

# Why the Holy Sacraments?

## DAVE BAST

One thing common to Christian worship through the centuries for almost all churches and in all times and places has been the use of the sacraments. These ceremonies or symbolic acts...it is actually kind of hard to define them...have marked Christian worship from the very first days of the apostles until today. Denominations and churches disagree about their meaning or their form or who should receive them, or even how many there are; but still, for almost all Christians, these sacred rites proclaim and enact the deepest truths of the Christian faith. So, let's dig in and learn more about the sacraments today on *Groundwork*. Keep listening.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, as we said in the introduction, we are going to talk about the sacraments. We planned a three-part series of programs, and in a way, I am reluctant to do this. I have been involved in radio ministry for well over 20 years, and as a rule, I have shied away from things that Christians disagree on, because there is so much we *do* agree on. We just did a series recently on *Groundwork* that we called Basic Christianity, which was all the stuff that Christians hold in common; but the sacraments have provoked controversy, and even open fights, through the years. So, it is a little awkward, I think.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

But, they are central to our faith, and so we want to talk about sacraments in general in this program, and then two programs, one each, on baptism and communion or the Lord's Supper; and to help us with this, Dave, we have a guest with us in the studio for all three programs: Dr. Jim Brownson, who is a professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and so, we are glad to have you here, Jim; welcome.

## JIM BROWNSON

It is a great pleasure to be here; thanks.

## DAVE BAST

Yes; we are very grateful that you have come, especially because you wrote the book on the sacraments; or you wrote, at least, *a* book on the sacraments, specifically baptism.

## JIM BROWNSON

Yes; the title of the book is *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition*, and I tried to just kind of walk through a lot of...the whole book is really organized around questions people have about the sacraments in general and then about baptism in particular.

## DAVE BAST

Right; and we are going to try to raise some of those questions and answer them in these three programs. So, I hope you will come along for the ride; but let's start, Jim, maybe with just the word *sacrament*. I don't

think that is a biblical term, is it?

### **JIM BROWNSON**

No, it is not. The Latin word, *sacramentum*, is where we get this word from; and *sacramentum* is a translation of the Greek word in the New Testament, *mysterion*, which means mystery or secret; but probably the meaning, which is most critical, even though this word is never used of either baptism or the Lord's Supper or anything else in the New Testament, that is a rite or a practice, what is most central is that the word *sacramentum* means an oath or a promise; and I think that critical to understanding the sacraments at all is that they have this character of a promise; and then, of course, the question is: Who is making the promise?

### **DAVE BAST**

Right, yes.

### **JIM BROWNSON**

You know, is it we who are making a promise to God or is it God who is making a promise to us? And at least from the Reformed perspective, which is where I locate myself, it is really God who is the one who is making promises to us, who is committing and inviting, then, the response of faith to that promise of God.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And what we find in scripture...and of course, scripture is words—it is verbal—but these sacraments...we have called them sometimes visible words; sometimes we call them a sign and a seal; and what they have tended to do in the history of the Church and in scripture is that these things come alongside the Word, not just to illustrate it, because as we will talk about in this series, there is more power behind them than just that; but that is the idea; that they confirm and make more real and make more vivid, provide a tangible sign of the promises of God; as you just said, Jim, it is all about the promises of God; and in the Old Testament, the two big signs that the Israelites were given were circumcision and then, of course, the Passover.

### **DAVE BAST**

There is a passage...a significant passage in Genesis where God is appearing finally to Abraham; it is the third time, I think, in Genesis—in Chapter 17. He has appeared in Chapter 12 to first call him, and then in 15, He kind of confirms that promise; and then in 17, He institutes a sacrament. So, we read:

<sup>9</sup>God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup>This is my covenant with you (covenant is a promise, isn't it?) and your descendants after you. The covenant you are to keep, every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.”

### **JIM BROWNSON**

Yes, and we have similar language about signs being used in the Passover as well. The Passover is also a sign. There is a technical distinction here that I think is fairly important, and that is, the way that we think about signs. What is a sign? And I think the critical thing is that a sign points to something bigger than itself, but at the same time, it means participating in that reality itself, right? So, when the Passover is lived out, you are celebrating and participating in God's deliverance—God's rescue. When circumcision is enacted, it is a way of participating in this understanding that God promises to bless through the generations. Maybe a modern analogy is the wedding ring, right? There is a sense in which the wedding ring points to: All right, now we are married, but you don't take it off; and if you permanently take it off, it means you no longer consider yourself to be married. It not only points beyond, but it expresses something of that reality itself.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes, that is interesting because just a day or two ago I saw a story about a celebrity who had split from her wayward husband, and the big announcement was: She is not wearing her wedding ring anymore.

