Jesus himself was the *means* that God had chosen to bring about the kingdom. “It was through *Him* that God had chosen to work.”³³

It is against the background of the notion of the kingdom of God that the concept of the Church acquires intelligibility. Although Jesus did not use the word “church” frequently, the idea was present in his teaching.³⁴ As Marshall puts it, “The church is simply the company of those who accept the kingly rule of God and find themselves bound together by their common allegiance to God and His Son.”³⁵ It follows that while the Church should not be confused with the kingdom, as the company of those who have accepted the message of the kingdom, the Church is a manifestation of the kingdom in the world. The Church “is the human community that *lives under God’s rule*”³⁶ (emphasis mine).

How does one enter the kingdom and to enjoy its benefits? The impression is clear in the Bible that entrance into the kingdom is conditioned on a personal response of discipleship (Matt. 7:21; Luke 12:32; 22:29f). Although the kingdom is a gift that comes to us from the grace of God, discipleship, i.e. the willingness to be united to Christ in trust and commitment, characterizes, those who are humbly willing to receive the kingdom (Matt. 18:3f; 5:10; 19:12; Luke 9:60, 62).³⁷

³¹ Dederen, 543.

³² Grenz, 22.

³³ I.H. Marshall, “Kingdom of God, of Heaven,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 3:806.

³⁴ See Raoul Dederen, “Jesus a-t-il eu l’intention de fonder une Eglise?,” in *Etudes En Ecclesiologie Adventiste* vol. 2 Comite de Recherche Biblique, Conferences Biblique de la Division Eurafricaine, 1993.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 808.

³⁶ Dederen, 543.

³⁷ Marshall, 807.

Looking at the composition of the Church from the point of view of the kingdom brings out at least two key ideas: a personal and voluntary proclamation of union and identification with Christ's rule (now and in the future), and a pledge of allegiance to God and His Son. It is important to observe that these two key notions that are implicit in the concept of the Church were shown, in our definition of the sacraments, to be at the heart, theologically, of the meaning of the sacraments (i.e. Lord's Supper and Baptism). Therefore, it can be concluded that the concept of the Church is integrally and formally connected to the sacraments.

The formal connection between the concept of the Church and the sacraments means that a particular community's way of interpreting the Church (i.e. its doctrine of the church) will inevitably influence the way the sacraments are defined, understood, practiced or not practiced. In this sense, the different ways in which the sacraments have been understood by different Christian communities reflect their particular understanding of the church. To examine the connection between the various communities' particular views on the sacrament and their interpretation of the concept of the Church is beyond the goal of this paper. Our goal in this section of the paper was simply to show that, formally, the sacrament/ordinances are an integral part of the concept of the Church. Nevertheless, we may make a few observations. First, at a very broad level, the historical controversy over the marks of the true church reflects this inner connection between the sacraments and doctrine of the Church. On the one hand, in "high church" ecclesiology (represented by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and to some extent Anglican traditions), where emphasis is placed on apostolicity (in conjunction with catholicity, unity, and holiness) in determining the marks of the true church, sacramentalism prevails. On the other hand, churches in the Reformation tradition that emphasize Word and Sacrament as the true marks of the Church, tend to reject sacramentalism. Second, churches of a Calvinistic bent, where the church is understood to be composed of an invisible elect group, tend to have a kind of 'covenant' approach to the sacraments in which certain people groups would be automatically eligible to participate in the sacraments. The practice of infant baptism, for example, among some in the Reformed tradition, is based on the doctrine of election. Third, those churches in the Reformation tradition who understand the church as comprising people who have made a voluntary covenant with God, and have a vital relationship with Christ, tend to have an ordinance-based understanding of the sacraments. They reject sacramentalism because it has the tendency of externalizing Christianity and reducing it to ritualism.

Two conclusions follow from our discussion so far. First, formally, the sacraments are intrinsically and necessarily connected to the concept of the Church. Second, the decision regarding how the sacraments/ordinances are practiced depends on one's particular understanding of the Church. On the basis of the foregoing, we will now specifically focus on the issue whether the sacraments are an essential part of Church life or not.

Sacraments: Essentials or *Adiaphora*?

