

**The Understanding of the Sacraments of  
First Church of the Nazarene Angeles City Congregants  
and Its Influence On Their Practice of These**

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The night before his suffering and death, Jesus instructed the apostles to remember him by eating bread and drinking wine. He even promised them that he would not partake in any of these elements until the coming of the kingdom of God. Approximately 43 days later, the risen Christ commanded the disciples to baptize new believers in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, leaving them a promise of everlasting communion. Sacraments have been a part of the church and at its heart since then, for this is where the promise of Jesus' accompaniment and return reside. But how does the body of Christ understand and practice the sacraments?

The Church of the Nazarene encourages its clergy to continually officiate these sacraments. It is printed in the *Manual* with a verbatim script to secure precision and unity in practice. I was born and raised in a local Church of the Nazarene in Angeles City, where I participated in the Last Supper multiple times and where I was baptized several years ago. Honestly, I did not know the significance and broader imagination of these sacraments. My participation in these had mainly aimed to concretize my faith and denominational affiliation. There were even times when I participated in the sacraments because I knew I had to do it. That is why, right now, I am blessed to explore this topic, for it has suppressed my ignorance and exposed the superficiality of my knowledge and my need for thoughtfulness in observance of these sacraments.

This paper discusses the significance of the Last Supper and water baptism (the two sacraments we embrace) in light of Wesleyan theology and John Wesley's Works, Letters, and Journals. Furthermore, this research will show the understanding of the congregants in the First Church of the Naz-

arene Angeles City (which I gathered through interviews with several people) about the sacraments and how they affect our treatment and celebration of them.

### I. Sacraments

Genesis 2 and 3 show several differences: 1) God showed himself to Adam to give him a command that required obedience; the serpent appeared in the garden to deceive Eve and lured her to disobey. 2) The LORD told Adam that he was “free to eat any tree of the garden” of Eden; the serpent gave an opposite statement to Eve to get her attention. 3) God pronounced death for disobedience; the serpent announced a divine-like life. This paradox of events boiled down to one result—God and humankind are separated because of the Fall. Thus, the human race, withdrawn from the sustainer of life, has been caught in the journey towards death, fueled by the disease of sin. Since the disease exists, what we need is healing! The sacraments are actually “healing encounters with God” where we are all invited! Our response to the Lord’s invitation aids us in being the humans he created us to be: those capable of exercising faith, charity, and willful submission.<sup>1</sup> Though sacraments are practiced in the church, Christians did not invent them; rather, they are the gift of God to believers, for this is where his “command and promise” are.<sup>2</sup> This is where the promise of the continuous presence of Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit is found, and this is where the promise of Jesus’ return is communicated.

When I asked a few local church members what a sacrament is, most just translated it into Filipino, which is *sakramento*. This word is familiar, but they do not clearly understand it except for the impression that it relates to sacredness, tradition, and Roman Catholicism. A sacrament is sacred because “it has been given by God” for “a sacred use.”<sup>3</sup> It is indeed also a

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<sup>1</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2017–2021* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship: God’s Invitation to Become Fully Human* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012), 151.

<sup>3</sup> James Nichols and William Nichols, trans., *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 2

tradition that has been observed from the primitive church to the contemporary church, and here in the Philippines, the word “sacrament” typically connotes Roman Catholicism. Few gave me any definition or understanding of it but only stated that the two Protestant sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism are practiced to remember Jesus Christ. If we check the etymology of the word “sacrament,” it is derived from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which refers to the money put in escrow, signifying the allegiance of a Roman soldier. The word “sacrament” may not be found anywhere in the original Greek manuscripts of the Bible, but the idea of promise and allegiance is well-captured by the word “sacrament.”<sup>4</sup> Since Jesus Christ promised faithfulness, in the same way, he calls us to put our faith in him in return through the practice of these sacraments.

The unfamiliarity with the word “sacrament” among my local church congregants resulted in a lack of complete appreciation, which is why the necessity of regular practice of these is not realized. Growing up in the church, I have noticed that we only observe the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper four times a year, every third month. Maybe one of the reasons behind this is that if we are going to do this regularly, we would seem and feel like Catholics, which we would never rather be. I remember when my late senior pastor explained to the congregation that he deemed it best for us to do the Last Supper occasionally to avoid over-familiarity. Therefore, an occasional celebration of it would be more special and meaningful. On the other hand, water baptism is only done once a year to solemnize the acceptance of new local church members.

Sacraments might seem traditional or “just another practice” in the eyes of many believers (treating them like a new song in the worship song lineup), but they are the external mark that a religious group is part of the body of Christ. Sacraments are the visible word of God, the counterpart of the audible word of the LORD (in the form of preaching and the public

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(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 435.