**JIM BROWNSON**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

It was a symbol, supposedly, just a small thing—a visible cue—but it meant so much more.

**JIM BROWNSON**

Yes; and it means participating in that reality. Another analogy that some people use is you own a house, but you live in it. That ownership is not simply an abstract thing, it is concrete—it is real—it affects everyday life; it shapes the way that you live.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, and what has always struck me as well, Jim, in the Old Testament, and this continues into the New Testament, as we will see, but you talk about participating and living into these things...I mean, we are spiritual creatures, but we are physical creatures as well, and these signs touch our very bodies. Circumcision involves a surgical procedure, and the Passover involves eating. You ingest things and you kill a real lamb and put blood on a doorpost. This is gritty and this is earthy and this is fleshly, and it involves us; and the totality of our humanity, both body and soul, are involved in this participation in the reality of God.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; and you know, we talked about sign and seal. Those are words that have been used historically; and in fact, St. Augustine was the one who classically defined a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace...

**JIM BROWNSON**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

Which is the reality of God's acting in us and on us by his power. So, signs in the Old Testament—two of them—big ones: Circumcision and the Passover; and they are directly connected to the New Testament sacraments, which is what we will look at next.

*Segment 2*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

**DAVE BAST**

And I am Dave Bast, and we are also pleased to welcome today to our program, and the next two programs, in fact, Dr. Jim Brownson from Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

**JIM BROWNSON**

And it is a pleasure to be here.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

We did an overview of the Old Testament, and we were just saying that both circumcision and the Passover are vivid signs that involve the totality of who we are as body and soul, and that we are participating...as you said, Jim...we are participating in the life of God, living into the promises of God in very concrete and tangible ways; and that continues, now, in the New Testament, where Jesus and his cross and resurrection are the key moments, of course, and the culminating moments of salvation history, of which everything in the Old Testament was kind of anticipatory and a foreshadowing of; and so now we have baptism and the Lord's Supper, and we will talk a little bit more about how those are connected specifically; but those are the continuation of that very thing; that we are participating in the life of God.

**JIM BROWNSON**

One of the things that we have already been talking about is the importance of bodily existence; and it is when you get to Jesus Christ that this becomes absolutely central, because at the heart of Christian faith is the notion of the incarnation—that the Word became flesh. God doesn't simply deal with us in the abstract, spiritually, staying off at a distance, or engaging only with our minds. God...

**DAVE BAST**

Or as if we were just souls.

**JIM BROWNSON**

That is right. God engages our bodies, and the word actually becomes a body; and so, the tangible, physical experience of baptism in water, a material substance, and eating bread and wine, is part of this sense that God cares about the creation and God draws the creation into God's redemptive purpose.

**DAVE BAST**

And wants to address us as we are, which is this body/spirit, body/soul, body/mind combination. You know, dualism has been a problem for all of Church history; and today it is interesting to me that already the Gospel addresses us this way and the Bible presents us as this; and now modern science is finding more and more the psychosomatic kinds of issues that affect us. How the body and the mind...you cannot separate them. They affect one another; and in the same way, the sacraments are meant to address us as this kind of whole creature, not some sort of split or schizophrenic existence.

