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Embracing Ritual:
Sacraments as Rites

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Over the past century, sacramental and liturgical theology have been growth industries in many Christian traditions,[1] but this explosion of interest and fresh scholarship has had little impact on the Reformed and evangelical churches in America. A few evangelicals, such as Robert Webber, have pressed for renewed attention to historic liturgies,[2] and evangelical publishers occasionally release books that explore baptism or the Lord's Supper in a new light.[3] In the main, however, evangelical treatments of sacramental theology do little more than rehash traditional debates about paedobaptism or the real presence[4] and make little use of the anthropological and philosophical insights that have been fruitfully applied to liturgical theology in other traditions.[5] Despite a rich liturgical and sacramental heritage deriving from Calvin and other Reformers, many sectors of the Reformed church have also ignored contemporary developments.[6]

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[1] For a very tiny sampling, see the Roman Catholic Bernard Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, "The Nature of a Sacrament," in *Signs of Faith, Hope and Love: The Christian Sacraments Today*, ed. John Greenhalgh and Elizabeth Russell (London: St. Mary's Bourne Street, 1987), 32-44; and the Lutheran Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of the Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[2] See, for example, Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985).

[3] See, for a recent example, Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

[4] For example, Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2d ed.; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 356-68.

[5] One indication of this failure to engage with the wider discussion is the neglect of ritual studies. From a survey of 1,043 articles from a variety of evangelical journals, Gerard Klingbeil found that only 13 contained "important references to ritual" ("Between Law and Grace: Ritual and Ritual Studies in Recent Evangelical Thought," paper presented at the 2001 national conference of the Evangelical Theological Society. I am grateful to Professor Klingbeil for providing me with a copy of this paper.)

[6] See, for example, D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002), whose authors, despite several welcome emphases, operate completely within the confines of traditional Reformed liturgics and its difficulties and show little awareness of wider ecumenical discussions. The same goes for Michael

Even where evangelical and Reformed theologians have drawn on the resources of modern liturgical renewal, little seems to have filtered down to the practice of churches or to church members.[7]

Causes for the stagnation of Reformed and evangelical sacramental theology are doubtless deeply rooted in the respective traditions where Puritanism and revivalism have, separately or in conspiracy, vitiated attention to sacraments. Exploring those historical factors, however, is outside the scope of this article. Instead, I hope to open up fresh perspectives on the sacraments, writing from the conviction that Reformed and evangelical sacramentology must be revised at a fundamental level. I offer, as a first step toward that revision, critical analyses of several common definitions of "sacraments in general." In the course of this critical analysis, I move toward a constructive proposal for the reformulation of sacramental theology, which argues for reconceiving sacraments under the rubric of ritual or rite rather than as means of grace, signs, symbols, or visible words.[8] Most of these latter definitions and descriptions are salvageable but will be useful to future sacramental theology only insofar as they are molded more into the shape of ritual.[9]

Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). Keith A. Mathison's treatment of Calvin's eucharistic theology is superb as far as it goes, but it addresses traditional questions in a traditional way (*Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Supper* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002). The situation is far worse in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 917-67. By contrast, Jeffery Meyers, *The Lord's Service* (Moscow, Id.: Canon Press, forthcoming), presents a Reformed liturgical theology fully in conversation and confrontation with contemporary liturgical scholarship.

[7] One piece of evidence in support of this assessment is the widespread adoption of user-friendly worship styles within Reformed and evangelical churches. These forms of worship have developed with little liturgical-theological reflection and with virtually no attention to traditional Christian liturgics.

[8] My discussion of these alternative definitions of sacraments in general is admittedly somewhat impressionistic. My goal is less to examine the technicalities of definition than to suggest the general thrust or trajectory of each definition. Thus, while I may not be able to find a theologian who would unpack the notion of *visible word* in the way I have done, I believe that the way I have described it is a fair account of what many Christians understand when they hear the phrase. My evidence for this is rather inchoate, based on impressions from sermons and conversations over many years.

[9] I have not here dealt with the terminology of *seal*, but hope to do so in a later article. I avoid discussion of the topic here mainly because of the complications of the historical usage of the term. Patristic writers, for example, normally use *seal* in the sense of "brand" or "tattoo" or "identifying mark," and as such, it has significant value in baptismal theology (though less value as a description of the Supper). Calvin, on the other hand, finds an analogy between the seal of the sacrament and the seal that authenticates an official document, a use of the image that is to my mind far more obscure than the patristic usage. Seal imagery came to play an exceedingly important role in later Reformed sacramental theology, and any sustained treatment of the topic would have to explore that usage. Finally, *seal* functions more as a technical term in sacramental theology, and thus requires a different sort of treatment than I have adopted in this article.

