

THE WESLEYAN THEOLOGY SERIES

# The Sacraments

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## Introduction

The sacraments are God's gift to the church that allow us to participate in the further redemption of creation. While this book can stand alone in its exploration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it lives within the theological imagination of a *martyr ecclesiology* that was considered in a prior volume in this series on *The Church*. That book celebrated that *the church is the eschatological being and becoming of the body of Jesus Christ, who was crucified and buried, who is resurrected and ascended*. As such in the Wesleyan tradition, this conversation celebrates a martyr ecclesiology as the people participate in the new creation God is working in the world for the redemption of all things.

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A Wesleyan soteriological lens frames this entire conversation on communal worship broadly, and then specifically, regarding the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This sacramental conversation considers both a robust theology as well as faithful sacramental practice in the local church. Finally, within the great rhythm of God gathering (inhaling) the church for communal worship (Word and sacraments), God then sends (exhales) the church out from communal worship to live into our vocation as the body of Christ in the world as our doxological mission.

This conversation draws upon a generous orthodoxy across all of Christianity while also being saturated by a Wesleyan eschatological hope and optimism of grace. God created humans and all creation so that love, joy, and

goodness would flourish and so that creation may glorify (re-image) God. Creation's glorification of God, reflecting back God's light and love, illuminates the Pauline celebration of hope and praise that indeed God "may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). This is the divine *telos* (goal or aim) of love for creation.

Within this hope and goal of love, the Wesleyan tradition takes very seriously the devastating consequences of sin. For Wesleyans, love and sin are best understood relationally. While the dis-ease of sin constrains, tarnishes, and attempts to choke off love, the Wesleyan optimism of hope is that God refuses to allow sin, death, pain, and suffering to have the final word. This hope is not naïve to the brutal consequences of sin; it is instead an invitation to refuse the despairing perspective of doom that says sin and death eternally reign. Wesleyans affirm that God desires to partner with creation as full healing and maturity in love continues to come.

The full hope and vision of God's love always invites more redemption, more love, and more flourishing. Therefore, God invites and empowers a journey of healing from sin to love and reconciliation that leaves nothing behind as worthless. Moreover, God invites creation never to settle for convenient, easy, or partial transformations in love (Romans 12:1–2). God invites us to press into the full gift of redemption—creation's entire sanctification. In this life we are invited to participate in this ongoing journey toward that upward call in Christ Jesus (see Philippians 3:13–14). As the primary work of the martyr church, communal worship is an eschatological divine-human encounter that participates in God's kingdom coming more fully.

Communal worship is part of God's ordained, Spirit-empowered respiratory system. God gathers and *breathes in* individual believers so we can be reformed and remade, re-united as the body of the crucified and resurrected

Christ. After the dynamic rhythms of the communal worship encounter, the church is sent out—*exhaled* by and with the Spirit to participate in God’s continual healing of creation. This movement out and into the world is part of the church’s doxological mission and a further living into the fruitful transformation that God is working within the crucified and resurrected body.

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper will be explored as a further intensification of the divine-human encounter in communal worship. The revival occurring around John and Charles Wesley has often been called a *sacramental revival*. Although the Wesleys largely affirmed the sacramental theology of their contemporary Church of England, what was novel in their theology was their zeal to celebrate the sacraments not as dead formulaic rites but as a dynamic *means of grace*.

## Baptism

Baptism is God’s invitation to new birth as part of one’s full initiation in the martyr church as the body of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Baptism is both a drowning and a cleansing. In baptism, the Spirit puts to death the deeds of darkness and sin. The disease of sin is vanquished as one joins in Christ’s death. Similarly, as persons are joined to Christ’s death, they are also raised in the newness of life (see Romans 6:1–6). Within this celebration, there are also pastoral best practices to consider in order to equip, empower, and encourage local churches to live into the gift and healing of baptism more fully.

While baptism puts sin to death and raises persons to new life, there becomes a unique ecclesial and communal anthropology that marks Christians collectively as the church. For many Christians living in Europe and the United States, a strong sense of individualism permeates most aspects of culture, but it is dangerous to co-opt the

Christian gospel with individualistic libertarianism. The sacrament of baptism declares that individuals find fulfillment as part of the martyr church. Thinking individually versus communally also informs the eschatological hope one imagines and the ethics for how one lives into such a future. Practice shapes imagination, and imagination shapes practice. Christians living in individualism-centered cultures may need to work more intentionally to find their identity not in themselves, isolated and abstracted from others, but in the crucified and resurrected Christ.