Are the sacraments essential for the Christian's salvation or are they simply rituals that are incidental to the practice of faith? It should be obvious from our discussion so far that for sacramentalists such as Roman Catholics the question is a moot one. The

sacraments are practically means of salvation. Indeed in post-Vatican II thinking on the sacraments the church itself is affirmed as the sacrament of the world, with the general understanding that Christ is the primordial sacrament (*Ursakrament*). Emery Percell explains, “The implication is that the body of Christ is a sacramental presence that cannot be limited to the sacraments. Wherever the body (i.e., the church) is broken in love for the world, the kingdom is presaged and made available to whomever will receive it. The church in its entirety receives the gift of salvation, and in its witness proffers it to the world.”³⁸ This view raises the issue of *pansacramentalism*, which is beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth pointing out, however, that “ordinance-motif” view of the sacrament as a dominical institution (i.e. an institution deliberately established by the Lord) seems to stand in contrast with pansacramentalism.³⁹

For non-sacramentalists, the question regarding the necessity of the sacraments is a delicate one. We will address the issue from the perspective of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the sacraments as outlined above. The highlights of the Seventh-day Adventist position on the sacraments may be stated as follows:

1. The sacraments are dominical in the sense that they were ordained by Christ to be observed by his followers. Hence the preferred denotation of the rites is “ordinances.”
2. There are two of these sacred rites (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), which together symbolize the believer’s unity with Christ and with one another; and a pledge of faithfulness to Christ’s rule.
3. The rites are not mere symbols, but proffer objective spiritual benefits, *not in and of themselves*, but by Christ who attends the rites through the Holy Spirit.
4. Among the spiritual benefits that may be obtained from the Lord’s Supper are: admission into the family of God and the inscription of one’s name in the Lamb’s Book of Life (baptism), fellowship with Christ and one another, and receiving conviction, repentance and spiritual rejuvenation (Lord’s Supper).

It would seem that the enumeration of the preceding points about the ordinances should conclude the case for their necessity. Nevertheless, the points made above need to be discussed in some detail. The case for the necessity of the ordinances will be made by two key points: because Christ commanded the ordinances to be observed and because we receive spiritual blessings by observing them.

First, the ordinances are essential because the Lord ordained them, both with respect to their nature and their number. It does not appear to be in doubt that the Lord commanded these ordinances to be observed. On the agreement on this point, D. M. Baillie is on target. ‘...we can confidently regard these two rites not only as sacraments of the New Testament but as ‘dominical’ sacraments.... They are saved from all arbitrariness by a clear historical connection with the episode of the Word-made-flesh.’⁴⁰ But why is it important to note that the Lord himself commanded the sacraments to be observed? Besides the fact that our love of Christ is expressed by observing his commands (John 14:15), it is obvious that the Lord had our spiritual welfare in mind

³⁸ Emery A. Percell, “The Church as Sacrament,” *Christian Century* 100/19 (1983): 938.

³⁹ Seventh-day Adventists take a cautious view on this issue. On the Lord Supper, for example, they caution, “Since the Lord Himself selected the deeply meaningful symbols...there should be great reluctance to introduce alternative symbols and means...lest the original significance of the service be lost,” *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 16th Edition, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 73.

⁴⁰ Donald M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 60.

when he taught us what to do. After he enjoined on the disciples the ordinance of foot washing the Lord observed, “If you know these things, happy are ye if you do them” (John 13:17). Furthermore, Baillie brings out an important point about the Lord clearly connecting the sacraments to historical events of his life, namely his death and resurrection. According to Baillie, in so doing the Lord has saved the sacraments from “all arbitrariness.” The point becomes extremely important in view of the contemporary emphasis on pansacramentalism. Through the influence of thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, and G. van der Leeuw, the view has been popularized that both nature and man are structured symbolically and sacramentally. Thus the argument has been made for the “world as the original sacrament.”⁴¹ What all of this means simply is that all reality “is potentially or in fact the bearer of God’s presence and the instrument of God’s saving activity.”⁴² It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage extensively with the issues raised by these developments. Suffice it to say that besides the problem of pantheism that underlies these ideas, one faces a serious challenge in defending the particular sacraments of the Christian church, whether the two (Reformation), or the seven (Roman Catholic etc.). The philosophical problem involved in that challenge has been correctly detected by Berkouwer: “How can this thesis be reconciled with the transcendence of the Christian sacraments?”⁴³ In other words, if all of the world’s reality is sacramental, in what sense can baptism, Lord’s Supper and foot-washing claim special significance? It is at this point that the “divine selection and qualification are of decisive significance for the power and the nature of the sign in God’s acting.”⁴⁴ For example, although the rainbow as a sign has meaning in science, God, by selection, qualified it for his sacred purpose (Gen. 9:12-16). In the same way, God has qualified water, through baptism, and the bread and wine through the Lord’s Supper for the sacred purposes outlined above.

A short summary about what has been said so far will be helpful here. We have said that it is necessary to observe the ordinances because the Lord in his wisdom requires us to do so. Furthermore to save us from all arbitrariness that may cause the ordinances from being what they are intended to be, he has connected them specifically to events that are historically tied to his life and death.

