

# THE DOCTRINE OF SACRAMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

African Divine Church suffers identity crisis and anxiety when her members come into contact with churches which observe sacraments. The church is defined in negative terms as not being a true Christian church, not following the commands of Jesus Christ, and that the members are spiritually impoverished. What this research has done therefore, is to construct a pneumatic sacramental theology for African Divine Church which is faithful to the universal church and scripture. This is born from the fact that a rich and relevant theology is an important aspect in the growth of the church. The writer has also employed a conversational model between African Divine Church and her critics, which is aimed at cultivating understanding for ecumenical purpose, expression of faith, and the experiences with the Holy Spirit. It is realized that both material sacraments and pneumatic sacraments are valid and authentic and this calls for embracing unity in diversity instead of emphasizing uniformity.

**Keywords: Material Sacraments, Pneumatic Sacraments and Doctrine**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of sacraments has gone through developments throughout history, which are full of agreements and disagreements. African Divine Church also has different interpretation of sacramental theology. The literature has been reviewed on the development of Sacramental theology, and presented a synthesis of the same. It is a library research which employs historical-critical and synthetic methodology.

### 1.1 Notion of Sacraments

Martos, J. informs us that the term sacrament comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. He says that in the pre-Christian times a *sacramentum* was a pledge of money or property which was deposited in a temple by parties to a lawsuit or contract, and which is forfeited by the one who lost the suit or broke the contract. It later came to mean an oath of allegiance made by soldiers to their commander and the gods of Rome.

In either case, the *sacramentum* involved a religious ceremony in a sacred place (Martos, 1981:11). In Christianity, McGrath, A., writes that the word sacrament comes from the Latin term *sacramentum*, meaning “something which is consecrated” and has to refer to a series of church rites or clerical actions which are regarded as having special spiritual qualities, such as the ability to convey the grace of God (McGrath, 1999: 169).

Rahner, K. et al show that in the church theology, Sacraments are the seven vital actions of the church in its liturgy which are efficacious for salvation (Rahner et al, 1970:22). He says that development of sacramental theology was mainly stimulated by questions of Soteriology (ibid.). Ecclesiastically speaking, Payne, J.B. says that the word *sacramentum* has come to refer to a sensible sign through which an insensible grace congruent with the sign is infused (Payne, 1970: 97).

It is clear that development of theology of sacraments was stimulated by the question of Soteriology. The term sacrament was borrowed from Latin and used in Christian theology to mean a series of rites or clerical actions, which had spiritual benefit like conveying the grace of God.

## 2. SACRAMENTS IN THE BIBLE

### 2.1 Sacraments in the Old Testament

According to Martos, Jews had many sacramental aspects like rituals, objects, places, and persons (Martos, 1981:33). The books of the law were filled with prescriptions about rituals of worship, purification, ordination, and so on. These rituals required the use of things which were “sacred unto the Lord” such as the temple, animals and utensils for sacrifices, the ark with its tablets, or holy vessels and oils. Moreover, the Holy of Holies and Mount Sinai were sacred places where Yahweh had revealed himself (ibid.). Rahner, K. writes, “The Old Testament sacraments were actualized at each moment for Israel or the individual Israelites, in memory, hope and salutary efficaciousness, the provisional self-communication of God displayed in the saving works of God, for example, in the liberation from Egypt” (Rahner, 1970:383).

According to Vorgrimler, H., classical sacramental theology recognized the existence of sacraments in the narrower sense and called them “natural sacraments” or “Old Testament Sacraments.” (Vorgrimler, 1992:15). He says that, in identifying sacraments in Israel before Jesus Christ, Christian theology concentrated narrowly on institutionalized rites and objects. Circumcision was seen as a mark of the covenant and sign of salvation (ibid.).

Gavin, F., informs that Jews did not have systematic theological formulation of sacraments as it is in Christian theology (Gavin, 1928:5). He says that the Christian dualistic thinking of outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace is in the realm of non-Jewish thinking, which is not dualistic (ibid, 7). Gavin argues that in the Old Testament, the utilization of material means to initiate, achieve, reconstitute, or maintain the proper relationship between God and man, a

believe that “sin” can be done away by material means, the grace at meals, proselyzation, and many others are sacramental (ibid, 24). He writes, “The phraseology of the definition of sacraments is un-Jewish but all the essential factors which that definition comprises are present in Judaism” (ibid).