## Eucharist

John and Charles Wesley's zeal for eucharistic celebration was central to their own formation from their days at Oxford, and it was central for the Methodist revival and renewal within the Church of England. The issues of presence, sacrifice, and mission will form the outline of our theological conversation on the Lord's Supper.

Presence and sacrifice in the celebration of the Eucharist have unfortunately caused division among Christian traditions since the Reformation. Too often, debates have focused only on how Christ is present at the Table. While Christ's presence is crucial, considering the congregation's presence is also a critical part of the divine-human encounter. Another point of division has been the question of sacrifice. The Wesleyan tradition affirms a dynamic sense that each Lord's Supper is a sacrificial event and encounter.

Finally, the eucharistic conversation will consider what it means for the church to be sent out missionally as the body of the crucified and resurrected Christ. This movement by and with the Spirit is part of the church's ongoing doxological formation participating in God's further inbreaking of God's new creation kingdom. This holy work participates in the full sacramental fruitfulness and flourishing.

After the theological eucharistic discourse, some best practices for local churches will also be explored. Pastoral issues around frequency, fencing the table, who can preside and serve, the elements themselves, liturgies, and more will be considered.

## Sacred Grace

This entire sacramental conversation celebrates the continual becoming of the church as the body of the crucified and resurrected Christ. These practices within the Wesleyan tradition celebrate divine-human encounters whereby the triune God seeks to heal and mature persons in love—a recovery and restoration of the image of God. This healing and maturation are not simply for individuals but are a further participation in the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

Finally, it is important that this text be received as a gift without condemnation. The broader Wesleyan tradition has not always trained pastors and congregations well regarding the significance of the sacraments. Both the theological discourse and the best practices may illuminate previously held less-than-ideal ideas or practices. Such revelation should not yield guilt but offer new hope, insight, and encouragement for a more robust sacramental celebration in the ongoing formation of the martyr church of Jesus Christ.

**Editorial Note:** Terms that are defined in the glossary are bolded the first time they appear in the book following the introduction.



# A Wesleyan Imagination

## SECTION 1

To begin this conversation, attention will be given to the unique Wesleyan lens that shapes this entire volume. The sacraments fall centrally within a Wesleyan celebration of salvation. Tracing the Wesleyan sacramental fervor through the journey of the Wesley brothers sets an important foundation.

While there is fertile theological soil to be tilled and faithful practice from church tradition to soak in, it is important to begin by *remembering* God's ongoing story and work in creation. Without care, sacraments and communal worship can become disembodied practices that are disconnected from God's continual work of creation, healing, and redemption in the world. Those who are antsy to get immediately to the specific discussions on the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism are welcome to skip ahead. However, this section seeks to provide an important theological foundation and imagination that both grounds and liberates the wonderful gifts of the sacraments God has given to the martyr church.

Finally, this section will explore the unique aspects of salvation through a focus on the unity and particularity of preventive, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

## A Wesleyan Aroma in Creation

How should one begin a conversation on communal worship and specifically on the divine-human encounters of the **sacraments** and the subsequent missional holy work embodied for the life of the world?

All storytellers write from a unique viewpoint. This text is simply telling a story of God and of God's people at work in the world participating in the new creation kingdom that is coming more each day. As such, this text on the sacraments will be written with a Wesleyan lens, considering both John and Charles Wesley as well as their liturgical and theological heirs. The Wesley brothers saw themselves as part of the church **catholic** (or universal church) and thus celebrated and largely affirmed not only theology and practices of the Church of England but also that tradition's connection back to the early mothers and fathers of the church. In addition, the ongoing Wesleyan tradition has learned and should learn from all parts of the Christian faith in the continual celebration and illumination of these blessed mysteries of the sacraments.

Some may wonder if such a pedagogical rubric will result in a bland ecumenicism. Conversely, the Wesleyan tradition celebrates that God is at work revealing and healing *all* parts of creation. Thus, with an eye of discernment, a Wesleyan hospitality seeks in hope to encounter and be encountered by God's revelations and insights regarding the sacraments from the Christian church broadly. Within this

general spirit of learning and listening, we admit that there are unique aspects specifically from the Wesleyan tradition, which we will highlight with the label *Wesleyan Sacramental Theology*. This emphasis will be one of distinction without disdain. Although there are differences in theology and practice among the various traditions, Wesleyans do not claim arrogant superiority over other traditions.

## Created in Love, For Love

The Christian tradition bears witness not only to the power, joy, love, and blessing of God's creation but also to the God who continues to participate in the ongoing becoming of creation. Genesis 1 celebrates a daily divine affirmation of creation: "It is good." In the early narratives of Genesis and beyond is the affirmation that not only humans but also the rest of creation break forth in praise to God (see Isaiah 55:12). The goodness of creation, including humanity, is never in question.

