



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is a sacrament for Lutherans?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Worship is more than words. When we gather for worship, we certainly use words in preaching and praying, in singing and giving thanks. The words we use matter profoundly (see also, [“How is language used in worship?”](#)). Yet we also enact rituals that involve all our senses (see also, [“How does worship involve all our senses?”](#)). Infants, children and adults become a part of the Christian community in Holy Baptism, a ritual of word and washing with water. Christians encounter Christ weekly not only in words, but also by Christ’s promise paired with sharing bread and wine in Holy Communion.

Worship Matters: An introduction to Worship, defines a sacrament in this way:

For Lutherans, a sacrament:

- is something Jesus commanded us to do;
- uses a physical element—something we can see, touch and sometimes taste; and
- is connected with God’s promise, the word of God, which gives faith.
(“Encountering God in the Sacraments,” p. 44).

We believe that God encounters us both in word (preaching, song, prayer) and sacrament. Lutherans have two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion (see related FAQs in the Resource list below for more information). When Lutherans refer to “the means of grace” they are referring to the gifts of word and sacrament. This term is explained in the ELCA’s set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*:

Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, this Word washes a people to be Christ’s own Body in the world. We have called this gift of Word and Sacrament by the name “the means of grace.” The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father. (Principle 1)

Perhaps the word “sacrament” is a daunting word to you. It has been a source of conflict among Christians over the centuries as they have tried to articulate exactly what is a sacrament and what isn’t. Contemporary theologians, especially Edward Schillebeeckx, have said that Christ is the “primordial sacrament.” As stated above, “the living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ...” In both Baptism and Communion, it is the whole Christ who encounters us. The sacraments are wonderful ways in which Christ is present to us.

Historically a sacrament was viewed as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof” (Anglican Catechism). Lutherans have traditionally tried for greater clarity by stating that a sacrament is an act that is commanded by Christ, uses a material or earthly element, and through connection with the Word is the bearer of God’s promise, as the definition above indicates. And Lutherans have quite clearly stated that using those criteria Holy Baptism and Holy Communion qualify as sacraments, and nothing else. (See also, *The Use of the Means of Grace*)

In recent years theologians and liturgical scholars have been working toward a richer and fuller understanding of sacraments. They have employed the best available biblical scholarship as the basis for expanding our understanding. The trend has been away from arguments about validity and efficacy and toward the mystery and joy of Christ’s presence. Instead of focusing on the “how, when and where” of the sacraments, the starting point has been Christ as the sacrament of God’s encounter with the world. One way that the sacraments can seem less daunting to us is to use terminology that connects these rituals with everyday life. For example, baptism is often referred to as “bath;” communion is called “meal.” Of course, baptism is a bath like no other and we would rarely consider one morsel of bread and a sip of wine a complete meal. But using these terms reminds us that, “in the extraordinary ordinariness of the sacraments, all our meals and living can be rightly understood as blessed by God.” (*Worship Matters*, p. 51). In celebrating the sacraments, we are reminded that God comes to us in very ordinary ways, but that every day, each moment, is lived in God.

While we will continue to explore what the sacraments mean for us through theological inquiry and study, it is in the regular pattern of sharing in the sacraments that we discover their centrality for our faith. In the sacraments we receive no less than the gift of Jesus Christ, signs of God’s mercy and forgiveness. As we celebrate them, we are marked and nourished as Christ’s body and strengthened for our life together.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↳ How can the centrality of baptism be renewed in our congregation?
- ↳ What are the practices for remembering and affirming baptism?
- ↳ How do we move to weekly communion?
- ↳ How do we use the body in worship?
- ↳ How does worship involve all our senses?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Lathrop, Gordon. *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds. *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 🎧 *Fed and Forgiven.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. A complete set of resources for leading children, youth, and adults into the sacrament of Holy Communion. Resources include a comprehensive leader guide, DVD, and age-appropriate learner resources.
- 📖 *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 Torvend, Samuel. *Holy meal: Opening the Gifts of Holy Communion – Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth. Christian Baptism in a Post-Christian Culture.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
- 📖 Luther, Martin. “The Large Catechism” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 379.

Revised January 2013

Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.