



Gifts of God: The Sacraments

Study Guide



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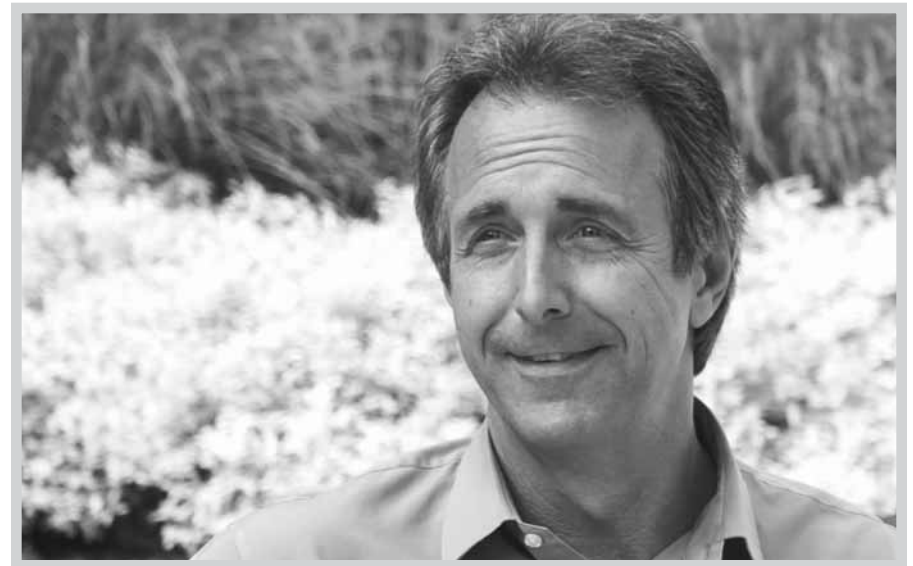
Gifts of God: The Sacraments

A study companion to *Gifts of God* DVD

Introduction

What is a sacrament? Why are the sacraments important to the church? What does my baptism mean for me? How can I come to have a more authentic experience of worship through the celebration of communion? How can I have a deep and personal encounter with God?

These are some of the questions many people have asked the church over the years. These are questions that anyone who is on a spiritual journey will ask at some point in their lives. Whether you have been in the church all your life, are new to the church, new to the faith, or somewhere in between, having the answers to these questions will make your spiritual journey of faith richer and more meaningful.



The DVD – *Gifts of God: The Sacraments* – provides an entrée into the rich feast of meaning and deep mystery of the sacraments. The DVD is divided into two parts: “Baptism: A Sign of Promise” and “Communion: A Feast of Grace.” This study guide is designed to facilitate your use of the DVD and raise guiding questions to enhance your discussion. The main goal of this study guide is to help those on the journey develop a deeper understanding of the sacraments.

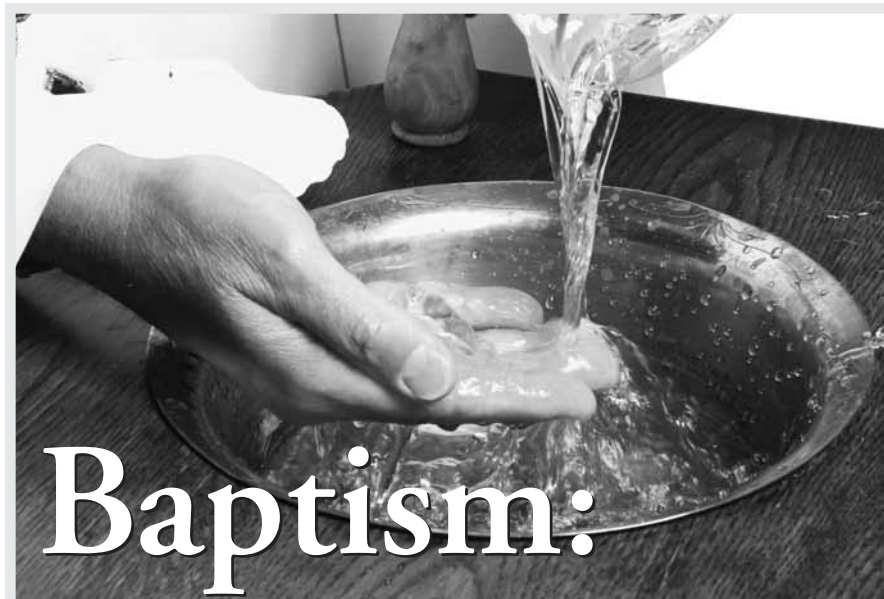
Depending on your ministry setting, these materials may be used with a variety of groups and individuals:

