

Sacraments in a Time of . . .

This book has been written and published during a time of radical change, not just for Christianity, but for the entire world. The demise of the Christendom epoch and critical decline of the institutional church are mirrored in every aspect of life, from the complete loss of confidence in inherited Western political systems to impending ecological disaster and the possible destruction of the planet.

Added to this, in the final weeks of preparing this work for publication, we have experienced the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. Set against this background, academic debates about how many sacraments there are and who should be allowed to preside at them might seem rather irrelevant.

And yet, this has been a time of profound ecclesiological unsettling within many Christian traditions, particularly when it comes to the celebration of the sacraments. For some, whose sacramental theology requires the physical presence of a gathered believing community to make them efficacious, celebrating sacraments or ordinances, either alone or digitally “on screen,” is not possible. Nor has it been possible, for very different reasons, for those whose ecclesiology demands the presence and presidency of an ordained priest together with consecrated elements.

Any book about the sacraments is, first, a book about *identity*. It is through the celebration of rituals and ordinances within a particular context (which might or might not be described as sacramental) that individual and corporate Christian identity is created. In other words, how we define ourselves as believers in Jesus and what we seek in terms of Christian community

are shaped, broadly, by how we experience Christ in our midst through a set of practices.

Sacraments are part of those practices of the Christian community, just as prayer is another. The majority of members of the Protestant tradition acknowledge only baptism and Eucharist (or Holy Communion) as sacraments, whereas in the Western Catholic tradition there are a further five: anointing of the sick, confirmation, holy orders, marriage, and penance/reconciliation (we explain these more fully later). Some Christian movements do not have sacraments and others prefer the term *ordinance* for such practices. These often depend on theological traditions and historical contexts.

Second, this is a book about *context*. It is important that Christians, congregations, and theologians re-engage in discussion about the role of the sacraments in the new and developing post-Christendom context.

Christendom is the concept of western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to the Christian faith, which is seen as the so-called soul of Europe or the West. The essence of the idea is the assertion that western civilization is Christian. Within this Christian civilization, the church and the state have different roles to play, but, since membership in both is coterminous, both can be seen as aspects of one unified reality—Christendom.¹

Post-Christendom or, more popularly, “after Christendom,” is what is happening now in Britain, Europe, and metropolitan Australia, and its seeds are now beginning to be seen in North America.

Christianity comes in more forms than could possibly be calculated, the identity of each tradition being shaped by its historical and current context. In addition, how each tradition’s key thinkers and leaders have encouraged the way the Bible should be read and interpreted over years, decades, or centuries, will influence both belief and praxis.

Divisions have been created, wars fought, and even new societies founded over what might today be considered small issues of theology. However, to believe these are small is to underestimate the extent to which sacraments, throughout church history, have been both instrumental in and integral to the life of the church—and to its authority within society. Whether or not Christians from different traditions can share in the Eucharist together remains one of the most divisive issues in the church; indeed one of the purposes of this

1. Carter, *Re-thinking Christ*, 14.

book is to enable such difficult theological issues to be considered in a different light.

As this book was being completed, social media came alive with debates among clergy about their responses to COVID-19, questioning whether the Eucharist can faithfully be celebrated “virtually” during times of social distancing and physical lockdown. Predominantly for pastoral reasons, those in leadership have relaxed their various stances, providing guidance they consider will be helpful for members and adherents during such exceptional circumstances. For some, these emergency measures have proved decidedly unhelpful: the seeming abandonment of the rich principles of their own tradition, which they consider an integral part of their identity as a follower of Christ.

At this point in time (Easter, 2020) it can be only an assumption on our part that we are living through a pivotal moment, not just for the church, but for the whole world. The impact of COVID-19 on social, political, and economic systems, as well as faith traditions of all kinds across the world, cannot even begin to be estimated. On first drafting this book, our initial premise was that the church, an institution which has nurtured and served us throughout two millennia, is no longer fit for purpose. The current pandemic has exposed some of this even more starkly; but at the same time perhaps it has been the jolt the churches across different traditions needed to make them assess their success (or otherwise) in terms of mission and ministry within their communities, and to give them license to review the efficacy (or otherwise) of their ecclesial and sacramental theologies and practices. In short, how can the church continue to facilitate human-divine² encounter, such that Jesus-shaped communities can experience for themselves the transcendent but very real presence of a God who stands among them in the person of Christ?

