

# The Augsburg Confession

## Article 13

### The Sacraments

What is a sacrament? How many sacraments are there? When we study these questions, we must realize that the term “sacrament” is a man-made term. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin *sacramentum* which means *oath* or *rite*. The number of rites recognized as sacraments depends upon how one defines the term sacrament. This article deals with the definition of what a sacrament is, and as a result leads the way for a discussion on the number of sacraments (which is discussed in-depth in Article XIII of the Apology).

### Article XIII

In the Augsburg Confession the Lutheran Confessors stated: *It is taught among us that the sacraments were instituted not only to be signs by which people might be identified outwardly as Christians, but that they are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith. For this reason they require faith, and they are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith.*

### Not Only Outward Signs

The main purpose of this article was to put the teaching of the Lutherans in contrast to Ulrich Zwingli and his followers who taught that the sacraments were merely signs by which people identified themselves as Christians. Zwingli adamantly denied that the sacraments had any power to create or strengthen faith. He said: *“I know that all the sacraments are so far from conferring grace that they do not even convey or distribute it,”* and *“They are wrong, by the whole width of heaven, who think that sacraments have any cleansing power.”* This is the teaching of the majority of Reformed churches still today, who also deny the power of God's Word at work in the sacraments. Lutherans do not deny that the sacraments serve as outward signs which distinguish Christians from those around them, but insist that in addition to being outward signs they are also means by which God creates and strengthens faith. The idea that the sacraments *“are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith”* was a concept foreign to Zwinglian theology. The Lutherans taught that the sacraments are means of God's grace - instruments through which God

conveys to human beings the forgiveness of sins which Christ won for them on the cross:

***“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38);***

***“Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28).***

Zwingli argued that the Holy Spirit does not need a “vehicle” through which to convey God’s grace, but worked without means. We must understand that while it is not necessary for God to use such a means (since He is all-powerful), He has revealed through His Word that these are the means through which He has decided to distribute the forgiveness of sins won by Christ.

## **Definition of “Sacrament”**

Generally, we have defined the term sacrament in this way: A sacred act, instituted by Christ Himself, in which there are earthly elements connected to God’s Word, and through which God offers, gives and seals for us the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Based on this definition there are two rites which we call sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But the Roman Catholic Church had a somewhat different definition of the term sacrament. In the Catholic Catechism they define a sacrament as *“a visible sign which imparts grace to our soul.”* According to this definition they list seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Lord’s Supper, Penance, Extreme Unction (Last Rites), Ordination, and Marriage. Let’s consider each of these individually.

### **Baptism -**

There is no doubt that Baptism imparts grace to our soul. Jesus said: ***“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).***

Instituted by Christ; offers forgiveness; earthly element: water.

## **Confirmation -**

Though this can be beneficial in laying a solid foundation for a young person or adult, the practice of Confirmation is not spoken of anywhere in Scripture (The Catholic Catechism refers to Acts 8:14-17 as a Scriptural reference). Since the Word is used in the instruction of the confirmand it can be said to impart grace to our souls in that sense, but the Catholic church emphasizes the ceremony of the laying on of hands, and not the instruction as "Confirmation".

Not instituted by Christ; does not offer forgiveness; no earthly element.

## **Lord's Supper -**

Based on the words of Christ in the institution of the Lord's Supper we would readily agree that this rite also imparts grace to our soul. Jesus said: ***"Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).***

Instituted by Christ; offers forgiveness; earthly element: bread and wine.

## **Penance -**

This also is spoken of by Christ Himself as a means of imparting God's grace to sinners. Jesus said: ***"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).***

Instituted by Christ; offers forgiveness; no earthly element.

## **Extreme Unction -**

This practice is based on James 5:14-15: ***"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."***

Not instituted by Christ; offers forgiveness; earthly element: oil.

### **Ordination -**

The practice of “laying on of hands” is Biblical as found recorded in the book of Acts and Paul’s letters: **“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6)**. In a sense, through the ministry of the Word, this can be said to impart grace to souls.

Not instituted by Christ; does not offer forgiveness; no earthly element.

### **Marriage -**

Marriage, though a great blessing, is not said to impart God’s grace to us. If marriage were to be considered a sacrament, one could also consider prayer (as well as other rites) a sacrament as well.

Instituted by Christ; does not offer forgiveness; earthly element: rings(?).

### **Apology**

In the Apology the Lutherans state: *“If we define sacraments as ‘rites which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added,’ we can easily determine which are the sacraments in the strict sense... The genuine sacraments, therefore, are Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution (which is the sacrament of penitence), for these rites have the commandment of God and the promise of grace, which is the heart of the New Testament.”*