- New member classes
- Confirmation classes
- Study groups
- Elders’ workshops/session meeting starters
- Preparation for baptism
- Individual home study or small group work
- WMS group study
- Church school classes
- Youth group study

The study guide has been prepared with all these groups in mind, so feel free to adapt it to suit your unique setting. While there are no suggested timelines in the study, each study session has been designed to be about 1.5 hours in length. However, these sessions can be broken up and stretched out to fit other time frames to suit a group’s needs. Because these sessions can be used in a variety of settings, there are different exercises suggested for different groups. These are noted at the end of each session and can be referred to as needed.

Because this is a study on the sacraments, an important theme with both sacraments is community in the family of God. In light of this, you may want to begin your sessions with a time of fellowship and hospitality so people have a richer sense of what it means to be part of God’s family celebrating their unity in Christ.

This study is simple and straightforward; all you will need to get started is a Bible, a copy of *Living Faith*, a DVD player, a hymnbook and a group of interested people. May God go with you as you learn and grow together!



A Sign of Promise

Baptism is one of two sacraments practiced by Reformed Christians (communion is the other). The act of baptism is deceptively simple – but in a handful of water, there is a deep well of mystery and meaning

Welcome and Prayer

Introduction

Churches in the Reformed tradition celebrate two sacraments: baptism and communion. These sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ and given to us to celebrate in the church (see Matthew 28:19–20 and Matthew 26:26–29). The sacraments are “gifts of God for the people of God.” They are a visible, tangible, and even tasteable way of experiencing God’s immeasurable grace and unfathomable goodness. Alongside the proclamation of the word, the sacraments are “marks of the church” – vital signs of the church’s identity, mission and ministry. They help to identify the church as a covenant community – the people of God and the body of Christ.

Gathering Exercise

Look at the 27 symbols in the **Symbol Name Game** on pages 12–13. Take a moment to jot down what you think each image symbolizes.

- What do the symbols represent?
- What comes to mind when you see them?

“Wherever we see the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9

Each image conveys the message it symbolizes. They are visible and tangible signs representing something greater, communicating a deeper meaning. This is what the sacraments are like. St. Augustine described the sacraments as “outward and visible” signs of an “inward and invisible grace.” They show us who God is and what God has done for us and for our salvation in Jesus Christ, expressing God’s claim upon our lives and confirming Christ’s calling to be faithful disciples. In the case of the sacraments, the elements of bread, wine/juice and water are set aside from their normal use to be used for the purposes of sharing the sacraments.

Exploring Deeper

Read: *Living Faith* 7.5.1–7.5.3

- What elements are used in the sacraments?
- What do they represent?

View DVD

Gifts of God: The Sacraments (Part 1 – Baptism: A Sign of Promise)

Sharing Your Story

Share with one another what you remember about your own baptism or the baptism of someone you know. Where was the baptism conducted? Who was present? Was a small amount of water or large amount of water used? Was there a memorable moment for you or someone else? If you have no memories of baptism, what does it mean to you?

Go back to the symbols on pages 12–13. Choose one or two symbols that represent what baptism means for you.

Read together: *Living Faith* 7.6.1–7.6.5.

Baptism is ... Cleansing, Covenant, Community, Commission

1 Baptism is Cleansing and Renewal

Water is a powerful and evocative natural symbol. It is a necessary ingredient for life on earth, and one of the primary components of the human body.