**JIM BROWNSON**

Yes; and here is where I think coming back to Jesus Christ as the center of the sacraments is so important, because Jesus Christ is the word made flesh. He is fully human, he is fully divine; and really, in many respects in the New Testament, the dominant theme of both baptism and the Lord's Supper is being united to this Christ, who is both flesh and spirit; and so our physicality, as well as our spirituality is implicated in all of this; and we don't come to a healthy understanding of the sacraments if we don't come to one in which both of those are involved in some significant way.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that whole theme of union with Christ...sometimes that gets a little neglected, I think, in the Church; but the idea that in baptism we become one with Christ, which was, you know, one of Paul's big points to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, the Corinthians were having some problems, some of the men were still visiting prostitutes, even though they were claiming to be Christians. They were doing lots of things that were just not very good; and Paul again and again came back to baptism and said: Don't you know, you are one flesh with Jesus now; that is one really good reason not to make your self one flesh with a prostitute, because you are bringing Jesus along with you; but just to come home again to that identity. You have a union with Christ as a physical and spiritual being, as Jesus is and will always be now. So, that idea of coming back to your identity of union with Christ—that you are one with Christ—that is so important, and I think we sometimes neglect that a little bit today, but that was vital for Paul, for sure.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; in fact, you just made me think, Scott, of the common attitude in the ancient world—the world of the New Testament—that many said what you did with your body didn't matter because all that mattered was your *psuché*—your soul, and so you could be a libertine, you could be a total hedonist, you could torture yourself, or you could be a stoic, you know, it didn't really matter; but the Gospel comes and says: No, we are both, and both are important. And it is also important, isn't it, the sacraments for the earliest Church? So, if we want to ask: Where are they in the New Testament? The answer is, they are right there from the very first day of the Church's life, the day of Pentecost, because in Acts 2 at the climax of Peter's sermon he says: What do you have to do?

## **JIM BROWNSON**

Repent and be baptized.

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes; and three thousand were; and then in the very next verse we see this picture of the early Church, where they are meeting together, giving themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer; and most scholars, I think, see that as a reference to the Lord's Supper.

## **JIM BROWNSON**

Yes; and it does seem to me that part of what the sacraments do is they help us to keep the main thing the main thing; which is our union with Christ both spiritually and physically; and the way it shapes not just our head, but our life; and the sacraments sort of hold that before us over and over again, inviting us to step deeper into Christ and deeper into not just a spiritual Christ, but the incarnate Lord.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Jesus himself needed a body in order to get baptized. John didn't think he should baptize Jesus, but Jesus said: You need to; but it was Jesus' physical body that went down into the Jordan. Jesus shared physical bread and wine with the disciples in the upper room, and said: Keep doing this; in remembrance of the death that hadn't happened yet, but was going to happen in the next 24 hours or so. So again, the physical hands of Jesus handing them bread and wine, the physical body of Jesus going down into the water. It is such a wonderful reminder that Christianity is indeed the religion of the incarnation of God becoming flesh and of redeeming, therefore, also our existence, body and soul alike.

## **DAVE BAST**

I love that idea, Jim, that you stressed that the sacraments help us keep the main thing the main thing, or keep first things first, which is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It happened, it is real, and it reminds me of a story. I just read this again in a history of the United States, but there was a movement in the 1830s called transcendentalism, and it was sort of this philosophical, highfalutin...led by writers and others who had sort of drifted away from the Christian faith. Certainly none of them were orthodox Christians, and the most famous of them was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was ordained as a minister in New England, and after three years resigned and left the church, not because he couldn't preach, that was easy for him; he was a wordsmith; but because he no longer could celebrate the Lord's Supper. It was too Christocentric—it made it too real.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Transcendentalism could get pretty gauzy and wispy, and you can talk that way, but the Lord's Supper brings you back to the main thing, and that was too much for someone like Emerson.

Well, let's conclude our program in just a few moments by wondering a little bit more about these signs: What constitutes a sacrament? There are disagreements about how many sacraments there should be. How do we decide? We will talk about some of that next.

*Segment 3*

## **DAVE BAST**

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and our special guest today, Jim Brownson, and we are talking about the sacraments in general as the first program in this series. So, this is one of the things that Christians have disagreed about. I talked about that in the intro to the program, Jim, and it is part of the sad history, I guess, of our faith; but, what are some of those disagreements?

## **JIM BROWNSON**

Yes; there are a lot of them. To start with, how many are there, right? Catholics have seven. Most Protestants have two; and the reason most Protestants say there are only two is they want to zero in on those that are specifically commanded, and not just practices, like marriage, for example, that not even everybody

participates in. You know, it is not that Jesus Christ isn't present and active in other sorts of practices, as well; but I think that is in many ways what is at stake in the dispute about the number. In addition to the dispute about the number, there are disagreements about the role of faith; and maybe a little history is helpful here. Way back in the early Church there was a Donatist controversy, where you had some church leaders who had abandoned the faith under persecution; and then the question arose: All right; well, what about the baptisms that they did? Are those valid because their faith wasn't real? And the early Church said...