The value of this reconceptualization will, I hope, become evident in the course of my argument, but one illustration is offered at the outset. Many of the specific debates regarding sacraments are fundamentally debates about the nature of sacraments in general. Paedobaptists and Baptists, for example differ not only about the subjects of baptism but also about the nature of baptism. What kind of event is it? Is it a profession of faith, or is it a rite by which God marks the baptized as a member of his covenant people? Before we can hope to resolve these issues on the surface, deeper consideration must be given to foundational questions about sacraments as such. Conceiving the sacraments as rituals or rites not only provides a more philosophically and theologically coherent account of sacraments but also offers promise for addressing and resolving surface debates that have sorely wounded the unity of the church.

Means of Grace

For centuries, sacraments have been described as means of grace, and, of course, this language is not unique to Reformed theology or evangelicalism. According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, God enables us to "escape the wrath and curse of God due to us by reason of the transgression of the law" by making "diligent use of the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation." Among these means are "word, sacraments, and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation" (Q. 153 and 154). In particular, sacraments "signify, seal, and exhibit . . . the benefits of [Christ's] mediation" and thereby "strengthen and increase . . . faith, and all other graces" (Q. 162).

To the extent that the phrase *means of grace* is intended to highlight the fact that believers receive real benefit from baptism and the Supper, the definition is useful. This language has also been attractive to Protestants as a way of rebutting the (supposed) Catholic claim that the sacramental elements contain virtue in themselves. *Means of grace* has a salutary deflationary effect: If the sacraments are only means, then the real efficacy comes from God who employs the means.

In several respects, however, this definition is misleading. First, talking about the sacraments as means tends to mechanize their operation, and obscures the fact that sacraments are places or moments of *personal* encounter with God, trysting places between God and his people, as Luther put it.[10] Historically, the Reformed tradition has defined sacraments as "signs and seals of the covenant of grace," thus emphasizing the covenantal and interpersonal character of sacramental performance, but the personal aspect of this covenantal theology is undercut by the notion of sacraments as means.

[10] This becomes more explicit in theologians such as Aquinas who describe sacraments as "causes" of grace, and employ technical analogies to explain God's use of sacraments to distribute grace (e.g., God giving grace through sacraments is like a carpenter driving a nail through the means of a hammer).

The phrase *means of grace* further obscures the personal dimension of sacraments when allied with a reification of grace. Shortly after the apostolic period, theologians began to treat grace as a created thing, force, or energy communicated through the sacraments, and in medieval theology this idea was elaborated in the concept of created grace. Imagery of grace as fluid, moving through sacramental pipelines to the sinner, strengthened and reinforced this notion.[11] Ultimately, this model rests on a mistaken doctrine of God, for there is no impersonal force in God nor any energy that mediates between God and creation. The God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus is exhaustively and eternally personal, eternally in relationship, and therefore God's relationship to the creation cannot but be a personal one. Grace is not a thing or energy but God's attitude of favor toward us, manifested in his coming near to us through his Spirit to form and renew covenant friendship, to have personal communion with us, and to offer us the gifts and blessings of Word and Sacrament.[12] When the New Testament describes graces as being poured out on believers or the church, the Spirit, not some detached divine energy, is the substance being poured (cf. Acts 10:45, Titus 3:5-6, Rom. 5:5). The model of the sacramental operation, thus, should not involve four terms: God, grace, sacraments (as means or channels of grace), and the church, but only three: God (who is gracious), sacraments, and the church. In the sacraments, we engage in a covenantal and personal communion with the Triune God. The Jews marveled at the change that came about in the disciples, and noted that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). Transformation occurs in the same way for us who have not seen Jesus in the flesh: We are transfigured by contact with the Lord who has become life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45, 2 Cor. 3:17-18).

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[11] See T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948). Torrance argues that for the apostolic fathers, grace came to be conceived pneumatically but lost its Christological grounding. Thus, it "came to be thought of in sub-personal fashion as pneumatic power" and as "the gift of spiritual energy that ranged itself in the heart of the believer . . . a phenomenon, a pneumatic energy implanted in the soul." Grace came to be seen as a "ghostly potency" (p. 140). In the scholasticism of the thirteenth century, Peter the Lombard's dictum was widely accepted: *quod gratia gratificans nos Deo, vel per quam nos grati sumus Deo, est aliquid creatum in anima* (II Sent. dist. Xvii, q. 1 a. 1, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.231, n. 6). The widespread imagery of an "infusion" of grace supported the notion of grace as an energy or substance, as did Hugh of St. Victor's comparison of the grace of the sacrament to liquid in a vessel (*de Sacramentis* 1.9.4). Reformed theologians have generally not followed these medieval examples, but imagery of sacraments as channels through which grace flows to the recipient is not uncommon (e.g., Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols.[Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 3:466). Taking note of imagery such as this may seem trivial, but images can and do have a powerful impact on the trajectory of sacramental theology and other loci as well.

