

The Purpose of the Sacraments

- We are back to our series on church foundations, and today we want to look at the two sacraments that we celebrate as members of an evangelical Christian church. They are baptism and the Lord's Supper. We celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of every month, and on other occasions as prompted by the Spirit. We celebrate baptism when there are new believers who are ready to be baptized, as we will do today after the service. You saw several weeks ago, when we looked at the eight signs of a healthy and growing church, that they observed the sacraments in the first church in Jerusalem. Three thousand people were participants in their first baptism, and they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (The Lord's Supper) and to prayer. Why did they observe the sacraments? Because Jesus commanded it. First, He commanded that the church observe the Lord's Supper, although there is no clear command about how often we are to observe it. When He instituted the Lord's Supper He said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." Second, He commanded that we baptize those who become disciples. When He commissioned His disciples to go into all the world with the Gospel, He said that making disciples includes "baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Baptism and the Lord's Supper are visual aids for us; they are pictures of our life in Jesus Christ. They are doctrinal dramas, if you will. Let's look at each one briefly and what they mean to us as followers of Jesus.
- Baptism has been called the front door of the church because it is an outward sign of an inward condition. A baptism is a picture of or a drama about the salvation event. And it is called the front door of the church because many times in Scripture it was the very first thing a person did AFTER he or she was saved. Baptism was the first act of the 3000 on the day of Pentecost after they had been cut to the heart by Peter's sermon about Jesus and they had repented of their sins and received saving grace. They were then baptized. Not to GET grace but because they already had it! Baptism was the first act of Lydia and her household in Acts 16:14-15. And the Philippian jailer and his household, also in Acts 16:30-34. It was the first act of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:35-38, when Philip was led by the Holy Spirit to approach the chariot of this important official and ask him if he understood the Scriptures he was reading. In every case then, and now, baptism is a public identification with Jesus Christ and His body, the local church. It is a public statement to all witnesses that says, "I have surrendered to Jesus Christ and now I belong to Him." This is why baptism for a Muslim or a Hindu is such a big decision. They may be able to keep things fairly normal for a little while after receiving salvation, but once a Muslim or a Hindu goes through with baptism, they are going to be cut off from their family. From their culture. Sometimes from their jobs. Sometimes from their community. And in extreme cases, they are signing their own death warrants. Which would make the visual picture of baptism, the metaphor, become even more powerful than it already is.
- Baptism is explained clearly by Paul in **Romans 6:1-14**.
- Do you see that? Baptism is a re-enactment, a dramatic reenactment of what has already taken place in the spiritual realm the very instant a person is given faith to believe and God takes their sins away. They are baptized into the death of Christ Jesus, symbolized by being put under the water just as Jesus was put under the ground, into the grave. Then, just as Christ Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also are already raised from the dead by virtue of being partakers in God's glory and by virtue of the fact that we are already co-heirs with Christ and by virtue of the fact that we are already sealed for eternal life by the Holy Spirit. And this resurrection power that worked in Christ to cause Him to walk as one who is alive even after He had been killed is working in us so that we are already walking in the resurrection power of God! If you are having trouble walking out this life in Christ with anything that resembles triumphant power and victory, then re-visit Romans 6 as often as you

need to. We are no longer dead but alive. We are no longer slaves of sin but are slaves, gloriously, of righteousness. We are no longer earning the wages of sin but are now sons of God, free from sin, already loaded down with fruit to holiness and the end, everlasting life! (vs. 22)

- If baptism is the front door of the church, then the Lord's Supper is the back door. Or maybe it guards the back door by keeping us walking together in unity and love by the grace of God. The same grace that saved us KEEPS us. Not just in eternal security but in constant fellowship. Let's look for a few minutes at the FIRST Lord's Supper. **Luke 22:14-22**
- This is the purpose of the supper in its simplest form: it gave Jesus a final time with all the disciples in one place to show them His love for them before He suffered. Jesus longed for their fellowship because He loved them. He loved the twelve? These boys had issues! Peter is getting ready to deny Him three times. Judas has hatched a plan to betray Him into the hands of men who will put Him to death. All of them are about to get into a rip-roaring argument about which one of them is the greatest. And Jesus knows all of that about them and still says, "I love you guys and want to be with you." You say, *but those were the disciples. Even though they had issues, they were the chosen ones. Jesus doesn't love me that way. Does He? I have lots of issues, too.* Dan preached this last Sunday, from John 14. "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to Him and make Our home with Him." (John 14:23) And Jesus also said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20) This is not a word to the lost as it is so often misused, but it is a word to the believer. Jesus desires fellowship with you and me. The truth is, the One who is King of all, the One who created the universe desires every day to sit down and have a meal with us, to talk with us, to walk with us.
- Look at the POWER of the supper, in verses 17-20. Now Jesus begins the Passover celebration with His disciples and there is something we have to see. Those who understand what happens in a Jewish Passover meal, a Seder, will see the difference. And though I am certainly not an expert on all-things Jewish, and I am open to correction on anything I say that is inaccurate, I think I can explain the basics of what would have happened at a typical Passover meal. The head of the family would pronounce a blessing over the first cup of wine, which would be passed around the table. After that, the bitter herbs were eaten. The second cup of wine is prepared and then the youngest son would ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The father would tell the story of the first Passover, the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, and how the Passover meal is a reminder of God's faithfulness. This was followed by singing the first part of the Hallel, either Psalm 113 or 113-114, and then the drinking of the second cup. The head of the family would then take the unleavened bread, bless it, break it, and pass it to the other members of the family. Traditionally the bread was eaten in silence. But not on this particular Thursday night. Jesus says something that must have stunned His disciples. Verse 19: He took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the twelve, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." There is no indication in the text that the disciples said anything at this point but they surely did not miss the significance of what Jesus was saying. The thousands of years of Passover celebrations have pointed to this moment in time, to this sacrifice, to this Man, Christ Jesus. After the bread, the head of the family would invite the rest to eat the meal, which of course featured the lamb. After the meal, the third cup was passed around. Again, Jesus speaks into the feast with something new. He said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you." Do you see the power of the supper? Before this night, all of the Passover celebrations were looking backward to the deliverance of Israel from bondage to slavery and looking forward to the day the Messiah would come and redeem His people once and for all. On this Thursday night, Jesus looks at the twelve and says to them, "This is the day. I am the One. This bread is my body, This wine is my blood. The new covenant is being established through Me." The Passover was being replaced by the Lord's Supper. The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world would be killed the next