On a piece of newsprint, list all the ways water plays a role in human life.



When Jesus was baptized by John in the water of the Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon him and the voice of God said: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:13–17). In the sacrament of baptism, God says the same thing to us: “You are my beloved child, and I look upon you with blessing and favour.” Like Christ, we are washed with water, a sign of the cleansing of sin and the renewal of life we receive through him. Like Christ, we are anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, empowering us to live as his disciples.

1. What positive associations do you have with water? What fond memories? How is water a source of life and healing either physically or spiritually for you?
2. Why is water such a powerful symbol for baptism?

3. In the video, the young adult states, “Maybe it’s like the resurrection... an old life ends and a new one begins.” What does baptism have to do with death and resurrection?

4. What represents the “old life” for you? What do you believe about new life in Christ?

2 Baptism is Covenant

The baptism of believers expresses our calling to respond with faithfulness to the gift of faith we have received. An adult or young adult declares his or her intent to trust in Christ and live as Christ’s disciple. When we claim the gift of faith through baptism (or when it is claimed on our behalf, as in infant baptism), we enter into a committed relationship with Christ and the members of his body, the church. This kind of relationship is best described by the biblical term “covenant” – a solemn promise established by God, in which we receive God’s blessing and seek to love and serve God with all of our lives.

1. What are some vows (covenants) that we make in life?
2. How is a covenant with God the same or different from other promises we make?
3. What does it mean to be a part of a “covenant community”?

4. In baptism we are “marked as Christ’s own.” What does that mean to you?

3 Baptism is Community

Read the account of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:13–17.

Note who is present at the Lord’s baptism. Not only were John, many religious folk and Jesus present, but the Holy Spirit and God were there also. The same is true of our baptism. We are surrounded by our family and our faith community in the presence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized with water in the name of the Trinity (the true divine community), we share in Christ’s own baptism. God claims us as beloved children. We are anointed by the Holy Spirit and made part of the community called the church.

Baptism is not a private occasion or family affair in the Presbyterian Church. It is a sacrament witnessed and celebrated by the whole congregation in the presence of God. In baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, becoming members of Christ and of his church throughout the world. Therefore, congregations have a vital part to play in extending the love and welcome of Christ to the newly baptized. The Christian congregation continues to nurture those who are baptized throughout the life-long journey of faith, always reminding them of God’s promises and holding them accountable to their own commitments to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Confirmation is an opportunity for those who were baptized as infants to claim their Christian faith in a mature and personal way, even as they continue to grow into its implications.

*“Just as a parent
embraces a child,
in baptism God embraces us.
We’re joined with Christ
and to one another
in a new family,
the people of God.
We’re then called
to reach out to others...”*

1. Why is it important for the congregation to witness and participate in the sacrament of baptism?
2. In what ways do (or did) your parents or guardians model (or not model) Christian life and faith for you?
3. How does your congregation live out its commitment to nurture, comfort and challenge those who are baptized, so that they will continue to live and grow in Christian faith?

4 Baptism is Commission

The baptism of Jesus marks the occasion when Jesus, claimed as God's own, is equipped for ministry. Such is also true for us. In the words of the Great Commission, Jesus tells his followers that baptism is an invitation to share the good news of the gospel in our own neighbourhoods and throughout the nations, making disciples, baptizing others and teaching the way of Christ in word and action.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The Great Commission,
Matthew 28:19–20

1. In what ways can you share the grace and love of Christ with others?



2. How is your congregation engaged in mission and evangelism – in the local community and/or in the world? How does that mission extend the grace and love of Christ and help the family of God to grow?

Optional Exercises

For confirmation classes or new members:

- You may wish to review the vows a person takes at baptism/membership and discuss them.