[12] I have explored the question of why God's personal communion comes to the church in sacramental form in "'Framing Sacramental Theology': Trinity and Symbol," *WTJ* 62 (2000): 1-16.

Understanding sacraments as means of grace has also allied with an overly individualistic concept of sacramental efficacy. When it is asked, "Do sacraments communicate grace?" the underlying question is often, "Do sacraments communicate grace to the individual believers who receive them?"[13] This, however, is a radically minimalist view of sacramental performance. Sacraments are done by groups of Christians and are signs and symbols that have their meaning within the community bounded together by the Spirit. In the patristic period, the presence of Christ in the Supper was conceived as his presence in the community, not in the elements alone,[14] and when Aquinas asked about the necessity of the sacraments, he answered by citing Augustine's dictum in his treatise *contra Faustum* (19.11):

> On the contrary, Augustine says, "It is impossible to keep men together in one religious denomination, whether true or false, except they be united by means of visible signs or sacraments." But it is necessary for salvation that men be united together in the name of one true religion. Therefore sacraments are necessary for man's salvation (*Summa theologiae* III, 61.1).

For Thomas, the necessity of sacraments does not pertain only to the individual recipient but to the community of the church. New creation takes a social form in the church, the body of the Last Adam, and as there is no social interaction, no common goals and programs without the use of signs and symbols, so there can be no church without sacraments. If understood in this corporate framework, sacraments may be called means of grace because they are tools for the formation and strengthening of the bonds among members of Christ's body.[15] Employing means of grace in this sense, however, is already stretching the language beyond the boundaries of its normal usage. I believe a superior framework is available, one that secures the positive implications of means of grace but avoids the pitfalls.

Symbols and Signs

Medieval theologians often defined sacraments as "outward signs of an inward grace," and this definition or some variation of it is employed by

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[13] The individualistic bias is evident in objections to infant baptism: If faith is necessary for baptism to be efficacious, and if the infant cannot exercise faith, then what is the point of baptizing him? The answer is, in part, that baptizing infants is not *only* about the infant baptized.

[14] See Paul H. Jones, *Christ's Eucharistic Presence* (Peter Lang, 1994). Medieval theologians systematized this view in their claim that the thing itself (*res tantum*) of the Lord's Supper, the thing to which the sacrament and elements ultimately pointed, was the unity of the church. For a historically rich study of the corporate dimensions of the medieval mass in England, see Eamon Duffey, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), ch. 3.

[15] Cf. the fine discussion of Thomas C. Oden, whose discussion of sacraments is completely embedded in a discussion of the community of believers (*Systematic Theology: Volume Three: Life in the Spirit* (1994; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Prince Press, 1998), part 3.

Protestant theologians to this day.[16] One of the difficulties with this definition is the striking ambiguity of both *sign* and *symbol*. Philosophers, anthropologists, literary critics, sociologists, and others have expended enormous energies attempting to define *symbol* and to distinguish symbols from signs, indexes, icons, and similar phenomena.[17] Within theology, this ambiguity is evident among Reformed writers who use the same terms in different senses. While Calvin and Turretin, for example, both describe the sacraments in terms of *signum* and *res*, they differ radically in their account of the sacramental union of the two, that is, in their understanding of how and why signs signify things. For Calvin, sacramental union depends on God's ordination that *these* objects convey Christ's benefit to us; for Turretin, by contrast, the thing is made present "to the understanding" through one's perception of the sign, so that the sacramental union takes place in the mind of the recipient.[18]

For those untouched by scholarly debate, symbols are usually understood in one of several ways. First, signs and symbols work cognitively or didactically, in that they help us to remember or consider nonsymbolic concepts, ideas, and things. On this view, baptism is a reminder of our state of original sin, of our need for cleansing, of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and of the sprinkling of our hearts with the blood of Christ. Baptism teaches us something about ourselves and God's work on our behalf. The Lord's Supper reminds us of the death of Christ, and teaches us that he is our life.[19] We might call this the Augustinian concept of signs as visible things that "bring something else to mind."

Second, symbols are understood as more or less unnecessary adornments or enhancements of real life. Straightforward literal language is thus distinguished from symbolic or metaphorical language; to say God is powerful is literal but to say God has a mighty arm is symbolic. Symbolic language has charm and rhetorical power, but it is no more than a striking way to say something that could as eas-

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[16] See, e.g., Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 918, quoting Charles Hodge to the effect that "the two simplest and most generally accepted (definitions of the word 'sacrament') are the one by Augustine and the other by Peter Lombard," the second of which is that a sacrament is "invisibilis gratiae visibilis forma." (Hodge himself goes on to comment that "These definitions are too vague," *Systematic Theology*, 3:487). Similarly, Horton, *A Better Way*, 105: "Both sacraments . . . contain two parts: the sign and the thing signified."

