



Keeping it Missional

Sample

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Unit 9. Baptism and Communion

Introduction

This module has sought to show that everything in our corporate life as church should be missional. If this principle is correct, then it must surely apply to the two central ecclesial (church) activities of baptism and communion. The aim of this unit is to show how the principle of 'all things missional' not only applies to, but actually defines these two practices. However, some ground needs to be cleared first.

Communion and baptism have been the occasions of fierce controversy among professing Christians over many centuries. This unit is not the place to engage in the controversy, much less to try to resolve it! However, it is impossible to discuss these two practices without taking a position. I am writing as a convinced credo-baptist — that is, someone who believes people should be baptised when they repent and confess faith in Christ.¹⁷ I am also writing as someone who has a strong theological preference for communion to be practised in the setting of a meal shared among members of a gospel community.

Sacraments

It is common for baptism and communion to be described as 'sacraments'. The term appeared in the Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible) and was used to translate the word 'mystery' in passages like Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 5:32. However, the word 'mystery' is never used in reference to either baptism or communion. It rather speaks of a mystery which was previously 'concealed', but is now gloriously 'revealed' — namely, what God has done in Christ.

There is nothing mysterious about either baptism or communion. They are signs which point to something important. They are dramatic enactments of the truth of the gospel; they signify the truth of what Christ has achieved, and our response to God's saving initiative in him.

Means of grace

Baptism and communion are also spoken of as 'means of grace'. John Wesley has this to say about the concept:

By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace. I use this expression, means of grace, because I know none better; and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages ... a sacrament is "an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same." The chief of these means are prayer ... searching the Scriptures ... eating bread and drinking wine in

¹⁷ As opposed to paedobaptism, the practice of baptising infants.

remembrance of him. And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.¹⁸

However, the term is not found in the Bible, and any view of baptism and communion as “channels of conveying [God’s] grace to the souls of men” is at best inferential. That does not make it wrong, but it should at least encourage a reluctance towards dogmatism.

When we are baptised and when we celebrate communion, we are being obedient to the Lord. That obedience is a fruit of God’s grace and a means of pleasing our Father: he takes delight in the efficacy of his grace in the lives of sinners. There is benefit in obedience, but grace comes to us in the gospel through the faithful applying work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism and communion are occasions for obedience (along with loving others, serving, confessing Christ, and so on) and we are blessed in such obedience. We, however, should not confuse the *occasion* for the *means*.

Baptism

It is impossible to read the New Testament without recognising a high view of baptism. Baptism is not an optional extra. The New Testament ties repentance and baptism so tightly together that it is easy to see why people fall into the error of baptismal regeneration.¹⁹ But it is not baptism that saves us; it is only the good news of Christ crucified that performs that miracle. Baptism is the way in which sinners *respond* to the gospel in the Bible. That is why baptism is so closely allied to profession of faith (see Acts 2:38; 8:36-38).

- Baptism is the way into the community
- Baptism is a visible sign of the gospel
- Baptism is an enactment of what God has achieved
- Baptism is a declaration of intent to follow Christ, a badge of discipleship

Baptism is a community event and a celebration of what God has done. Baptism is the open door through which people enter. Because baptism is integral to a sinner’s response to the gospel, it is a clear sign of the welcome that the gospel gives to sinners. There is no need for people to ‘clean up their act’ to get baptised; they do not need to prove themselves to gain entry into the Christian community. Just like the gospel, entry is free with no strings attached. Baptism is therefore missional, because it displays the openness of the gospel.

Communion

If baptism is the physical demonstration of our entry into the community, communion is the physical demonstration of our continuing in the community. Baptism announces that it is by

¹⁸ Wesley, J., *The Means of Grace* (1872). Retrieved 21/12/09 from <http://gbgm.umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/16/>

¹⁹ That is, the idea that *through being* baptised, people are regenerated by the Holy Spirit (as opposed to the idea that people are regenerated by the Holy Spirit irrespective of anything we might do to them with water).

God's grace through the death and resurrection of Christ that we have new life, and communion announces that it is by the same work of Christ that we are ever being formed into his image as his body and bride (the Church). It is a living display of the nature of the gospel and the gospel community. Eating together has always been a vital part of what it means to be the people of God.