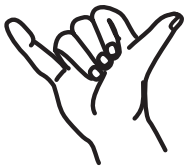
For sessions or other groups:

- Go into the sanctuary and discuss the important pieces of furniture in the sanctuary (the font, the communion table, the lectern and the pulpit). Where is the font located in the sanctuary? Does the placement of the of the chancel furniture speak of our Presbyterian ministry of Word and Sacraments? What other furnishings in the sanctuary declare our ministry of Word and Sacraments?

Optional exercise for all:

- Read the words of the hymn “Now there is no male or female” (#513, *Book of Praise*). What does each verse say to us about what baptism means? Sing the hymn.

Symbol Name Game





Communion:

A Feast of Grace

Communion is one of two sacraments practiced by Reformed Christians (baptism is the other). In this simplest of meals – a morsel of bread, a sip of juice or wine – there is a great feast of mystery and meaning.

Welcome and Prayer

View DVD

Gifts of God: The Sacraments (Part 2 – Communion: A Feast of Grace)

Sharing Your Story

- Think about the best meal you have ever had – a great feast, a rich banquet, a family dinner, or an intimate gathering with friends on a special occasion. What made this meal so special? What made it memorable?
- How do you “say grace”? How do you celebrate God’s gifts and life’s good moments at everyday meals? Are there special prayers or other practices in your personal life or family tradition?
- How is communion like an everyday meal or family dinner? How is it different?

Read together: *Living Faith* 7.7.1–7.7.5

The breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup is ... the Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist



The different names for this sacrament emphasize different facets of its meaning. “The Lord’s Supper” reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who institutes the sacrament, and it is his sacrifice we remember. “Communion” refers to our spiritual union in Christ; we are connected in faith and fellowship with God through Christ and Christians of every time and place. “Eucharist” is from a Greek word that means “thanksgiving”; we give thanks for the countless gifts of God, above all the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will enjoy in heaven (see Isaiah 25:6–9, Matthew 26:29, Revelation 19:9).

- What names for the sacrament are most commonly used in your place of worship? How do these terms connect (or not) with your experience of the sacrament?

1 Lord’s Supper – Remembering and Rehearsing

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

These words of the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth – echoing the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke¹ – are an integral and vital part of the Lord’s Supper. They recount the story of how Jesus established the sacrament, at a Passover meal with his disciples, and instructed them to keep this feast in his name.



Paul reminds us that whenever we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we proclaim the “mystery of faith” – that Jesus Christ lived, died and rose from the dead for our salvation and that he is coming again to reign in glory.

1. What does Jesus mean when he says the bread is his body, given for us?
2. What does Jesus mean when he says the cup is the new covenant in his blood?
3. What does Jesus want us to remember when he says, “Do this in remembrance of me”?
4. Why is it important to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis?

¹ See Matthew 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26 and Luke 22:14–23

2 Holy Communion – Unity and Community

For 2,000 years, Christians have celebrated communion, rejoicing in the presence of the risen Christ among us and our unity in his name. Christians in the Reformed tradition affirm the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of communion – not that the elements of bread and wine are *physically* transformed into Christ’s body and blood, but that Christ is really *spiritually* present (by the power of the Holy Spirit) whenever the church (the body of Christ) celebrates this feast in his name.

*Jesus said,
“I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me
will never be hungry,
and whoever believes
in me
will never be thirsty.”
(John 6:35)*

1. Think about other meals Jesus shared with his followers – the feeding of the multitude (John 6:1–15), the upper room (Matthew 26:26–29), breakfast on the beach (John 21:1–14); the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–34). What is the significance of Jesus’ followers recognizing him in the breaking of the bread?
2. Do you think of communion as a meal with the *risen* Christ? If not, how might that change your experience of the sacrament?
3. What does it mean for Christ to be spiritually present in communion? How is that different from other understandings of Christ’s presence in the sacrament?