[17] A dated but still helpful summary of this discussion may be found in Raymond Firth, *Symbols Public and Private* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). A more recent study, with specifically theological purpose, is Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[18] See the excellent discussion in Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002), 113-19.

[19] According to Barth, this "cognitive" or "didactic" model of the sacraments is found in Calvin. Barth accused Calvin of inconsistency when he advocated infant baptism within this "didactic" or "cognitive" general understanding of sacraments (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest A. Payne [London: SCM, 1948]).

ily be said in literal terms. Similarly, fancy napkins, silverware, candlesticks, and china enhance the table for a special occasion, but beneath these accouterments is the literal reality of a meal. Churches drape colored paraments over the pulpit to enhance its beauty and to adorn it for Easter celebrations. The key assumptions in this second view are that natural or literal reality can be isolated from its enhancements, that natural or literal reality is nonsymbolic, and that real life is fundamental and foundational, however much we may dress it up with symbols to punctuate certain occasions. I shall call this the Lady Macbeth view of symbols ("the sauce to meat is ceremony; meeting were bare without it").

Neither of these is helpful in thinking about sacraments. In response to Lady Macbeth, it must be said that any sharp distinction between the sauce and meat, between normal and ceremonial, or between literal and symbolic dissolves on inspection. With regard to language, there is no firm line between literal and symbolic. In an important sense, all language is symbolic because it employs visual symbols or sounds that mean something other than themselves. Even if we put that point to the side, it is still evident that there is a spectrum from less metaphorical to more metaphorical language rather than a clear boundary line. For instance, most readers will have understood the previous sentences as primarily literal, yet I have employed several figures in the course of my argument: No one is *really* drawing lines between literal and symbolic words, distinctions are not *literally* sharp, I am not making points (as if this were an exercise in pin-production), and no reader is *actually* being asked to put my points to the side.[20] By the same token, there is not a sharp distinction (there I go again!) between everyday activities and those adorned with signs or symbols. Meals are not natural events that can be dressed up by symbol and ceremony; every meal, however simple and unelaborated, is always already symbolic, already points to something. Is there a more poignant symbol of loneliness than a man eating a TV dinner alone in front of the screen? Ceremony is sauce, to be sure; but, even without the sauce, the meat (not to mention the meeting) is full of sign-ification.

Augustinian or cognitive accounts of signs and symbols similarly fail because symbols do not merely teach and appeal to the mind but also *do* things.[21] In the

[20] For a fascinating discussion of how metaphorical language necessarily underlies our speech and thought, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic, 1999), ch. 4.

[21] In the Bible, the word *sign* is applied to God's actions as well as to objects. Signs may indeed be "aids to memory," whether human memory or God's (rainbow: Gen. 9; Aaron's rod: Num.17; pillars from the crossing of the Jordan: Josh. 4). But *sign* often refers to what God has done, as in the repeated statement that God brought Israel out of Egypt with great "signs and wonders and terrors" (e.g., Deut. 4:34, 6:22) or in the Johannine notion that Jesus' miracles were signs (e.g., John 2:11, 23). These signs were not merely objects that bring remembrance. They were actions that communicated something about God's character; through these sign-actions God made himself known and accomplished his purposes in the world.

main, symbols enable personal communication and communion. Personal communion involves a union of the desires, thoughts, aspirations, and feelings of two or more persons, but because we cannot know the heart of another, these desires, thoughts, aspirations, and feelings must be brought out into the open, made public, and externalized if a personal union of any sort is to be formed. The way we make them public and external is through symbols.[22] Through the symbolic actions or speech and gesture, we create and maintain personal relationships.

A few examples may help establish the point. Language is, as noted above, a symbolic or semiotic system in a broad sense. In language, we use visual signs on paper or the computer screen, or we use audible signs and meaningful sounds. The sounds and signs that we emit are symbolic in the sense that they are pregnant with meaning beyond their sound or visual appearance. (As medieval sign theorists understood, even a prelinguistic grunt carries meaning—pain, hunger, and anger.)[23] Language is a system of symbols, and is it possible to imagine personal relationship without language? Using language, further, inevitably, involves physical activity, and that means it is invariably public. When we speak, we make movements with our mouths to control the passage of air and make noises that (we hope) carry significance. When we write, we move a pencil or pen across a page or type with a finger, or several, on a keyboard. Through our bodies, our feelings, desires, fears, and thoughts are externalized, and they are externalized in the form of linguistic signs.