- Eating together was an act of welcome and acceptance as you invited strangers into your house (see, for example, Genesis 18).
- The Passover was an annual meal which rehearsed the great rescue from Egypt (Exodus 12).
- Prophecies in Isaiah speak about the great Messianic feast with rich foods and aged wine, and a plentiful supply of bread for those without money to buy (Isaiah 25:6-8; 55:1-3).
- On the Day of Pentecost, in response to the gospel, the early church immediately shared their lives together, tangibly demonstrated by their practice of breaking bread together daily (Acts 2:42-47).

Communion is the meal we celebrate together as we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, it was set within the context of a meal. Paul rebukes the Corinthians because their behaviour contradicted the nature of the sign. That is, communion is supposed to be a sign of unity among Christians because of what Christ had achieved. The Corinthians, however, were divided, and so what they ate was not the Lord's meal (1 Corinthians 11:18-22).

Communion is a sign of the gospel because it is about God's welcome of sinners into his home. It is about God sharing his bounty with his people. It speaks about the effectiveness of what Christ has done in bringing rebels into his family and it points to the meal that Christ will share with his people at the end of time at that great Messianic banquet.

When non-Christians see Christians eating together it is missional; for eating together is an important part of sharing our lives together. The more diverse our group, the more powerful the sign, for we can attribute our unity only to the work of Christ

Practice

Baptism

The depth of our convictions should impact our practice of these two signs. If the usual practice of your church is for baptism to be a public act in which the 'candidate' invites his or her family and friends, it is a gospel opportunity being handed to you on a plate. Grab it with both hands!

- Explain everything in gospel terms
- Presume no prior knowledge
- Be bold in the gospel explanation
- Use the event and the person being baptised as a point of reference
- Because baptism is a piece of 'gospel drama', make sure the observers know that it is primarily about Christ and his work

- Talk about sin, cleansing, the cross, new life and the blessing of living under God's reign as his new community
- Invite people to be baptised upon profession of faith
- Be celebratory, rather than solemn

If your church is committed to baptising children of Christians because it sees them as being members of the covenant, then this too offers a great gospel opportunity, and should include all of the previous thought and preparation.

Secrecy and ritual should be avoided at all costs. Any language or practice that requires special knowledge should be abandoned in favour of something that is open and accessible to everyone.

Communion

Displaying the missional character of communion will differ according to how it is observed.

If it is a part of a Sunday meeting and the 'emblems' of bread and wine stand alone:

- Make people aware of the focus they give to the broken body of Christ and his shed blood, indicating a life violently ended and prematurely taken²⁰
- Make it clear that the privilege of participation is not on the basis of good works or respectable living, but what Christ endured on the cross

If it is an integral part of a meal, use it as an opportunity to invite repentance and faith:

- Use the meal as an illustration of the great banquet God has prepared for those who love him
- Be explicit about the invitation that comes to us in the gospel
- Be celebratory rather than solemn
- Let the meal express something of the blessing that is ours in Christ
- Describe it as a family meal and be courageous in inviting people to become part of God's family by grace

Conclusion

Transparency should be an important value among Christians. Our lives, both individually and corporately, should commend, illustrate and explain the gospel. In other words, people should understand the gospel better by being with us and witnessing how we live. This means that everything we do is a great gospel opportunity.

The challenge is for us to live our lives openly before a watching world, and to use those lives to show Christ in every detail and in each moment.

²⁰ see Stibbs, M. A., *The Meaning of the Word 'Blood' in Scripture*, (2nd edition, The Tyndale Press, 1962), 32

Reflection

Reflect on the way baptism and communion is practised within your own church context. Do you think that non-christians present understand why you carry out these practices? Are there ways in which these times can be more missional?

Further Reading

Kostenburger, Andrew; O'Brian, Peter, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: a biblical theology of mission*. (Inter-Varsity Press, 2001)

Carson, D. A., *The Cross and Christian Ministry: leadership lessons from 1 Corinthians*. (Baker Books, 2004)

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