As discussed above, the Old Testament has sacramental rituals. These rituals were enacted for various reasons like reconciling people to God, maintaining relationship between people, and to proselyte non-Jewish converts. In these circumstances, material elements were employed

## 2.2 Sacrament in the New Testament

According to Vorgrimler, New Testament communities has two-fold basis in the concept of sacraments. On one hand, there are witnesses of a manifold liturgical and ritual praxis although with different layers of meaning: baptism and Eucharist were primary, but we also have mention of penitential practice, the imposition of hands, and anointing (Vorgrimler, 1992:43). However, the New Testament has no single unified term and common theology for these different practices (ibid.). Moreover, we have the concept of *mysterion*, which encompasses the sacramental economy of salvation and it contains Jesus Christ, the church, and the totality of their life (ibid, 44).

Martos writes that the earliest records of Christian community are the letters of Paul to various churches between A.D 50 and A.D 65. These letters mentions various sacramental actions performed by the first Christians, but there is no single general word to speak about them. These were baptism, laying of hands, and sharing of the Lord’s Supper (Martos, 1981:36). There were also charismatic sacraments like tongues and prophecy which were not specifically rituals even though they probably followed a styled pattern during community worship. Each of them had simply its own name but no generic name for all of them (ibid.).

Later, the Greek-speaking Christians began to speak of their sacramental rituals as “mysteries,” borrowing the term from the pagan mysteries (ibid, 39). In Paul’s letters *mysterion* meant something which is hidden like the wisdom of God, which was hidden from the worldly but revealed to those who are spiritual (1Cor. 2:7-13) (ibid.). Martos says that the message that Paul preaches is a mystery since it was hidden from previous generations (Col.1:26-27) (ibid.). Basically that message is God’s secret plan of salvation (Eph. 9-10), but more specifically it is the mystery of Christ which was hidden but now has been made known through the spirit (Eph. 3:3-6) (ibid.). Moreover, early Christians did not have rites, but there were things connected with their newly found faith which they repeated in roughly the same manner each time like eating a common meal, sharing bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus (ibid.). Martos argues that these actions were sacramental because they symbolized invisible realities and mysteries psychologically and socially (ibid.).

Having looked at sacraments in the New Testament, it is clear that early Christians had some form of rituals which were performed repeatedly but there was no unified term or common theology for them. Also, there were non-ritualistic acts like charismatic spiritual gifts which followed a pattern of style during communal worship. These acts were sacramental in nature. We also have the notion of *mysterion*, which is connected to theology of salvation.

### 3. SACRAMENTS IN THE CHURCH

#### 3.1 St. Augustine and Sacraments

Fitzgerald, A., points out that Augustine inherited the term *sacramentum* from Tertullian and Cyprian but he redefined it as a symbol or sacred sign and uses the term with great deal of diversity to identify manifestations of divine presence. Augustine uses the word for objects, events, and for Christ himself (Fitzgerald, 1999:741). Augustine's theological reflections of sacraments as signs operate within a platonic conceptual framework which understands the material, visible world to be a manifestation of a deeper inner reality (ibid.). Also, the scripture is manifested to humanity in sign and symbol, hence, Augustine applies the term *sacramentum* to diverse and sometimes unspecified ways to a large number of objects, events, and rituals (ibid, 742). According to Martos, Augustine understands a *sacramentum* as a sign of a sacred thing, hence his sacraments were infinite (Martos, 1981:59).

From Augustine, it is clear that a sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing, which manifest a deeper inner reality. Everything in creation is a sacrament; hence, he has no specified number of sacraments. Also, the word and Christ Himself are sacraments.

#### 3.2 St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Aquinas' argues that sacraments are connected to the death of Christ which is the universal cause of human salvation. He says, "Since a universal cause must be applied singly to each of its effects, it was necessary to show men some remedies through which the benefits of Christ's death could somehow be conjoined to them." (Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 4, 56:1). These remedies, according to Aquinas, had to be handed on with some visible signs (ibid, 56:2). For him, humanity grasps the spiritual and intelligible naturally through senses. Therefore, spiritual remedies had to be given to men under sensible signs (ibid, 56:3).