Not only language but other sorts of symbolic acts create, renew, or maintain personal relations. Coming into a party full of strangers, you see a familiar face in a small but lively circle near the hors d'oeuvres. As soon as you enter the circle, you begin to deploy symbols, and are deployed against. You use language: "Hello!" "Bon jour!" "Hola!" "Guten Tag!" You exchange greeting gestures—a handshake, a kiss, a hug, a significant exchange of looks, or a secret fraternity rite. Only by using these linguistic and gestural symbols do you reestablish your acquaintance with the person. Should your friend introduce you to the other members of the group, you establish personal communication and the possibility of friendship through the use of symbols. You speak, shake hands, and smile. Without these symbolic actions, these meaningful uses of the body, no personal relationship would be established.

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[22] I characterize the situation this way for the sake of simplicity. In actual fact, our desires and aspirations are not inherently presymbolic realities that may at some secondary level be expressed in symbols. On the contrary, even our deepest aspirations and desires are formed by symbols, a truth illustrated by every kid who drinks Gatorade to be like the pros.

[23] Peter of Spain distinguished between significant and nonsignificant utterances, and within the former distinguished between those that signified *naturaliter* and those that signified according to convention (*ad placitum*). His example of a natural but significant sound was the moaning of a sick person (*gemitus infirmorum*). See the discussion in Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 22-27.

Another example: A young man is desperately in love with a young woman. He thinks about her day and night, dreams about her, imagines what it would be like to hold her hand, to kiss her, and so on. This might go on for years and years without becoming an actual romance. If he is going to move from internal feelings of infatuation and an imaginary romance to the risky but more pleasurable relationship with a real woman, he must go public. He does this through symbols. He speaks or writes to her. Employing linguistic signs; he sends flowers, which he intends as an erotic symbol rather than an encouragement to horticulture. She responds with symbols, words, or significant actions, which will imply some response on the spectrum between invitation and rejection.

One important clarification must be introduced here. In these examples, symbols do not dress up and enhance a relationship that already exists; we are not back to Lady Macbeth and her saucy meats. On the contrary, relationships do not exist at all apart from the symbolic and ceremonial exchanges. We cannot say, except as a joke, "I know him well, we're great friends, but we've never spoken or written or exchanged greetings." Symbolic exchanges create or constitute relationship, and it continues only so long as the symbolic exchanges continue. Moreover, the relationship does not exist behind the symbolic exchanges, as if the real relationship were a hidden spiritual reality of which the symbols are only expressions. The pining lover might find comfort in Lombard's definition: The signs he uses are, he might hope, "visible signs of an invisible relationship." Oh, that he could at least have an invisible romance! But no; it is false comfort. The intricate fabric of exchanged language, gesture, symbol, and action *is* the relationship, and without them there is no relationship.[24]

For sacramental theology, two implications follow from this discussion. First, evangelicals are defined by freedom in talking about a personal relationship with Christ, but this genuine biblical insight can sometimes imply that the personal relationship with Christ takes place apart from participation in public worship and fellowship with other believers or beyond a believing and obedient response to Scripture. If personal relationship verges in this direction, it is more aptly described as a mystical relationship, one that bypasses the symbolic means by which God communes with his people. Personal relationships among humans and with God simply do not exist apart from language and signs.[25] Sacraments can be defined as signs in this sense—not as dispensable means for making visible a relationship that is perfectly healthy without the visible means but as con-

[24] There is indeed a mysterious extra in personal relationships. I can anticipate my wife's response to a novel circumstance, even though we have never discussed the circumstance. There is a kind of meeting of minds that surpasses anything that has been or can be explicitly said. However—and this is the point I wish to focus on—this meeting of minds does not take place *without* a background of public symbolic exchange and communication. If I had never spoken to my wife, I could hardly anticipate her future actions.

[25] This temptation to ascend beyond signs has plagued sacramental theology through most of Christian history. For more, see my "Old and New in Sacramental Theology New and Old," *Pro Ecclesia* (forthcoming).

stituent elements of the relationship. Second, these considerations make it all the more strange to think of the sacraments as means of grace. If we situate sacramental theology within the context of personal interaction and communication between God and ourselves, then it is as odd to think of sacraments as means of communication as it is to say that the words we speak are means by which we communicate to others. Words and gestures *are* the communication.