<sup>4</sup> Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1991), 86.

reading of the Bible).<sup>5</sup> In addition, James Arminius considered sacraments as the “signs or marks which God appends to his word, and by which he seals and confirms the faith which has been produced in the minds of his covenant people.” This shows how important it is to preserve and practice the sacraments, for these are used to confirm “the gracious promise proposed in his word,” that it might be bound to us so that we can perform our Christian duties. Arminius also clarifies that the sacraments are exclusive to “whom God has entered into covenant,” meaning all believers.<sup>6</sup>

John Wesley believed that the aim of the sacraments is for salvation by which we are justified, sanctified, and united with God and other believers in love and holiness. Based on the teaching of the Church of England, he furthermore defined a sacrament as “an outward sign of inward grace,” wherein what we visibly do in the Lord’s Supper and Baptism is an indication of what already happened and of what will happen. Grace has already given to us and done something in us and will be doing something in our stead, which is why we celebrate it! Through these sacraments, we can participate in a God-human interaction, but it does not mean that there is magic in the water, bread, and wine that enables us to commune with God. This is emphasized in John Wesley’s sermon “The Means of Grace,” in which he states that the elements that we are using are only “ordinary channels” in which God communicates to humankind his “preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace” because it is Jesus alone who is the only means of grace.<sup>7</sup> The Lord’s Supper and baptism might be using different symbols, but these two come hand-in-hand where the function of baptism is to “commence what the Lord’s Supper . . . ordained to preserve and develop: a life in faith and holiness.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter H. Van Ness, “The Proclaimed and Visible Word,” *Word and World* 7, no. 2 (1987): 185–91.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, *Arminius*, 435–36.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” sec. 2, *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 1, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 381–382.

<sup>8</sup> Robert K. Martin, “Toward a Wesleyan Sacramental Ecclesiology,”

## II. The Lord's Supper

In my interview with some congregants in my local church, all of them quoted Luke 22:19, where Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me”; thus, they firmly believe that we observe the Lord's Supper to remember the suffering of Jesus on his way to Calvary and his sacrifice at the cross. With this, we unknowingly take Ulrich Zwingli's memorialist view, where we put our attention on the atoning gift of God in Christ realized in the crucifixion. And of this, we are thankful and want to remember it most thoughtfully and sincerely. None of my respondents, not even those with a Roman Catholic background, mentioned anything about transubstantiation; likewise, the consubstantiation view was not highlighted.

In the letters of Susanna and John Wesley to each other, it is interesting that both did not affirm transubstantiation or consubstantiation. Still, both believed that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are present in the Lord's Supper to “impart the benefits” of Jesus' death to “worthy receivers,” for Christ has already ascended into the heavens, which is why he is not actually present in or around the elements. Regarding the method of impartation of God's grace to commendable believers, both Susanna and John Wesley declared it to be a “mystery” because “Who can account for the operation of God's Holy Spirit?”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, John Wesley was asked why he did not accept the literal idea of Jesus' words when he said in Mark 14:22–24, “This is my body . . . this is my blood.” Wesley replied that it would be “grossly absurd, to suppose that Christ speaks of what he then held in his hands as his real, natural body” where Jesus Christ only used “forms of speech.”<sup>10</sup>

During the probing, one of my respondents said, “If the bread that Christ broke and distributed to his disciples was his actual body, and if the

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*Ecclesiology* 9, no. 1 (2013): 26–29.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *Letters I (1721–1739)*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 25, *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 326–28.

<sup>10</sup> Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), 61.

blood he blessed is his actual blood, then the disciples were cannibals.” Sarcastic as it may seem, he had a point. “Besides, drinking his blood ought not to be done.” That is why wine is appropriate as the sign of Jesus’s blood.<sup>11</sup> He added, “It would also mean, then, that every time there are leftovers after each Eucharist, there are Jesus’ spare body parts and blood.” In response to this, according to Ole Borgen, when John Wesley said that Jesus Christ’s “divinity” is present in the Lord’s Supper, it does not mean that Christ is bonded organically to the elements, thus implying that we need God to consecrate the elements for these to be means of grace. This would prevent anyone from “the dangers of con- or transubstantiation.”<sup>12</sup> With this proposition, Rob Staples writes that we do not need to keep the leftover elements “as if they were sacred objects” for the next observation of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout his three-year ministry, Jesus claimed that the Father sent him out of great universal love so that all who put their faith in him will forever live (John 3:16). One of the respondents said that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is the way to support and believe this claim of Jesus. As we observe this sacrament, we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood is sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins (Eph 1:7). My respondent added, “If anyone is bored or doubtful of Jesus’ return, partake of the communion.” In his sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion,” John Wesley said that it is “strange” if a godly person disregards the importance of constantly partaking in the elements because of unworthiness in eating and drinking them. This practice is based on Paul’s warning to the Corinthian church when the believers there started to partake of the elements like a common meal. In response, John Wesley stated that it is more dangerous if a believer would “not eat or drink at all.”