Now we come to the second main point about the necessity of the ordinances. The ordinances are essential because of their spiritual benefits. On this point, Seventh-day Adventists believe, on the basis of the Bible, that our Lord has ordained that the practice of the sacraments should have an objective spiritual benefit to the participant. From this perspective, the sacraments are essential and necessary. We have already enumerated some of the spiritual benefits to be gained from participating in the ordinances.

If the ordinances have these spiritual benefits, why would their practice be on the decline? It seems that the issue has to do with a proper theological understanding of the nature of the sacraments. On the one hand, the devaluation of the practice of the sacraments in some Protestant traditions is said to have come about because of the “bare

⁴¹ Theodore Runyon, “The World as the Original Sacrament,” *Worship* 54/6 (1980): 495-511.

⁴² Kevin W. Irwin, “A Sacramental World—Sacramentality As The Primary Language for Sacraments,” *Worship* 76/3 (2002):202.

⁴³ Berkouwer, 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

symbol” understanding of the nature of the sacraments. If the sacrament is devoid of any spiritual “realism,” there is little incentive to practice it. This is true with some churches that stand in the tradition of the radical reformers with regards to the sacraments. On the other hand, the issue of the necessity of the sacraments as presented by sacramentalists creates a theological hurdle for some who believe that salvation cannot be reduced to mere ritualism. The emphasis on sacramental realism from “sacramentalists” appears to force the issue of *necessity* to be a choice between whether the sacraments are necessary for salvation or *not* necessary for salvation. Of course, underlying the choice, when it is so presented, is a particular understanding of the sacraments, i.e., sacraments as a *means of grace*. It is our contention that framing the choice in that manner exposes one to a false dilemma. This is because the essentiality of the ordinances need not be tied to their necessity as *means of salvation*. In other words, it should be possible to say that the sacraments are essential and necessary without saying that they are the means of the grace of salvation.

The distinction between *necessity of means* and *necessity of precept* is an important and helpful one in seeking to resolve the foregoing issue.⁴⁵ The former represents an absolute necessity, such as when it is said that food is a necessity of life; and faith is necessary to salvation. The latter has to do with observing a command, such as the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. On the one hand, the characterization of the sacraments as a means of salvation presupposes an *instrumental*, ritualistic understanding of salvation. In that sense, the sacraments are *not* necessary for salvation, “*for by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God*” (Eph. 2:8).

The sacraments, on the other hand, are “necessary” for salvation as precepts. For example, Jesus’ mention of water and Spirit in his discourse with Nicodemus is generally understood as a reference to the ordinance of baptism (John 3:5). While, as we have shown above, interpretations may differ regarding the *efficacy* of water in the ordinance, the basic necessity of the precept of baptism in entering the kingdom of God is clear from the text. This necessity of the precept can be shown within the total context of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the ordinances. Specifically, ordinances do not operate autonomously. This means that while we do not dispense with the necessity of the precept of baptism, for example, one would not necessarily be *born again* by being immersed in water if one has no faith in the reality that the immersion in water symbolizes. We are saved by grace, through faith in Christ. He is the *cause* of our salvation. Water is not a second cause of salvation. Yet, baptism is a necessary precept. The necessity of the precept lies in the objective spiritual benefits of the ordinances that we outlined earlier. Thus, while baptism is not a *cause* of salvation, it is not spiritually *unessential*. A similar argument can be made for the Lord’s Supper, including the ordinance of foot-washing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, different Christian communities understand the nature of the sacred rites of the Christian Church differently. This phenomenon is reflected in the way the rites are labeled, either as “sacraments” or “ordinances.” The difference in labeling,

⁴⁵ Hodge, 516.

however, is reflective of the two main different theological approaches of understanding the nature of Christianity's sacred rites. Within each approach, minor differences may be observed. We have explored the two main approaches and pointed out the minor differences in each approach as far as they relate to particular Christian traditions. The Seventh-day Adventist understanding within the ordinance approach has been addressed. In addition to the two main approaches, we have also noted the contemporary broadening of understanding regarding the sacraments in the notion of pansacramentalism.

In spite of the different perspectives, from a biblical perspective, two conclusions appear incontrovertible. First, through its connection with the concept of the kingdom of God, the sacraments/ordinances are theologically linked to the Church as the body of Christ. This relationship is a formal connection that cannot be severed without obscuring the Church's essential distinctiveness from other human societies. Second, the sacraments/ordinances are essential not simply because the Lord commands his followers to observe them, but because by participating in them we declare our belongingness to the kingdom of Christ and actively receive the objective spiritual blessings which the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, bestows on citizens of the kingdom.