It will be noted that my discussion of sacramental signs bypasses the traditional question of the relationship between sign and thing signified. That avoidance is deliberate. This traditional question depends on a prior isolation of the sacramental element from its ecclesiological and liturgical context, and I want to resist that isolation. Far preferable is the nuanced analysis of medieval linguistic theorists who distinguished (anticipating important moves in modern linguistics) between *significatio* and *suppositio*. The former is the meaning that a sign would have if isolated from all context; with regard to words, the significance could be determined by a dictionary. However, medieval theorists also noticed that words take on nuances of meaning by keeping company with other words, and this is the concern of *suppositio* ("standing for"). In an actual proposition, the word *bread* does not merely mean "a concept of bread," but may mean particularly *this* or *that* loaf of bread. In the phrase, "Bread is made from grain," bread signifies and supposits the concept; but, in the proposition, "This bread is moldy," the word signifies a concept (bread) but also supposits a particular loaf.[26] An analogous analysis can fruitfully be applied to the eucharistic rite.[27] Considered by itself, the bread is a sign of the body of Christ (and sign here comes close to the Augustinian sense), but in the eucharistic action it is *not* by itself. Considered as part of the eucharistic action it has to be dealt with in some framework other than the dualism of sign-thing. It is not enough to determine the meaning of the bread in some system of meanings *outside* the rite; the bread must also be considered as a term within the proposition of the Eucharist.

In short, the symbolism involved in sacramental performance is the symbolism of action, less like the symbolism of a painting or a metaphor (which is made or written and laid out for interpretation) and more like the symbolism of a handshake or a wave or a kiss. When sacraments are conceived as symbolic *acts* (analogous to speaking or shaking hands) rather than symbolic objects, and when we combine this with the earlier point that the sacraments are occasions or moments of personal communion or encounter, then we are in a position to make sense of the logic of the sacraments. As symbolic actions, the sacraments are symbols by and through and in which personal, covenantal relationships are forged and maintained. Thus, the definition of sacraments as "signs and symbols" can be retained, but these names fit the reality only if we simultaneously stress that sign and symbol are personal and active, only if we nudge sign and symbol in the direction of ritual.

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[26] Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory*, 12-13.

[27] Admittedly, I have not *performed* this analysis here. The comment is meant to be suggestive.

Visible Words

Since the time of Augustine, sacraments have been described as visible words. Too often, however, the accent in this formulation falls on the first half, on the visibility of the sacraments. It is often said that the word comes to us through the sense of hearing but the sacrament through sight.[28] This has a subtle and highly unfortunate tendency to move our attention away from receiving the baptismal bath and participating in the sacramental meal toward *viewing* the bath and the meal, a shift of attention that can perpetuate the worst abuses of medieval worship. If the sacrament is a *visible* word, then perhaps the main point is to look at it, to ponder what it shows us, to strive to see Jesus in the celebration. Perhaps we should simply wait for the bell to ring and then strain for a look at the bread-made-Jesus.

If, however, we emphasize that the sacraments are visible *words*, Augustine's terminology can be recovered. Sacraments have a linguistic character and function as words do, but this makes sense of sacraments only when we recognize that words do more than communicate information and appeal to the intellect, though words certainly do both. Language, as I stressed above, is the paradigmatic symbolic system, and like other symbols it not only communicates information but also creates and maintains personal relationship.

Again, an example will help. When we say to the stranger at the bus stop, "Gee, it sure is cold" or, "These buses always run late," we are not communicating anything new to him. We say it because speech establishes commonality and puts something out in public space that we can both consider and agree with. Phatic speech such as this communicates virtually no content and certainly no new information, but it is not useless speech. Its use is not cognitive or didactic but rather personal. As visible words, the sacraments are not phatic speech. Baptism and the Supper do have cognitive and didactic content, reminding and telling us what God has done and will do for his people, ritually retelling the story of the world's redemption. Yet, sacraments, as visible words, do not have an *exclusively* didactic function. As speech, they are also forming or continuing personal communion.

Speech act theory is of help here as well. Philosophers such as J. L. Austin and John Searle have shown that language deployed in a particular way by a particular person at a particular time not only communicates information but actually performs actions.[29] Austin thus writes of "doing" things with words. A judge who

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[28] Calvin focuses on the visibility of the sacrament: It is like a "mirror," even an "image," of God's promise, where God's promises are "painted as in a picture from life." Turretin likewise includes visibility within his definition of sacraments (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. [Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1997], 3:339). The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 163) uses the more general but preferable phrase *sensible signs*.

[29] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

says, "I sentence you to death," is not merely declaring a decision that has already been rendered in some other forum. Rather, by his declaration, the judge is passing the sentence. Speaking the words is doing the deed. Similarly, the captain who says, "I now name you the Queen Mary," has actually named the ship.[30] Wittgenstein said it simply: "Words are deeds." Just as words are performative, so the sacraments as visible words actually do things and do not merely tell things. They not only remind us and teach us about Christ's death, but they make promises, issue warnings, and establish or renew covenants.