This brings us to the third major theme to be explored in this book: *tradition*. On the surface this appears to be an ecclesiological theme—the way church in all its different forms organizes itself. However, there is a far deeper issue at play here: it is how Christians, now and through the ages, perceive God to be at work in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a subject that takes us to the heart of the Christian faith as well as to a single day in history almost two thousand years ago.

Belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, God’s agent in the world, unites Christians across the globe; yet the form taken, the manifestation, and even

2. We recognize that people encounter God in many circumstances, which find written testimony in the Christian Bible and their living echo in the sacraments. We continually use “human-divine” to refer to such encounters, and offer further theological reasoning for this choice in chapter 14.

the words used to describe the Holy Spirit—it/her/him—can be causes of major division. As we will discover in this book, belief in how the Holy Spirit is at work in the world is intimately connected with attitudes towards ritual practices, whether they be described as “sacramental” or not.

Ultimately, this is a book about human-divine encounter and the resultant understandings of how Christians relate to and with a *covenant* God, whether it be through signs, symbols, words, or actions. This book exists to explore the way God breaks into the lives of individuals and Christian communities, and how that in-breaking is both mediated and experienced through the rituals, ordinances, or other practices considered sacramental within each particular Christian community’s tradition.

One of the keys to unlocking the nature of the church during Christendom, and therefore moving towards understanding it after Christendom, is to examine how it has developed and been understood through the sacraments. In what we would term “the shift into post-Christendom,” the definitions of what constitutes “church” and what it means to be a follower of Jesus within an ecclesial community are open to discussion. The church of today is emerging in many places as a new entity—or collection of different entities—with Jesus Christ in common. In many emerging communities there are no longer set ideas about where and in what form Christians meet, how they worship, how they explore and understand the Bible, and how they experience Christ in their midst through sacramental practice.

It will be for future ecclesiastical historians to determine how much of a pivotal transition the church now finds itself within. And in such a state of flux, we do not claim that this volume could, or does, give the last word upon sacraments after Christendom. Rather, we intend to provide a contribution to the debate about how, what, where, when, and why sacramental theology and practice might be shaped for the future. To ignore engaging in such conversations risks losing some of the God-given vitality that we will need in reaching out to meet the missionary challenges of our post-Christendom age.

The Nature of Sacraments

Thomas Cranmer, in the preface to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1549), described the sacraments as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible means of grace.” He was using a formulation dating back as far as the North African theologian and philosopher, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one also used by Anselm (ca. 1033–1109) and Aquinas (1225–1274).

This helpful description has survived through the modern era and remains useful contemporarily in the nurture of new Christians.³

What such a definition clearly implies is that a sacramental moment involving reciprocal activity between God and humanity is an “in-breaking of God’s holiness” into a particular earthly “moment.” This phrasing of the “in-breaking of God’s holiness” comes directly from the globally seminal work of the German philosopher and theologian, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937)—*The Idea of the Holy*. Although it is impossible to translate Otto’s thesis in its fullest meaning into English, Otto uses the term “holiness” to describe the nature and activity of God. Using the term “numinous” from the Latin *numen* (meaning “holy”), Otto sought to demonstrate that “the holy” has a divine power, both mysterious and fascinating.

One of the other key parts of Otto’s thesis—“*Gottes ist ganz andere*” (Ger.)—is often rendered as “God is wholly other.” In both the sacraments and other sacramental moments, it is (at least in part) the encounter with that holiness—that wholly other nature of God—which makes it transformative for the individual person. In romantic terms, one could describe this as “where heaven and earth meet.”

