

Two Avenues of Grace

New Life by the Gospel of Grace

The Lord knows how difficult it is at times for us to believe in Him; how hard it can seem to only live by faith in His Word. We yearn for a “touch” from God; we want to see Him in the flesh. And He wants to meet with us! These two “avenues of grace” are His way of bringing invisible divine life into events of the material world. We make contact with Him through tangible means which are not only aids to our faith, but actually pathways for His life to enter and transform ours.

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Acts 2:37-38 ESV

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Corinthians 11:26 ESV

Two for the Journey

Tragically, the two activities that Jesus gave as tangible means of being united to Him have caused some of the most intense divisions between His followers. Let's don't let that happen for us. Keep in mind that they are sacred mysteries and stay humble. Participate in them with grateful wonder, press in to understand them, but always be willing to bow before mysteries that no one fully understands. Above all, be on guard against insisting on only one way of seeing them or doing them—your own. That has been the downfall of multitudes!



These two avenues of grace are called sacraments to indicate that they “make sacred” two ordinary things: in baptism, the water; with Holy Communion, the bread and wine. How that happens, exactly what it is that happens, and what has to be done for “it” to happen, I will happily leave to the scholars and theologians to debate among themselves. A good rule for walking gently with the Lord is, “Don't make anything harder than it has to be.” The hard part of the sacraments is understanding them with perfect knowledge. Good luck with that one! The easy part is doing them.

1) Baptism: Initiation

Baptism can be called the new convert's first step of obedience. It is a universal command of the gospel given by no less an authority than Jesus' hand-picked leader for the new movement. On the day of Pentecost when thousands cried out to be saved after hearing Peter preach his first sermon, he told them to “repent and be baptized.” In saying this Peter was being absolutely faithful to what Jesus commanded His disciples to do—make disciples and baptize them, beginning in Jerusalem. So, if we want to keep this simple, we need only ask two questions:

- 1) Do you want to be saved? Then, repent (be converted to faith in Christ) and be baptized.
- 2) Do you want to obey Jesus? Then, become a disciple and be baptized. I don't want to leave it there, but let's at least agree to begin there!

If you have become a Christian, then you are a convert and a disciple. A convert is one who has transferred allegiance; a disciple is one who is seeking to be trained in the ways of a master. Have you been baptized? That's your first step. Make no mistake about it, Jesus is the One putting it before you. Why? Don't insist on a definitive answer. Obedience isn't about you always knowing exactly why you are being led a certain way. That is not Jesus being in charge; that would still be your intellect and your will in command. It is amazing how many people buck at this. Don't let that be you!

Fortunately, most new converts are eager to be baptized. That is a true sign of the Holy Spirit working on the inside causing us to "will and to work for His good pleasure." In the Bible all it took was some water, a convert and someone willing to do the baptizing. Philip baptized a fresh convert by the side of a desert road. Paul baptized a whole family at night after being let out of jail. This was in the early days before churches organized formal ways of doing the sacraments. At the very least it demonstrates that "in a pinch" any way is better than no way. If you are in more ordinary circumstances, simply present yourself to be baptized at the local church you attend.

Explaining the Sign

Now, at last, for some explanations. Peter told the crowd to repent and be baptized "for the forgiveness of sins." Water baptism is an unmistakable sign of being washed or cleansed. Do we do it as a witness that we have already been washed by the Blood of Jesus (through our faith-conversion) or do we do it in order to be cleansed of sin? The texts are suggestive of both interpretations.

Paul gives us another image, that of being baptized into the death of Christ. His thought is characteristically deep. Baptism is "burial" of the old life that enables us to be raised into new life with Jesus. Is he speaking figuratively or literally? Are Paul's baptismal death and Peter's baptismal cleansing primarily a) genuine spiritual occurrences in their own right, b) outward signs of something faith accomplishes, c) witnesses to others? This is why it really helps to "embrace the Mystery" and live by simple faith!

2) Communion: Connection

Staying well connected to Jesus is practically the whole walk in a nutshell. Jesus is the Source and ultimate goal of our new life; He *is* the Way we follow, the Truth we believe, and the Life that we enjoy. He is the One rescuing us from the ocean of sin and self that ever seeks to drown us; He is also leading us to heaven and into a more heavenly life on earth. Of course, we want to stay closely connected to Him! Many things aid us in this, especially what we call [the "Big Five" Connectors](#): Bible, prayer, worship, fellowship and service.

One of the greatest connectors of all is Holy Communion. If baptism is the sacrament of initiation, communion is the sacrament for continuation. Through communion a grace is available to more intimately connect us with our Risen Lord. ("How is it available?" There you go

with those questions again!) What could be more intimate than somehow taking Jesus into our bodies? This already happened during the New Birth of course: Jesus now lives inside us through His indwelling Spirit. However, lest we forget, or become doubtful, here is a way given by the Lord of “proving” to us all over again—and again and again, as often as we may receive it—how willing He is to love us, forgive us, and live within us.

Divergence in Belief and Practice

Taking in the wide scope of present day church practice communion services range from being intimate gatherings to immense congregations; from brief moments of devotion to elaborate and lengthy ceremonies; from informal, spontaneous prayers to the recitation of ancient and prescribed liturgies. Speaking solely out of my own experience, I have met and missed the Lord in every kind of setting, but I have been met by Him far more often than not. Just as He says in His Word, He truly is present to commune with us. That leaves the door wide open for us to find the best way to commune with Him.

Just how Jesus is present with us through communion is a subject of tremendous curiosity. As is well known the Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine of communion become the real Presence of Christ—His actual Body and Blood. Jesus own words encourage this interpretation: "Take, eat; this is my body."

Most Protestant and Pentecostal denominations tend to see the bread and wine as mere symbols of Christ's presence, taken “in remembrance” of what He has done for us—a “memorial” service. Jesus' own words encourage this interpretation as well. Anglicans take a middle road, believing in a “real” Presence of Christ, but not a literal changing of the bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Jesus. For them the real Presence is primarily to be found in the changed lives of those who receive Him.

What All Hold in Common

The common element in all these different practices and beliefs is that the “elements” of communion—the bread and wine—become a graced means for the participants to draw closer to Jesus, be cleansed of sin, be reassured of acceptance, and experience the peace of His presence.

Much, much more can be said and experienced, but this is simply a primer to set you off on your journey of discovery with (let's hope) a balanced overview of the rich territory that lies before you. We are intended to feed on Christ, to drink Him in, to taste and see that He is good. Enjoy the Paschal feast!

Two More to Explore

Two Realms of Habitation It is hard enough learning how to live in one world, this one. Yet, our calling is to learn to live in two realms at once. It's no good saying you can't—God knows you can with His help. In fact you have already been “seated with Christ” in the heavenlies. You are in this world, but not of it: You are on pilgrimage through it looking for the “city not made with hands” which God is building with the new creations He is raising up.



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