As with the terminology of signs and symbols, the phrase *visible word* is recoverable as a formulation of sacramental theology. As with *sign*, it is recoverable only insofar as it is reconceived as ritual.

Ritual and Rites

Sacraments may also be described as rites or rituals.[31] As is apparent by now, I find this a vastly more satisfying one-word description of baptism and the

[30] Austin distinguishes between the "locutionary" and the "illocutionary" force of a speech act. The locutionary force is the actual use of linguistic signs and the sense of the signs: I make these particular sounds or write these particular signs, and I mean something by it. My use of these sounds or signs, however, may be intended to accomplish a number of different things, depending on the context of my speech or writing. What I intend to accomplish through these linguistic signs and sounds is the illocutionary force of my utterance. "That ice is thin" has a particular meaning, but it can have a variety of uses. It can be merely a matter of communicating information or it can serve as a warning. If someone hears me state this sentence but does not catch the illocutionary force of the sentence, the point, he might end up drowning. Wittgenstein uses the example of a mason calling to his fellow for another slab of stone simply by yelling the word *Slab*! In Austin's terms, the locutionary force of the word is simply "flat piece of stone" but the illocutionary force is, "Give me another slab."

[31] The term *ritual* has sometimes been used within Reformed sacramental theology. According to Richard Muller's definition, Reformed orthodoxy defined sacraments as constituted by three realities: a visible element (bread, wine, water), which is a sign; an action ordained by God, which is called the *actio ritualis* or *actio sacramentalis*; and the saving benefit of the covenant. At times the rite is defined as the whole action of the sacrament; Muller writes that the *actio sacramentalis* embraces consecration, distribution, eating and drinking (*Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], 20, 267-68). Yet, there is some ambiguity about the definition of *ritual action*. Some have viewed the *actio ritualis* as consisting solely in "the recital of the words of the institution of the sacrament" that consecrates the elements to a new use. Thus, it is not uncommon to define a sacrament as the combination of the words of institution (the *actio*) and the physical element: "God effects the sacrament by the word of institution, which being added to the element it becomes a sacrament, not by the infusion of a new quality but by change of use" (Lucas Trelcatius, *Scholastica et methodica Locorum communium s. Theologiae Institutio* (1610), quoted by Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, [rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer; trans. G. T. Thomson [London: Wakeman Reprints, 1950], 592-94). In this formulation, actions such as pouring water, or taking and breaking bread, or drinking wine are *not* included within the definition of sacrament. Many Reformed theologians and documents ignore even the *actio* of the words of institution, and define sacraments without any reference to a ritual or sacramental action. See the Westminster Confession (27.1): "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him; as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world." See also Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:487, who defines sacraments as "ordinances instituted by Christ that

Supper than the definitions above. Describing sacraments as rituals, rites, or ceremonies has all the advantages of the other terminology but avoids some of the distortions encouraged by the other definitions.

First, as has already been emphasized in the critical analysis above, some of the other definitions fail because they do not focus on the fact that sacraments are actions. By contrast, rite and ritual connote *action*. Contrary to the impression given by Augustine's dictum, "add the word to the element and it becomes a sacrament," baptism is *not* merely the element of water plus the word.[32] For a baptism to take place, water must be *used* in a particular way, so that there is action as well as words. The Supper is not merely bread and wine plus the word but bread-and-wine-eaten-and-drunk-by-the-church plus the word.

Further, by defining sacraments as rites, we move away from a narrow focus on the physical elements or on the visibility of the elements. To speak of sacraments as rites emphasizes that they are performed by a community and are embedded in the life of that community. This point becomes especially clear against the background of ritual studies, a subdiscipline of cultural anthropology that has explored the communal and political significance of rituals in both primitive and modern communities.[33] Baptism from this angle is seen as a rite of entry that expresses the character of the church—that it is a community where racial, economic, and sexual divisions are dissolved (1 Cor. 12:12-13, Gal. 3:27-29). When we all partake of one loaf, the church is publicly and ritually showing the fact that it is one body in Christ and that its many members are working together for the edification of the whole. The ritual becomes a standard against which we measure the quality of our life together.

Understanding sacraments as rites also helps us to understand the efficacy of sacraments. Puritans (and Lady Macbeth) to the contrary, rites and ceremonies are not mere window-dressing added to an occasion that could take place without ritual and ceremony. Like performative utterances, rites actually accomplish things. As an initiation rite, baptism is analogous to other rites of entry into organizations or groups. When one is admitted to the bar, one has to go through certain formalities; at the end of the ritual process, one becomes an attorney. Going

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are 'significant' of some spiritual reality and perpetual, and are given to 'signify, instruct, seal, confirm and strengthen, convey or apply, and thus sanctify believers.'" Intriguingly, and in my judgment ironically, Hodge immediately quotes the Second Helvetica, which defines sacraments as *symbola mystica, vel ritus sancti, aut sacrae actiones.*

[32] Medieval theologians did not understand Augustine's dictum in this way. Peter Lombard defines the element of the sacrament of baptism as the washing with water, not the water alone. Other medieval theologians argued that sacraments were constituted by three features: word, element, and action.