In his 2020 book, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Churches*, John D. Rempel explores how, through rituals, customs, feasts, and festivals, communities of faith have incorporated a “sacramentality of time” into their daily lives. He notes that, in Judaic, then early Christian, thought, “time had a forward movement toward the fullness of God’s reign at the end of time and through eternity.”⁴ By adopting the Sabbath, observing the Passover, and celebrating the resurrection on Easter Day, participants were entering into a *kairos*, or sacramental, moment, “one in which God’s Kingdom becomes tangible.”⁵

This experience of history-changing human-divine encounter can be found time and again in the Bible, as mere humans come face to face with the holiness, glory, and power of God.

- When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, he is reminded by the voice within that he is standing on holy ground and is to acknowledge this by taking off his sandals (Exod 3:1–14).

3. Formal teaching within such nurture is sometimes called “the catechism” and those being nurtured “the catechumenate.”

4. Rempel, *Recapturing*, 55–60.

5. Rempel, *Recapturing*, 55–60.

- When Isaiah the prophet enters the temple and sees “the glory of the Lord” filling the space while six-winged angels attend the moment and bring a burning coal to salve the prophet’s unclean lips (Isa 6:1–6).
- When Peter, James, and John are with Jesus on the mountain, encountering Moses and Elijah, it becomes a transfiguring moment (Matt 17:1–13).
- When Peter encounters Jesus for a Galilean beach breakfast barbecue after the resurrection, he is empowered afresh to recognize Jesus’ call to holiness in his own life (John 21:15–19).

However, despite fitting Rempel’s definition of “sacramental moments,” none of these events have ever been deemed to be “sacraments.” As writers, we recognize that the in-breaking of “the holy” into the life of God’s people cannot be limited to just a certain number of practices or actions. As we later explain, while the assumption is that there are a finite number of in-breaking communal practices which can be declared as sacraments, we believe that sacramental activity is broader than that.

It is therefore useful to make clear at the outset our view that an event or practice can be “sacramental” without being labelled as “a sacrament.” We view sacraments as corporate activities of a Jesus-believing community, through which we are re-membered as part of the corporate people of God, past, present, and future. That re-membering is a particular moment of grace, which incorporates us afresh within the body of Christ, as we recognize Christ’s presence in our midst. In that “moment of grace,” God acts transformatively in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Such “moments of grace” can occur in another time, place, or activity.

Just How Accessible Is This?

When speaking to those outside the church, not just to those who have consciously rejected inherited models of church, but also those who have never encountered Christianity or Christian community, we realize that we may as well speak gobbledygook as use formal definitions of sacraments. How are those without even a basic knowledge of Christian tradition and theology supposed to understand the spiritual difference between the visible and invisible, or the theological “means of grace,” or implications and practical outworkings of it? Is *grace* even a word that people would generally use?

Our thesis is that sacramental praxis plays a vital role in shaping Christian identity, both individually and corporately. The nature of shared experience

within Christian communities is vital to understanding how those Christians perceive the role and place of sacraments within their communities.

We suggest that the human believing community is an essential parallel expression of the divine community. This has been expressed by many writers but particularly eloquently by Leonardo Boff:

This mystery [the Trinity] becomes embodied in history, because it is organised in groups and communities. Communities in turn assume the elements of each age, so that the church has as many faces as the incarnations it has undergone throughout history . . . The Blessed Trinity is a sacramental mystery. In other words, it is something that appears in many signs, that can always be known; yet our effort to know never ends.⁶

As the church navigates post-Christendom, these new incarnations become key to reaching those with no background knowledge of the Christian faith or experience of church culture. Many British primary school children have little or no knowledge, and certainly not significant understandings, of the Jesus narrative—except perhaps a garbled version of the infancy narratives which they gained from “nativity plays.” There is a well-known scene in the film *Love Actually*, where one character has been given the role of “first lobster” in her school nativity play. “There was more than one lobster at the birth of Jesus?” responds the child’s mother, incredulous. “Duh!” says the child, as though not thinking there would be a lobster present was a ridiculous thought!⁷

While there are those for whom the sacraments are both transformative and life-affirming, for many people the term *sacrament* has no meaning at all. Therefore, in everyday terms, we often find ourselves explaining the sacraments as a particular means (or activity) of approaching God and molding individual and corporate Christian identity. Given the fact that only 6 percent of the English population regularly attend Christian worship, this lack of understanding of something as central to Christianity as sacraments demonstrates another reason why this book needs to engage with the subject.⁸

How We Use Scripture and Sources

Both of us have engaged with biblical studies at postgraduate level and have practical knowledge of how Scripture is generally used by the Christian

6. Boff, *Holy Trinity*, 108, 115.

7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9chdp8izEtk>.