3 Eucharist – Reconciliation and Thanksgiving

Communion as eucharist is a feast of thanksgiving. Reconciliation and thanksgiving are important themes in the celebration of the eucharist. In preparation to celebrate this sacrament, we confess our sins against God and one another, and seek to be at peace with God and our neighbours (see Matthew 5:23–24). We come to the table as we are, knowing Christ will always welcome us. Having been fed at Christ’s table, we are strengthened and renewed in the Spirit to work and pray for peace, justice and reconciliation in the world. We celebrate this holy meal as an offering of thanksgiving to God for the new life we have on earth and the new life promised to us in heaven. The church’s ministries of service, witness and outreach are all centred in the eucharist. We seek to feed others as we have been fed by Christ’s grace, and to welcome others as we have been welcomed in Christ’s love.

1. Think of a time when you made a serious mistake. Were you forgiven? What did it feel like?
2. In what ways can we offer God thanksgiving?
3. How have you been nourished by Christ and strengthened in the Spirit? How might you share that nourishment and strength with others?
4. Isaiah 25:6–9 describes the heavenly banquet all God’s children will enjoy. How is the eucharistic meal a foretaste of the life of the world to come?

Conclusion

The sacraments of baptism and communion are “gifts of God for the people of God.” God gives us these good and gracious gifts to celebrate and enjoy, but also to share with others. As Christ’s disciples, we are called to proclaim the good news of God’s saving power and love to the entire world. Through the sacraments, we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit and equipped for ministry in Christ’s name. The sacraments are God’s gifts to the church. They are “visible expressions of the Gospel given as means of entering and sustaining the Christian Life” (*Living Faith* 7.5.1).



1. How do the sacraments of baptism and communion help you live out your calling as Christ’s disciple in your daily life – in your private life, family life, workplace, with friends, and in your community?

If it is appropriate, conclude the session with the singing of a hymn and a celebration of the sacrament of holy communion.

Optional Exercises

The Great Prayer

Look at the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the communion liturgy. What are the things for which we thank God in this prayer? Why is it important to have an attitude of gratitude when we receive the sacrament?

Consider the different ways we can receive the sacrament of communion:

- Common cup – as the Anglicans do
- Intinction – dipping bread into the cup
- Individual cups – Presbyterian format

In some churches, the people take communion as it comes to them. In other churches, everyone waits until each element is served and then they all receive at the same time. They do this to symbolize their unity in Christ.

Discuss the way your congregation receives the sacrament compared to other methods of receiving the sacrament. Which one is meaningful to you and why?

Photolanguage

Lay out on a table pictures gathered from magazines, Internet and other sources (images depicting happiness, freedom, forgiveness, solitude, togetherness, abundance, family, hope, reconciliation, renewal, inspiration, plenty, safety, and so on). Each participant is invited to browse the table and pick one or two images that most represent what communion means to her or him.

Gather back into a large group or several smaller groups. Share with each other why you selected the image(s) you did.

Celebrating the Sacrament

If this study is going to be divided into several sessions, consider celebrating the Lord's Supper in different ways after each session. Here are some creative suggestions.

I. The Lord's Supper – a feast of remembrance

Have participants sit at a table with bread on a plate and a chalice with wine or grape juice (as per your congregational tradition). The leader begins by reading 1 Corinthians 11: 23: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread..." Going around the table, have people share in their own words what happened on that night. What happened? Who was there? What would it have felt like? Retell the story together, recreating the experience. When the story has been retold and people have shared its meaning, one person will be invited to read 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 or Matthew 26:20–30. The Lord's Supper is then shared by passing the bread and cup around the table. This simple celebration may be concluded with the following prayer:

Lord Jesus, on the night you were betrayed, you took bread and gave thanks to God. So, too, as we leave this place fed at your table, we give thanks as well. We remember with gratitude the great sacrifice you made on our behalf and the meal you shared with your disciples to give them hope. May this meal we have shared in remembrance of your saving act strengthen us to be your faithful disciples in a hurting world. Amen.

II. The Eucharist – a feast of thanksgiving

References such as *A Celtic Eucharist*, compiled by Brendan O'Malley and sold at The Book Room for under \$12, can be used as a guide to celebrating the sacrament in a unique way.

For Further Study

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