**DAVE BAST**

Kind of a harsh judgment, you might say...

**JIM BROWNSON**

That's right.

**DAVE BAST**

But anyway...

**JIM BROWNSON**

But what the early Church said is: No, they are valid because they were done in the name of Jesus; and if sacraments are dependent on the faith of the person practicing them, then we will never know if Jesus is really present or not. Jesus is present when he is invoked; and so, yes, they are valid.

Now, the medieval Church took that idea and kind of ran with it in ways that later the Reformation reacted against because they said the sacraments are so objective it doesn't really matter if you believe or not; and so, by the time you get to the Reformation, you have people buying essentially sacramental grace, and all sorts of problems there; and so, it does seem to me that part of what we see in the Reformation is a recovery of this balance between the objectivity of the sacrament and the importance of faith...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**JIM BROWNSON**

Holding onto the Donatist idea that there is an objectivity, but also that faith is central; and I think the central thing here is that if the sacraments are God's promise, in the Bible God's promise is always directed to faith; and promises don't mean squat if they are not embraced by faith; and that, it seems to me, is the balance that holds the two together.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and faith has nothing to grab onto if the promise isn't there already; and I think that is an important distinction as well.

It is interesting that some of that still comes up. I heard of a situation in a church not long ago...in fact, I have turned it into a ministry case study for our capstone course at my seminary...of a pastor who served a church for about 15 years, went to another church, had an affair, was found to be deep into pornography. He was defrocked, and people in his former church wondered: Are the baptisms valid that he did? Are marriages valid if this guy was such a bad guy? And of course, that goes back to the Donatist thing. Yes, God was active even through an imperfect, broken vessel because it is God, indeed, who acts.

When we talk about baptism in the next program, as well as the Lord's Supper in the third program of this series, that will be very, very important in terms of what happens in the sacraments. What takes place? No, we don't think they are magic, but we don't think they are empty symbols or just something to jog our memory either, because it is finally about God.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; I guess we are trying to find a middle way here between the idea that simply... I remember reading about an early French missionary to the Indian tribes in North America, who said: Just a drop of water and all these people will be saved forever and ever. That kind of view that all you have to do is *pling*, and they are

in; and the view that, no, we don't need these signs at all; all that matters is you have got to believe and it is purely a spiritual thing. Somehow, we are trying to find a middle way there.

### **JIM BROWNSON**

Yes; you know, I think that this comes back to the fact that we are both spiritual and material beings, and we cannot abstract the two. They go together, and spiritually means understanding promises, trusting in them, giving our life to them; but materially, these things have a sort of objectivity as well, and it is a both/and, not an either/or sort of situation.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that is one of the reasons why, and we will talk maybe in the Lord's Supper program, too, in terms of how often do these get celebrated? How often should we have these before us? There has been a lot of up and down on that over the centuries as well; but, these are...as you said earlier, Jim...these are the things that tie us to Christ. These are the things that nurture and nourish our faith. Faith does grab onto the promises; and the sacraments, along with preaching of the Word, help us do that, because it is always the Word of God which is central. Which is why, in a lot of churches, and particularly Reformed and Protestant churches, traditionally the pulpit was always in the center, and the baptismal font and the Lord's Supper table flanked the pulpit because these things support each other, but it all comes down to that Word of God and the promise of God in the Gospel.

### **JIM BROWNSON**

I think the other thing about the way sacraments get practiced in the Church that is important to emphasize here is that it happens communally...

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

### **JIM BROWNSON**

We participate in the Supper together. We are baptized in the context of a worship service. In our highly individualistic culture, that sometimes gets sort of pushed at, but it seems to me that a sacramental theology pushes back and says: No, it matters that you are a corporate body. That is where the grace of God is most tangible.

### **DAVE BAST**

Well, we started with the word *sacrament* in this program: *Sacramentum*—the sacred promise that a Roman soldier made when he joined the legion; and in a sense, it is God's promise to us, and as we respond in faith we are joined together in the body. It is not just us and God, but it is us as the body of Christ with the Lord Jesus.

So, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and our guest today, Dr. Jim Brownson. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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*Printed on June 3, 2026*