8. <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/download/gb-church-attendance-1980-2015.pdf>.

tradition. We will refer to texts in what is traditionally referred to as the “Old Testament” as the Hebrew Scriptures, and to “New Testament” texts more often as the type of text they are (Gospel, epistle, etc.) or more generally as the “apostolic writings.” What we are seeking to avoid is the Christendom trap of creating an implied superiority for the New Testament over the older Hebrew Scriptures.

We have to rely on Christian tradition and list biblical references in ways accessible to the reader and as advocated by our publisher. References to the Christian Bible are normally given by three pieces of information: the name of the book involved; the chapter; then the verse or verses, e.g., Ruth 3:9 or John 10:10. This will be the style adopted throughout our text. Unless stated otherwise, the translation used is the New Revised Standard Version.

It may seem obvious but in any exploration of Christian theology, “church practices,” or personal discipleship, one rapidly encounters statements such as “the Bible says . . .” or “Jesus teaches that . . .” What does this mean? Few readers will refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Gospels or apostolic writings in their original Greek, and thus must recognize that they are using an English translation or paraphrase, which may have come via a previous Latin translation. We will have to return to looking at the nuance of particular words or biblical phrases and their implications for this book.

Even the simple “Jesus says . . .” needs reviewing. The church is indebted to the German theologian Joachim Jeremias (1900–1979) for enabling believers to understand clearly the difference between the “actual words” (*ipsissima verba*) and the “actual voice” (*ipsissima vox*) of Jesus. Did Jesus actually say the words attributed to him on the pages of the most reputable biblical translation? Let us explain with two examples:

- Semitic languages, such as the Aramaic that Jesus spoke, are very pictorial and do not use verbs. Jesus would almost certainly not have been speaking Greek when he reportedly said, “This is my body, broken for you” at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19) but Aramaic, saying “This, my body, for you.” How many centuries of argument about the Mass/Eucharist/Holy Communion have been built on the Greek which Jesus is supposed to have said?
- Equally, Matthew records Jesus saying, at the end of his earthly ministry, “Go into all the world, preach the good news, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . .” (Matt 28:18–19, our translation) several weeks before Pentecost (when the Spirit came upon the believers) and decades before anyone had a clear trinitarian understanding. So have we got the actual words (*verba*) or just the voice (*vox*) of Jesus here?

How important is this for understanding the sacramental development of baptism?

As writers, we have great love and respect for how the Bible *can* teach us when our theology and practice is determined by it, but we have to have integrity and recognize the differences between Jesus' "actual words" and Jesus' "actual voice" in following his call.⁹

We have both been influenced by the Wisdom tradition of biblical scholarship, which uses the person of "wisdom" (Gk.: *Sophia*) to "explain" the character of the divine breath or Holy Spirit (Prov 8:1).¹⁰ To maintain a sense of linguistic balance, we have adopted masculine pronouns when writing about Jesus and chosen to use feminine pronouns for the Holy Spirit.

Much recent theological thought has been stimulated by current trends in biblical scholarship associated with how the earliest disciples and Jesus-shaped communities both met and worshiped. The power of the works of Robert Banks, Andrew McGowan, and Hal Taussig among others is that they utilize not just the biblical text, but also other sources, including archaeological, literary, and historical ones. Their work draws attention to the counter-cultural nature not just of liturgy, but also of the placing of members of the earliest Christian communities (slave and free sharing the common cup, or women and slaves being given equal placings to men, etc.). Their books or journal articles have been influential in locating much early Christian meeting/worship within the context of a Greco-Roman banquet, as well as exploring use of liturgy within the context of earliest Christian worship.¹¹