But on the other hand, my church mates espoused the warning of Paul (which is supposedly designated for the Corinthian believer), which is why

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<sup>11</sup> Nichols, *Arminius*, 439–40.

<sup>12</sup> Borgen, *John Wesley*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Staples, *Outward Sign*, 227.

they make sure they do not take the elements “unworthily” because if so, there would not be any cleansing effect in the sacrament. Aside from the possibility of nonparticipation in the sacrament, this view implies that they consider the bread and wine to be the substance that can make them clean. This idea has the wrong impression that the bread and the wine are magical elements instead of religious means that can lead to the restoration of our “relationship to God.”<sup>14</sup> Brent Peterson writes, “The Lord’s Supper is a primary sacrament for people becoming more fully human, for the further healing of creation, and for the further coming of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we should understand that Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27 is given for a specific reason to a particular audience. We then should be reminded of John Wesley’s teaching that sacraments are God’s means of grace; therefore, healing from the disease of sin and sanctification can be received by partaking in the elements of the Lord’s Supper.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of God’s grace communicated through the wine and the bread depends not on our holiness but on the LORD’s mercy and unwavering will to make us holy. In his sermon, Wesley strongly declared that receiving the Lord’s Supper is a “duty of every Christian” because it is “a plain command of Christ.” Doing so has great advantages: “the forgiveness of our past sins” and the “strengthening and refreshing of our souls” to overcome temptations that lurk around like a hungry predator waiting for the kill.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Baptism

*Paglubog sa tubig*, or water immersion, is the image my respondents gave me after asking how they understand baptism. Perhaps this is because we have never done sprinkling or pouring in our baptismal service (as far as I

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<sup>14</sup> Egil Grislis, “Wesleyan Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” *Duke Divinity School Bulletin* 28, no. 2 (1963): 99.

<sup>15</sup> Peterson, *Created to Worship*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> John Wesley, *John Wesley*, on the sermon “The Duty of Constant Communion,” ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 335.

know). Plus, we have a nice nearby swimming pool where we can conduct our yearly water baptism. In John Wesley's sermon "On Baptism," he said that "washing, dipping, or sprinkling" in water baptism is acceptable because the Bible did not give any specific way to baptize new believers in the name of the Trinity. Baptism for John Wesley is a sacrament established by Jesus Christ himself that "enters us into covenant with God." It bears the benefit of the "washing away . . . [of our] guilt of original sin by the application of the merits of Christ's death." This sacrament includes the promise of Jesus that he will accompany the disciples "to the end of the age," as it says in Matthew 28:20.

Wesley asked, "Who are the proper subjects of baptism? Grown persons only, or infants also?"<sup>17</sup> This is never a subject matter for the congregants that I questioned, for they firmly believe that, as a Protestant church, we should never, ever baptize children who are under twelve years old. I noticed that they did not know (or deny?) that our denominational *Manual* offers infant baptism as an option to conduct "upon request of parents or guardians who shall give assurance for them of necessary Christian training,"<sup>18</sup> alongside infant dedication (which they consider to be more biblical and valid). Most of them were surprised when I told them this because it has been a Filipino-Christian worldview that Roman Catholics exclusively conduct infant baptism.

Wesley strongly advocates infant baptism in his sermon because 1) infants are accountable for original sin and must be washed from it. 2) Infants are "capable of making a covenant," namely the "evangelical covenant" based on Deuteronomy 29:10–13 that shows a citywide invitation that extends even to the "little children" for an all-encompassing renewal of the covenant with God (so that the whole Israel may be established as God's people again). 3) Infant baptism is what replaced circumcision for the forgiveness of sins and regeneration for babies who are diseased with Adamic sin. That is why the "Christian parents have the duty to baptize children

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley, "On Baptism," 324.

<sup>18</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *Manual*, 34.

according to God's command but should not worry about their fate should they die unbaptized"<sup>19</sup> since they are graced with the "universal atonement of Christ" that has negated the "guilt of Adam's sin . . . as soon as they are sent into the world" by Jesus Christ's righteousness.<sup>20</sup> 4) Infants should "come to Christ," based on Luke 18:15–17.