[33] See, for example, Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969). I have raised some theological objections to ritual theory in "Modernity and the Merely Social: Toward a Socio-Theological Account of Baptismal Regeneration," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 3 (summer 2000): 319-30.

through a wedding ceremony creates a marriage, and forms a single man into a husband and a single woman into a wife. Undergoing an ordination ceremony turns the candidate into an ordained minister, and a swearing-in ceremony makes a person a judge and an inauguration makes a President. In all these examples, the person begins the ceremony having one status and ends the ceremony with another. The rite does not recognize a status that already exists; it actually installs the person into that status. Ceremony is not a sauce covering a bare meeting; without the ceremony, the meeting would simply not be what it is—would not be a wedding, or an ordination, or an inauguration. Without ceremony, the meeting would be something else entirely.

Scripture recognizes the reality of status-changing rites. A child circumcised on the eighth day becomes a child of the covenant, and an unclean person who undergoes the prescribed washings is made clean. In the ordination of priests, to take another example, the priest offers a bull for the sin offering (Lev. 8:14-17). Bulls are used for purifications only for priests or the whole congregation (Lev. 4:3, 13-14), so the fact that Aaron uses a bull in the ordination rite is fitting. Other elements of the purification in the ordination rite, however, are not consistent with the purification of priests. In Leviticus 4, the purification of a priest requires the blood to be sprinkled before the veil of the sanctuary and on the horns of the altar of incense (Lev. 4:5-7), but this is not what happens in the ordination rite. Instead, the blood is put on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and the rest is poured at the base of the altar. Thus, the purification rite is and is not like the purification for priests, and the reason is clearly that at the beginning of the rite Aaron was not yet a priest. During the rite, Aaron's sin offering was performed in one fashion; the next day, it would have to be performed in another fashion. His status changed because he went through the rite of filling.

Importantly, through this rite Aaron's status *before* God changed. To become a priest was not merely to enter a new social status or a new position in a religious organization. Once ordained, Aaron was allowed to approach the tabernacle without being killed, because YHWH had accepted him as a temple servant. Similarly, when two people marry, their status changes from single to married, and what happens through the rite of covenant making is said to be something joined together by God. A week before the wedding, sex between the engaged couple is fornication and a sin; on the wedding night it is no longer a sin.

To call the sacraments rites is to emphasize that they actually accomplish and do things; God recognizes the baptized person as a baptized person, and a church that celebrates the Supper is considered by God as a church that has celebrated the Supper. A sacramental theology conceived in terms of ritual can maintain a high view of sacramental efficacy without giving the least countenance to magic. Such a sacramental theology recognizes the performative character of baptism and the Supper.

The main downside of the language of ritual is that it suppresses to some degree the gift character of the sacraments and might encourage the Pelagian

notion that we can sanctify ourselves by performing our rituals or the equally Pelagian notion that sacraments are performed for God's benefit. Protestant theology from the beginning has rightly and severely inveighed against this idea by insisting in the strongest terms that sacraments are gifts *from* God not works *to* God. It is essential, then, in reconceptualizing sacraments as rites that this fundamental emphasis not be lost. I suggest two important factors that will head off this danger. First, it must be emphasized that the very existence of the sacraments depends on Christ's ordination. Were it not for God's gracious intention to wash us into his fellowship and feed us at his table, baptism and the Supper would not exist. Second, it must be emphasized that God is giving gifts in, with, and under the performance of the sacramental rituals. Through the ritual of baptism, we are ingrafted into the body of Christ, and, through the meal ritual of the Supper, the Father feeds his children the Bread of Life in the Spirit. To be sure, especially in the Eucharist, the church offers a return gift, an oblation of praise and thanks, but this return gift is a response to the prior gift of life and food. In short, sacraments reconceived as rituals should be reconceived as rituals of gift-exchange.

Conclusion

Transposing sacramental theology into a ritual key has several advantages, both for sacramental theology and for the mission of the church: It emphasizes the crucial role of *action* in sacraments, provides a fresh context for working through questions of sacramental efficacy, highlights the corporate nature of sacraments, and places sacramental theology into direct dialogue with cultural anthropology and its postmodern offspring. I am not able to expound on all of these advantages here, but I hope to have made a plausible case that this revision might reinvigorate a moribund locus of theology and this transposition might help harmonize the cacophony of evangelical and Reformed sacramental theology.