Moreover, Aquinas argues that instruments must be proportioned to their first cause. The first and universal cause of human salvation is the incarnate word. So, harmoniously the remedies by which the power of the universal cause reaches men had a likeness to that cause; that is, the divine power operates in them under visible signs (ibid, 56:4). He says that since man fell into sin by clinging unduly to visible things, it was fitting that through the visible things themselves the remedies of salvation be applied to men (ibid, 56:5). Consequently, visible and bodily things serve spiritual salvation, since they are the instruments of a God who was made flesh and suffered. But the instruments do not operate by the power of their nature, but by the power of their principal agent. The spiritual salvation is worked by Christ institution (ibid, 56:7). Looking at St. Aquinas understanding of sacraments, it is clearly seen that for him sacraments are salvific. The fallen humanity cannot perceive the spiritual realities without material elements. However, if sacraments serve the purpose of salvation, then it can be concluded that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross was not enough for the salvation of humankind.

#### 3.3 The Reformers and the Sacraments

Migliore, D., points out that in the Middle Ages, the number of sacraments varied widely. Since the thirteenth century, their number has been set at seven in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick (Migliore, 1991:212). Migliore adds that the Reformers reduced these sacraments to two,

that is, baptism and the Lord's Supper, arguing that sacraments were to be limited to those practices that were instituted by Christ and Apostles (ibid.). He says that Reformers emphasized two basic points: The inseparability of word and sacrament and the importance in both word and sacrament of the working of the Holy Spirit and believers' faithful response (ibid.). Hastings, A. et al says that Reformers read New Testament and could only see baptism and Eucharist as associated with the actual words of Christ (Hastings et al, 2000:635).

According to Vorgrimler, Reformers sacramental theology was mainly governed by their theology of the word of God. For them, the proclamation of the word of God activates the presence of Jesus Christ within the community and in individual believers. So, sacrament as "visible word," is part of the word proclaimed (Vorgrimler, 1992:57). It can also be called an "external sign of God's grace" or "sealing in the Holy Spirit (ibid.). Vorgrimler continues to say that for Reformers, the saving content of word and sacrament is identical, and is distinguished only on regard to the way in which it is apprehended and to the manner by which it produces its effects: the word seeks to awaken faith in itself, while the sacrament is intended to strengthen the already awakened faith in the word (ibid.).

Therefore, for Reformers there are only two sacraments: Lord's Supper and Baptism. These are believed to be instituted by Christ. They emphasize the relationship between word and sacrament, the working of the Holy Spirit and believers' response in faith. Word and Sacrament are external signs of God's grace. The word prepares a way for the operation of sacramental action.

#### **4. SYNTHESIS OF THE DOCTRINE OF SACRAMENTS**

Looking at sacramental theology from different perspectives, it is agreed that sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace. On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas argued that sacraments are necessary for salvation.

St. Aquinas' emphases on material elements pose a danger of overreliance on them. Payne, J.B writes that Erasmus was very critical of an external, formalistic sacramentalism and advocated for a spiritual as over and against a physical participation in the sacraments (Payne, 1970:101). Erasmus tries to imply that the invisible element of sacrament is the most excellent than the visible. At this point the researcher poses a question: If the invisible element of sacrament is the most excellent, is it only achieved through what is visible?

It is observed that the concept of sacrament went through developments over years. These developments were as a result of experience within the Christian faith. Martos points out that there is no direct evidence that Jesus of Nazareth left his companions with a well-defined and complete set of sacramental rituals but the church developed sacramental rituals as a result of experience and the world around them (Martos, 1981:31). Christians believed that sacraments were instituted by Christ. On this claim, Healey, F.G., informs that the mainstream of Christian tradition agree in affirming the Dominical Institution of two sacraments. However, he argues that there are difficulties in proving from the scriptures that Christ gave the sacraments to his church as well as in reaching an agreement on their number (Healey, 1967:60). In fact, Healey shows that the Dominical Institution is interpreted in more than one way. It may be taken to mean the Lord's providing, or commanding, or commending (ibid.). At this point, three questions arise:

- (1) If there are difficulties to prove that Christ gave the sacraments to the church, is there certainty that he fixed what was to be the sacramental signs?
- (2) Is the Real Presence of Christ in the Christian meetings only realized through material elements?
- (3) Does faith only rely on material elements to perceive divine and invisible realities?