Wesley himself required Methodist preachers to spend an hour with the children so they might be led to Jesus. If a preacher claims he has no talent in ministering to children, he is not called to be a Methodist preacher.<sup>21</sup> Further, Wesley encouraged that we should continually bring little children to Christ through baptism since this has been "the general practice of the Christian Church in all places and all ages . . . the practice of the apostles . . . [and of] Christ." As a son of an Anglican clergyman, Wesley himself was baptized as an infant and believed that he did not lose the "washing of the Holy Ghost" until he was ten due to his limit in understanding as a young boy, his negligence of outward religious duties, and committing "outward sins." Despite his continuous religious practice of a certain degree of piety, interest in religion, reading the Bible, attending church services, prayer, and communion, he knew that he needed to "enter into holy orders" (where his father pushed him), which directed him to Thomas Kempis' book *Christian Pattern*.<sup>22</sup>

Richard Heitzenrater states, "Wesley was convinced that any grace received by an infant at baptism would soon be sinned away, and the child would stand in need of God's forgiveness again." That is why in the Methodist societies, revivals were held that transformed the lives of the young

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<sup>19</sup>Barbara Pitkin, "The Heritage of the Lord: Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 182.

<sup>20</sup> Staples, *Outward Sign*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 199.

<sup>22</sup> John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries I (1735–1738)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 18, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 242–43.

people so they “became models for the adults.”<sup>23</sup> Wesley concluded his sermon by answering the objections he received in practicing infant baptism.<sup>24</sup> In Wesley’s apology and careful articulation, God did not require “repentance and faith” before the circumcision of an eight-day-old baby boy. Infant baptism is not contrary to the commandment of Jesus. Infant baptism does not require the “repentance and faith” of the infant preceding the sacrament. Wesleyan’s stance could be challenged by a person influenced by Anabaptists who understood “baptism as a confirmation of a prior experience of faith, [which] diminished the importance of baptism as the place where the one baptized dies and is born again, and the experience out of which faith is born and nurtured.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, with regards to the “cognitive abilities that are seemingly necessary for this experience,” objections to the baptism of infants (who are incapable of understanding anything) were raised by not only my church mates but also John Wesley’s contemporaries, both his “allies and opponents.” In their protests, John Wesley replied: “Neither can we comprehend how it is wrought in a person of riper years.” With this being said, we can see the obvious influence of his doctrine regarding prevenient grace wherein even though we cannot understand the condescending and mysterious benefits and operations of grace towards us, the LORD does not cease nor hesitate to continue working in us. Hence, infant baptism is God’s way of recreating us into his image “at the earliest possible moment in our lives.”<sup>26</sup>

When I asked my church people about the meaning of baptism in our Christian Formation, they all quoted Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” One of my respondents said that the

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<sup>23</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 294–96.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley, *John*, “On Baptism,” 324–30.

<sup>25</sup> Pitkin, *The Heritage of the Lord*, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen G. Blakemore, “By the Spirit through the Water: John Wesley’s ‘Evangelical’ Theology of Infant Baptism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2 (1996): 179–80.

sacrament of baptism is a “proof of knowledge of the need of God,” which is also the “first step to obedience.” In regards to this, in his sermon “The New Birth,” Wesley firmly clarified that “the new birth is not the same thing with baptism, so it does not always accompany baptism; they do not constantly go together. A man may possibly be ‘born of water,’ and yet not be ‘born of the Spirit.’”<sup>27</sup> Although baptism is where a believer renounces the influence of Satan in his life as well as the time when he or she is “buried with Christ and, by the power of God, he [or she] rises again to a new life of holiness,” it does not automatically imply that new birth is present at baptism for it might precede or proceed the sacrament.<sup>28</sup>

The understanding of my respondents may not perfectly fit the above explanation of John Wesley, but in some sense, they understand the importance of baptism for our Christian formation. They understand that the baptism of the believer is a sign of active response to the grace of God and openness to the help of the local Christian community. The old sinful life is to be thrown away to embrace the righteousness found in Christ. Moreover, they understand that the baptized has the following responsibilities: 1) to practice Christlikeness “by the example of their lives and speech”; 2) to use the Scriptures so that he or she could “repent, receive forgiveness, and to grow in faith and good works”; and 3) to express his or her “oneness in Christ” by attending communal worship “for unity in all areas of faith.”<sup>29</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

It is noticeable that the understanding of the local congregants in my local church regarding sacraments is lacking because we do not have any current specialized classes that are an avenue of learning. During the time of my late senior pastor, he taught a class from January to May of each year that focused on the sacrament. There was no concern about my late pastor’s

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<sup>27</sup> Wesley, Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” *Works*, 2:197.

<sup>28</sup> Borgen, *John Wesley*, 235.

<sup>29</sup> David Schneider, “Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the Philippine Reach Agreement On Baptism,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 41, no. 7 (1970): 422.

competency in teaching the class. It was just that only a handful of congregants were interested because they considered the lessons that could be learned in class about sacraments as only extra knowledge and not essential knowledge. I firmly believe that every congregant of the Church of the Nazarene Angeles City needs a profound understanding of the sacraments so that their experience of the Lord's Supper could be a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and the event of Baptism could be a candid experience of reception to the family of God.

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