

[SACRAMENTS](#)

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A sacrament (from the Latin *sacramentum*) is defined in Protestantism as visible sign of an inward [GRACE](#). Traditionally sacraments denote those rites which the church understands to be “means of grace” for the recipient. Protestant churches have recognized two such rites, both of which are explicitly ordained by Christ in the New Testament: [BAPTISM](#) and the [LORD'S SUPPER](#) (or Eucharist or Holy Communion). In this, they rejected the Catholic affirmation of seven sacraments, insisting that a sacrament required the specific institution by Jesus and the promise of the conveyance of grace. Protestant churches affirming the former, but not the latter, prefer the term “ordinance.”

Seeking to correct a perceived overemphasis on the externality of sacramental performance in the medieval Catholic church, the reformers of the sixteenth century stressed the [FAITH](#) of the believer as a prerequisite for sacramental efficacy. Thus the Protestant doctrine of the sacraments came to be regarded as a corollary of the doctrine of [JUSTIFICATION](#) by faith alone. While [MARTIN LUTHER](#) and [JOHN CALVIN](#) retained the sacraments as a visible means of grace, and continued to emphasize the ecclesial significance of their outward practice, they placed preeminent importance on the sacraments' role in the strengthening of the faith of the believer. [HULDRYCH ZWINGLI](#) sought to redefine a “sacrament” as an “oath” between the believer and God, and as a public demonstration of the believer's allegiance to the church.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with their stress on interior faith had several lasting effects on Protestant sacramental practice, ranging from significant changes (such as the shift from infant to adult believer's baptism by the [BAPTISTS](#)) to a moderation of the ceremonious aspects of sacramental worship ([PURITANISM](#) and [PIETISM](#)). In some cases, the result was the elimination of sacramental ceremony from the liturgical order altogether (see [FRIENDS, SOCIETY OF](#)). While some countercurrent sacramental movements arose within Protestantism, such as the largely communal practices of early [METHODISM](#), and although the aesthetic concerns of [ROMANTICISM](#) provided a catalyst for the renewal of ceremony in Protestantism, the individual notion of sacramental [WORSHIP](#) remained pervasive through the nineteenth century.

The ecumenical movement of the twentieth century restored the importance of the communal church to Protestant sacramental worship. United by the perceived common mission of all Christians in the world, churches (both Protestant and Catholic) witnessed remarkable convergence in their understanding and use of the sacraments, especially as attested to in the [WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES](#) report on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. These developments have done much to address the practical concerns of sacramental worship, but doctrinal divergences, both within Protestantism and between Protestants and Catholics, remain points of serious contention. This is due in large part to the fact that questions of practice have not as readily led Protestant theologians to propose the sacraments themselves as doctrinal loci. Where such work has occurred, the way forward appears to depend on the extent to which the role that the sacraments played in constituting the liturgical life of the church in the early [REFORMATION](#) could be recovered today.

See also [Catholicism, Protestant Reactions; Ecumenism](#)

References and Further Reading

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