The early texts of Genesis proclaim an idea that is woven throughout the whole Bible: humans are created to love God, love other humans, be loved by God and by others, love themselves, and take responsibility for creation by participating in creation's ongoing flourishing. The kind of love God offers to and expects from humanity is a love of covenantal joy, responsibility, and vocation. In *Confessions*, Augustine celebrates that humans are created to worship God. As a prayer, he yearns that humanity "cannot be content unless we praise you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, The Westminster Shorter Catechism's first question asks, *What is the chief end of humanity?* It answers that humanity's

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1. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1.1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.

“chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>2</sup>  
This focus on God is the hope and *telos* (ultimate purpose) not only for humanity but also all of creation.

Within God’s desire for love to flourish in all creation, the intrusion of sin and death work against the hope of life and love, bursting forth from the garden story in a pandemic<sup>3</sup> across the created order. Sin is not simply misbehaving, or breaking a law or divine command. Sin fractures relationships because it is a failure to love. Sin is not about the mere act of lying, cheating, or stealing; it is always grounded in relational wrenching: whom did I lie to, whom did I cheat, whom did I steal from? This pandemic of sin not only infected humanity in the garden but also the rest of creation: “We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free” (Romans 8:22–23).

The Wesleyan tradition affirms that God does not desire to leave any in a place of death and sin but instead desires that all may find healing, life, and reconciling love (see 2 Peter 3:9). Scripture records the calling of Abram and Sarai to be a unique people who embody the way of God in order to bless all the families of the earth (see Genesis 12:3). God gave this unique people the law through Moses as a guide to image and reflect the way of Yahweh on the earth. Paul notes that, while the law could demonstrate the

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2. The Presbytery of the United States, Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” <https://www.westminsterconfession.org/resources/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism/>.

3. It is tempting to refer to sin as endemic, a medical term that indicates a disease that will never be fully eradicated. However, the term “pandemic” intentionally celebrates the Christian hope that, although sin is so far-reaching as to be global, it is not eternal, and one day it *will* cease to be.

right way of God, it did not have the power to help persons follow it completely on their own. Paul notes that the law did well to show the sin that infects all humans (see Romans 3:23; 7:7–12). Yet, as a fulfillment of God’s promise in love not to leave humanity sick unto death, God the Father sent the Son to be incarnated in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. As celebrated in the volume in this series on *The Church*, Jesus Christ inaugurates and embodies the irruption of the kingdom of God on earth and offers reconciliation with all creation to be healed and set free from sin into the divine dance (*perichoresis*) of triune love.

Christ is the foundation of the martyr church as the body of the crucified and resurrected Holy One. Beginning with Abram and Sarai and moving forward, God desires to covenant with people not only as part of our ongoing healing from sin to love but in order that we participate with God, as clay in a potter’s hand, in the further inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

After Christ ascends, the Spirit is poured out on the believers at Pentecost, and the church is most fully born of water and Spirit (see Acts 2). As the church moves forward, its mission is clear: continue to be used by God to participate in the further inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The church is sent to reach out to all persons drowning in despair, clinging to corruption, and saturated in sin—both from what they have done and what has been done to them. The good news declares healing and forgiveness and life, liberation from slavery to sin and the disease of death (see Romans 6).

## The Gift of Salvation Invites and Empowers Response

A central affirmation of the gospel is that the gift of healing, salvation, and reconciliation offered by God the Father, through the ministry of Jesus Christ, by the pow-

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God continually makes the first move in reaching out to encounter and offer life in love. Yet God's love is not coercive or manipulative. By wooing and inviting, God empowers us to respond to God's invitation while also empowering that response.

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er of the Holy Spirit is never something we can earn or achieve on our own. Although the law shows the way of life, we cannot attain it on our own power; we all fall short (see Romans 3:23). Yet the good news of salvation and healing is that God offers them as a gift. The apostle Paul celebrates this gift of salvation as central to the Christian gospel: “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something you possessed. It’s not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives” (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Not only does this passage celebrate God’s gift of salvation, but it also declares the joy and hope we are as God’s *accomplishment*, where we can do what we were created to do—good things, holy work, things of life, joy, and creation, allowing love to flourish in and through us. Within this gift of salvation, the Wesleyan tradition is also very clear that God does not simply choose to save us apart from our desire to be redeemed. God’s wooing, *prevenient* invitation seeks our participation in the continual work of new creation God is doing.