Similarly we are encouraged by the much-respected (but little known beyond Anglican circles) liturgist and theologian, A. H. Couratin, whose legacy has creatively influenced so much current UK denominational and ecumenical theological education. Couratin and others acknowledged the vitality of the pre-Christendom church, which grew through the work of particular influential figures and a rich variety of specific Christian communities rather than definitive liturgies. Couratin maintains this allowed no real liturgical history pre-Christendom but does offer an embryonic prehistory. This widely accepted argument affects how writers, academics, and readers treat and use original sources. A primary document is the New Testament's apostolic writings whereas rites from a particularly geographic church can act only as indicators of the ways in which Christian thought was developing.

9. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*.

10. Daise and Charlesworth, eds., *Light in a Spotless Mirror*.

11. Banks, *Going to Church*; McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*; Smith and Taussig, *Many Tables*.

One of our influences is ourselves. We are both white, well educated, middle class, and financially supported (salaried or pensioned) by different denominations as ordained United Reformed Church ministers. We live in the UK and work among congregations struggling with the issues associated with the declining Christendom church. While we can try to understand “world church” perspectives, in reality we can write only from our own, and we recognize those limitations.

Semper Reformanda

As we both hail from different parts of the Reformed tradition, we are accustomed to the rallying cry: “*Semper reformanda*”—“always reforming.” In his *Perpetually Reforming* volume, John Bradbury reminds us that our identity in and through Jesus Christ is found in how the church continually and repeatedly shares the nature of God in the outworking of its life in the world.¹²

In one sense, any Christian from the Reformed tradition must be prepared to countenance significant change in the way that Jesus-shaped discipleship is undertaken, both individually and corporately. It is no accident that, in its “Statement of Nature, Faith and Order,” the UK’s United Reformed Church not only allows, but positively encourages, us to change both how we articulate and practice our discipleship and our collective trajectory in following the leading of the Holy Spirit and the prayerful discernment of the denomination’s people.¹³ We are thankful to be ministers within such a forward- and Godward-looking company, within the broader contemporary “Jesus movement.”

We realize that how Christian communities agree to travel and learn together becomes an informal covenant, enabling God’s in-breaking, helping to forge a shared identity in Christ. In sharing this earthly pilgrimage, we uncover our missional purpose and rework the forms and expressions of our faith, because of our church tradition or our cherished biblical values and interpretations.

So What Lies Ahead?

This book is divided into three parts:

- The first part lays trails, sows seeds, and sets some parameters for our discussion. Following this Introduction, there are four chapters, beginning

12. Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming*, 78–79.

13. Thompson, ed., *Stating the Gospel*, 262–65.

with one examining how the “Jesus movement” came together corporately in sharing the dominical sacraments. The next chapter examines the issues around the development of sacraments within the Christendom church, while the third highlights several of those issues created by the innate challenges of the post-Christendom church. Finally in this part, we examine some of the theology and theory that we believe is necessary when exploring and calibrating the relative nature of sacraments. The images of covenant, tradition, context, and identity, both in Christ and as members of Christian communities, will recur in the successive chapters of this book.

- The second and longest part of the book comprises two longer and a set of shorter chapters concerning particular aspects of life and faith that have been described as sacramental, and that some would call sacraments. The first of those chapters reexamines what baptism and Eucharist as sacraments, which nearly all Christians practice, have come to mean today. The second looks at those practices which the Catholic and most of the Orthodox traditions declare as sacraments. Then the four shorter chapters each examine the claims of another aspect of Christian life, which some regard as sacramental.
- The final part of this volume has three concluding chapters in which we outline what have, for us, become the central issues and questions which must form part of the discussion. We also offer some conclusions of our own. There is also a select bibliography.

We are believers in the encouragement of a “currency of ideas,” which can enrich a dialogue or conversation about pivotal theological or philosophical moments and concepts. As we have already stated, rather than providing definitive solutions to issues surrounding sacramental theology and practice, the aim of this book is to enable readers to grapple themselves with what the sacraments and sacramentality mean to them.