day and there would never be a need for another Pascal lamb, sacrificial lamb. Think about it. The Passover celebration looked back at the first Passover and looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. The Lord's Supper, as we celebrate it today, looks back at the suffering of Jesus for our sins on the cross, as He said, "Do this in remembrance of Me." We are also looking forward to the time when we will eat the marriage supper of the Lamb with Him in heaven, as He said, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." But there is also a present power that this supper represents as well. Paul said it in 1 Cor. 11:26 – "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is shed for you." There is a present reality when we take the Lord's Supper that because of what Jesus did for us THEN, we are cleansed and forgiven NOW. There IS power in the blood. Wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb. The Passover was part of the old covenant and could not give that assurance but the Lord's Supper can and does for those who have crossed over from death unto life. But there is another truth about the Lord's Supper which points to it being the guard at the back door of the church to keep people from running away, and instead turning them back to the arms of those with whom they have been offended. You know what Paul said about this purpose of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11. We look at it often when we prepare to come to the table. Let me illustrate it with a story from Chuck Colson's book, "The Body."

- A pastor named Pat Novak served as a hospital chaplain intern just outside of Boston. Pat was making his rounds one summer morning when he was called to visit a patient admitted with an undiagnosed ailment. John, a man in his sixties, had not responded to any treatment; medical tests showed nothing; psychological tests were inconclusive. Yet he was wasting away; he had not even been able to swallow for two weeks. The nurses tried everything. Finally they called the chaplain's office. When Pat walked into the room, John was sitting limply in his bed, strung with IV tubes, staring listlessly at the wall. He was a tall, grandfatherly man, balding a little, but his sallow skin hung loosely on his face, neck, and arms where the weight had dropped from his frame. His eyes were hollow. Pat was terrified; he had no idea what to do. But John seemed to brighten a bit as soon as he saw Pat's chaplain badge and invited him to sit down. As they talked, Pat sensed that God was urging him to do something specific: He knew he was to ask John if he wanted to take Communion. Chaplain interns were not encouraged to ask this type of thing in this public hospital, but Pat did. At that John broke down. "I can't!" he cried. "I've sinned and can't be forgiven." Pat paused a moment, knowing he was about to break policy again. Then he told John about 1 Corinthians 11 and Paul's admonition that whoever takes Communion in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself. And he asked John if he wanted to confess his sin. John nodded gratefully. To this day Pat can't remember the particular sin John confessed, nor would he say if he did, but he recalls that it did not strike him as particularly egregious. Yet it had been draining the life from this man. John wept as he confessed, and Pat laid hands on him, hugged him, and told John his sins were forgiven. Then Pat got the second urging from the Holy Spirit: Ask him if he wants to take Communion. He did. Pat gave John a Bible and told him he would be back later. Already John was sitting up straighter, with a flicker of light in his eyes. Pat visited a few more patients and then ate some lunch in the hospital cafeteria. When he left he wrapped an extra piece of bread in a napkin and borrowed a coffee cup from the cafeteria. He ran out to a shop a few blocks away and bought a container of grape juice. Then he returned to John's room with the elements and celebrated Communion with him, again reciting 1 Corinthians 11. John took the bread and chewed it slowly. It was the first time in weeks he had been able to take solid food in his mouth. He took the cup and swallowed. He had been set free. Within three days John walked out of that hospital. The nurses were so amazed they called the newspaper, which later featured the story of John and Pat, appropriately, in its "LIFE" section.
- Baptism: the front door of the church. The Lord's Supper: the guard at the back door.