Wesleyans follow the example of Jesus’s interactions with people in the Gospels. Some responded well to Jesus’s invitation to faith and discipleship, such as his chosen disciples, and Mary and Martha (see Mark 1:16–20; 2:13–14; Luke 10:38–42). Some, like the rich man in Mark, walked away from Jesus’s invitation (see Mark 10:17–31). When we respond positively to God’s invitation, such a response is always empowered by God and not a work that makes us worthy of the gift. Yet God desires to covenant and partner together in the ongoing healing of creation—not as partners equal with God but as ambassadors of the kingdom of God (see 2 Corinthians 5:20).

## Salvation as Healing

The gift of the sacraments is part of God's work in the world healing and redeeming persons as part of the new creation that is here and further coming. The Wesleyan tradition imagines salvation as the healing of humans and creation from the disease of sin. Randy Maddox's seminal work *Responsible Grace* asserts that salvation is first and foremost a therapeutic healing from sin to love—a recovery of Christlikeness in the **image of God**. This perspective grounds salvation as primarily relational rather than juridical (a legal decree).

Wesley certainly affirmed the power of God's justifying grace. **Justification** is God declaring persons righteous by faith through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Justification is the legal change of position as declared by God through the forgiveness of sins. Yet Wesleyans believe that God desires to do more than simply *declare* us righteous through Christ. God seeks to *make* us righteous in the ongoing work of **sanctification**.

Maddox summarizes John Wesley's distinction by describing "justification as a *relative* change, in which God declares us forgiven by virtue of Christ, and sanctification as a *real* change in which the Spirit renews our fallen nature."<sup>4</sup> This distinction does not mean justification and sanctification are at odds; instead, they each provide unique prisms in celebrating the full promise and hope of Christian salvation.

### A Holy Life as the Fruit of God's Love in Us

Although some Christians have been uncomfortable with the biblical book of James because of its emphasis on

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4. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 170.



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The difference between justification and sanctification is important. The sacraments not only participate in our juridical forgiveness (justification) but also serve as healing encounters of the triune God where we are invited to be more fully healed in love, moving into maturity in Christlikeness (sanctification).

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the futility of faith without works, the Wesleyan tradition fully testifies to the importance of works of holy love as the fruit of God's healing in one's life. While the fruit of a holy life is never a work that earns our salvation, without the works of maturity in love, our faith is dead (see James 2:14–17). John Wesley grew pastorally annoyed and sad concerning Christian **nominalism** in England in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Many in England at that time considered their **baptism** to be merely a faith-related event in their past, but their lives did not bear the fruit of holy love. John and Charles Wesley's reformation and revival called believers into a holy and mature love that evidenced a dynamic faith continually at work in their lives.

Although the call to a holy life did lead some in the Wesleyan tradition to an unfortunate legalistic interpretation of works, the invitation to a holy life at its best allows the Spirit to do its full work both in each person and in the full redemption of all creation. A Wesleyan sacramental theology is central to this ongoing healing and maturing in love for the Wesleys.

## Grace as God's Presence

We have discussed sin and salvation in the Wesleyan tradition as best understood relationally. In thinking about the salvation and healing God is working in creation, it is also important to consider how the *ordo salutis* (the way of salvation) grounds God's works in divine-human transformative encounters. One of the key distinctions of a Wesleyan sacramental theology is an acknowledgment of the sacraments as *means of grace*. In fact, John Wesley's sermon "Means of Grace" is one of the most helpful resources in discerning his understanding of the sacraments.

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5. Nominal Christians are those who call themselves Christians but do not live in ways that set them apart as Christ followers.

“Grace” is a wonderful word used in Scripture and in songs of the faith, but what *is* grace? When I ask my students to help define grace, they rightly respond with ideas about *unconditional favor, gift, and undeserved healing*. All of these are wonderful, but they do not get to the heart of what the sacraments are as means of grace. To receive God’s grace is not like God giving us a one-hundred-dollar bill. Grace is not an object of material substance. For the Wesleyan tradition, both in salvation and specifically when referring to the sacraments, grace should be understood as the undeserved, healing, and transforming *presence of the triune God*. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop emphasizes that, particularly in Wesleyan theology, grace must not be thought of as some object or thing that exists outside of God. “Grace is never impersonal or *something* apart from God himself.”<sup>6</sup>

Affirming that God’s transformational presence is an important part of a Wesleyan sacramental theology can anchor our sacramental conversation. In light of this exploration of the Wesleyan ethos and aroma, let’s look at how the sacraments are central to a Wesleyan order of salvation.

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6. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 197.