Moreover, the notion of sacraments as visible signs of invisible grace has dominated sacramental theology.

But it is noted that the emphasis has been on Christology. Though the Holy Spirit is given a mention, its role in the efficacy and realization of sacraments has not received the degree of sustained treatment. Madathummuriyil J.D. observes that there has been a shift in systematic theology in general and the sacramental theology in particular. He says that there is a renewed interest in the theology of the Holy Spirit. The so-called “forgetfulness of the Holy Spirit” (*Geistvergessenheit*) in Western theology has been overcome, and the West have accepted the significance of Pneumatology. Pneumatology is no longer considered to be inferior or an appendage to other branches of theology. Madathummuriyil proposes that this new awakening in Pneumatology calls for reinterpreting the understanding of the efficacy of the sacraments from a Pneumatological perspective (<http://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/>).

Migliore argues that the neglect and suspicion of pneumatology has damaging effects on both Christian life and theology (Migliore, 1991:166). On the part of sacraments, Migliore says that they degenerate into almost magical rites under the control of a clerical elite (*ibid.*). Similarly, Badcock, G.D. argues that there is a pronounced pneumatological deficit in Christian theology over against the enormous elaboration of Christology (Badcock, 1997:1). He writes, “Where pneumatological reality of faith as lived is not taken up into theology, then life itself is robbed of theological depth” (*ibid.*, 2). He proposes that theological reflection is to be spiritually deepened and also Christian spirituality to be deepened by theological reflection (*ibid.*, 4).

Now that the Holy Spirit has found its rightful place in the Christian theology, does stress on material elements as the only channels of God’s grace do justice to the work of the Holy Spirit? Sacraments are defined as visible signs of invisible grace. Because sacraments are recognized as mysteries, there are doubts and difficulties that cannot be avoided, hence diversities in sacramental theology. Re-awakening of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit demands a reinterpretation of the doctrine of sacraments. This discussion lays a foundation for constructing a pneumatic sacramental theology for African Divine Church and engagement in dialogue with her critics.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, it has been noted that the grace of God is universal. It is the unearned and undeserved gift of God which is available to all believers in their sinful state to strengthen and awaken them to respond to God in obedience. This grace is connected to Soteriology, which is also universal. The embodiment of this grace is Jesus Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the universal grace of God removes sin and renews humanity to be conformed to Christ, which means conformity to the image of God. Hence, the grace of God cannot be confined to any particular Christian community or tradition. If it happens like that, then God’s goodness, mercy, love and justice must be put to question.

Secondly, God uses both material and non-material channels to convey his grace to believers. God’s-self communication both in the Old Testament and New Testament occurs in unlimited

ways. Because God's grace comes with sacramental signs and not in sacramental signs, it is indispensable that God's grace can impact the souls of believers without necessarily making use of material channels. The Holy Spirit operation can make use of material channels or impact the souls of believers directly. Believers are assured that grace has been conferred to them, when the Spirit bears witness with their spirit that they are the children of God.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit makes believers to participate in the pneumatic ritual oblation in the immanent trinity. In this manner, believers receive graces in fullness. Their faith is awakened, hope is strengthened, they share in the love of God, and they are regenerated and sustained. Now, if God's grace is universal, and that God communicates his grace to us by either material channels or pneumatic categories, then both categories are valid and authentic. Overemphasizing one category and demeaning or refuting the other is limiting the operation of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. God reveals himself to people according to their level of understanding. Also, faith as an experience of God, which calls for response in trust and obedience is not static. It enlarges the understanding of Christian beliefs and can even modify them, as their understanding of God's-self-revelation progresses.

Therefore, in summary one can argue that since the grace flows from God and to whomsoever He chooses, that is, it is not limited to any particular group of people, it is logical to infer that the grace of God is found both in those Churches that partake sacraments in material form and non-material form and thus both sacraments are valid.

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