

# The Sacraments

by J.H. Newman

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*The sermon discusses the definition and number of sacraments in the Church of England, highlighting the distinction between sacraments ordained by God and other rites and ceremonies.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Luke 22:19, John 3:5, Ephesians 2:8, 1 Peter 3:21

**Topics:** "Sacramental Theology", "Christian Rituals"

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## Description

J.H. Newman delves into the definition of sacraments, particularly focusing on the distinction between the five rites commonly called sacraments and the sacraments of the Gospel, such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He emphasizes that sacraments must have an outward sign ordained by God or Christ to be considered as such. While the Church has the power to dispense grace through its rites, only Baptism and the Lord's Supper meet the criteria of sacraments with visible signs ordained by God. Newman highlights the importance of understanding the true meaning and significance of sacraments as visible signs of an inward spiritual grace given by Christ.

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## Transcript

Art. xxv.—"Those five, commonly called Sacraments, that is to say, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown, partly of the corrupt following (pravâ' imitatione) of the Apostles, partly from states of life allowed in the Scriptures; but yet have not like nature of sacraments (sacramentorum eandem rationem,) with Baptism and the LORD'S Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of GOD."

This Article does not deny the five rites in question to be sacraments, but to be sacraments in the sense in which Baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments; "sacraments of the Gospel," sacraments with an outward sign ordained of God.

They are not sacraments in any sense, unless the Church has the power of dispensing grace through rites of its own appointing, or is endued with the gift of blessing and hallowing the "rites or ceremonies" which, according to the Twentieth Article, it "hath power to decree." But we may well believe that the Church has this gift.

If, then, a sacrament be merely an outward sign of an invisible grace under it, the five rites may be sacraments; but if it must be an outward sign ordained by GOD or CHRIST, then only Baptism and the LORD'S Supper are sacraments.

Our Church acknowledges both definitions;—in the Article before us, the stricter; and again in the Catechism, where a sacrament is defined to be "an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace, given unto us, ordained by CHRIST Himself." And this, it should be remarked, is a characteristic of our formularies in various places, not to deny the truth or obligation of certain doctrines or ordinances, but simply to deny, (what no Roman opponent now can successfully maintain,) that CHRIST for certain directly ordained them. For instance, in regard to the visible Church it is sufficient that the ministration of the sacraments should be "according to CHRIST'S ordinance." Art. xix.—And it is added, "in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." The question entertained is, "what is the least that GOD requires of us." Again, "the baptism of young children is to be retained, as most agreeable to the institution of CHRIST." Art. xxvii.—Again, "the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by CHRIST'S ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped." Art. xxviii.—Who will maintain the paradox that what the Apostles "set in order when they came" had been already done by CHRIST? Again, "both parts of the LORD'S sacrament, by CHRIST'S ordinance and commandment, ought to be administered to all Christian men alike." Art. xxx.—Again, "bishops, priests, and deacons, are not commanded by GOD'S law either to vow the estate of single life or to abstain from marriage." Art. xxxii.—[In making this distinction, however, it is not here insinuated, though the question is not entered on in these particular Articles, that every one of these points, of which it is only said that they are not ordained by CHRIST, is justifiable on grounds short of His appointment.]

On the other hand, our Church takes the wider sense of the meaning of the word sacrament in the Homilies; observing—

"In the second Book again the Adversary of the Law and the Prophets, he [St. Augustine] calleth sacraments holy signs. And writing to Bonifacius of the baptism of infants, he saith, 'If sacraments had not a certain similitude of those things whereof they be sacraments, they should be no sacraments at all. And of this similitude they do for the most part receive the names of the self-same things they signify.' By these words of St. Augustine it appeareth, that he alloweth the common description of a sacrament, which is, that it is a visible sign of an invisible grace; that is to say, that setteth out to the eyes and other outward senses the inward working of God's free mercy, and doth, as it were, sealing our hearts the promises of God."—Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments, pp. 296, 297.

Accordingly, starting with this definition of St. Augustine's, the writer is necessarily carried on as follows:—

"You shall hear how many sacraments there be, that were instituted by our SAVIOUR CHRIST, and are to be continued, and received of every Christian in due time and order, and for such purpose as our SAVIOUR CHRIST willed them to be received. And as for the number of them, if they should be considered according to the exact signification of a sacrament, namely, for visible signs expressly commanded in the New Testament, whereunto is annexed the promise of free forgiveness of our sins, and of our holiness and joining in CHRIST, there be but two; namely, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.

For although absolution hath the promise of forgiveness of sin; yet by the express word of the New Testament, it hath not this promise annexed and tied to the visible sign, which is imposition of hands. For this visible sign (I mean laying on of hands) is not expressly commanded in the New Testament to be used in absolution, as the visible signs in Baptism and the LORD'S Supper are: and therefore absolution is no such sacrament as Baptism and Communion are. And though the ordering of ministers hath this visible sign and promise; yet it lacks the promise of remission of sin, as all other sacraments besides the two

above named do.

Therefore neither it, nor any other sacrament else, be such sacraments as Baptism and the Communion are. But in a general acception, the name of a sacrament may be attributed to any thing, whereby an holy thing is signified. In which understanding of the word, the ancient writers have given this name, not only to the other five, commonly of late years taken and used for supplying the number of the seven sacraments; but also to divers and sundry other ceremonies, as to oil, washing of feet, and such like; not meaning thereby to repute them as sacraments, in the same signification that the two forenamed sacraments are.

And therefore St. Augustine, weighing the true signification and exact meaning of the word, writing to Januarius, and also in the third Book of Christian Doctrine, affirmeth, that the sacraments of the Christians, as they are most excellent in signification, so are they most few in number, and in both places maketh mention expressly of two, the sacrament of Baptism, and the Supper of the LORD. and although there are retained by order of the Church of England, besides these two, certain other rites and ceremonies, about the institution of ministers in the Church, Matrimony, Confirmation of Children, by examining them of their knowledge in the Articles of the Faith, and joining thereto the prayers of the Church for them, and likewise for the Visitation of the Sick; yet no man ought to take these for sacraments, in such signification and meaning as the sacraments of Baptism and the LORD'S Supper are: but either for godly states of life, necessary in Christ's Church, and therefore worthy to be set forth by public action and solemnity, by the ministry of the Church, or else judged to be such ordinances as may make for the instruction, comfort, and edification of CHRIST'S Church."--Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments, pp. 298-300.

Another definition of the word sacrament, which equally succeeds in limiting it to the two principal rites of the Christian Church, is also contained in the Catechism, as well as alluded to in the above passage:--"Two only, as generally necessary to salvation, Baptism and the Supper of the LORD." On this subject the following remark has been made:--

"The Roman Catholic considers that there are seven [sacraments]; we do not strictly determine the number. We define the word generally to be an 'outward sign of an inward grace,' without saying to how many ordinances this applies. However, what we do determine is, that CHRIST has ordained two special sacraments, as generally necessary to salvation. This, then is the characteristic mark of those two, separating them from all other whatever; and this is nothing else but saying in other words that they are the only justifying rites, or instruments of communicating the Atonement, which is the one thing necessary to us. Ordination, for instance, gives power, yet without making the soul acceptable to God; Confirmation gives light and strength, yet is the mere completion of Baptism; and Absolution may be viewed as a negative ordinance removing the barrier which sin has raised between us and that grace, which by inheritance is ours. But the two sacraments 'of the Gospel,' as they may be emphatically styled, are the instruments of inward life, according to our LORD'S declaration, that Baptism is a new birth, and that in the Eucharist we eat the living bread."

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