1
———

Defining the Terms

Since our focus is particularly on the sacramentality of the word of God and its interplay with the pastoral act of preaching, two words are critical to our investigation and need to be explored in further detail before proceeding: word and sacrament. While I will not offer new definitions here, as previous definitions are sufficient for the task, I do provide an historical examination of the ways in which the classic definitions of both word and sacrament have narrowed from their original meanings and uses. Additionally, I provide relevant reasons for this theological shift. I then describe what has classically constituted the sacramental in three of the major Western Christian traditions: the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist/Reformed. Then I pose this question: Can the word function sacramentally? In answer, I offer some prosaic examples of how the word, written and preached, might once again be considered sacramental and, moreover, how it might find commonality, not distinction, with the more recognized sacraments of the church—precisely in that it delivers the fullness of the one behind the gift, Jesus Christ.

Word

The word of God has been defined in Christian history as the sacred Scriptures, particularly those books confessed by Christians to have been authored under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While the particular mode and extent of that inspiration is debated by some, it is clear that those sacred books, subsequently listed in the Christian canon, serve as authoritative, to some degree, for both the church and the faithful.[1] In their various confessional documents, nearly all strands of historic Protestant Christianity have held to the aforementioned understanding of the word of God.[2]

In particular, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (hereafter LCMS) subscribes to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the *Book*

---

1. The canon, in definitive form, can be traced to 367 c.e. (see Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought, Vol. I: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1987], 150). See also Carter Lindberg, *A Brief History of Christianity* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 15: "The oldest witness to a complete New Testament as it now stands is Athanasius (c. 296–373), the bishop of Alexandria. In 367, in his annual pastoral letter to the churches of Egypt . . . , he listed the books to be accepted as canonical literature." Admittedly, there was a canon, albeit in unofficial form, well before that time, which included some books that did not make it into the canon observed by Protestants today. One example of such a book was Ecclesiasticus, whose name literally meant "the church's book," signifying a certain level of acceptance among Christians at the time.
2. While Lutherans are grouped with Protestantism by way of illustration, they often do not consider themselves "Protestant," both in terms of motive at the time of the Reformation and theology both then and now. For a contemporary examination of this trend from a broad perspective, however, one might consider the work of James White, a leading Protestant liturgical scholar, who moves the Anglican/Episcopal tradition to the right of Lutheranism in the twentieth century and beyond, signifying a shift in both traditions, with Lutheranism becoming more Protestant than ever before (see James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2000], 38, diagram 3). For prominent examples from the various Protestant confessional documents of Scotland (The Scottish Confession of Faith [1560]), England (The Thirty-Nine Articles [1563]), and France (The Calvinistic Confession of Faith [1571]), see the following, respectively: "The Scotch Confession of Faith," article 18 in *The Creeds of Christendom,* vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 462–63; "The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England," article 6, in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom,* vol. 3, 489–90 (hereafter 39 Articles); "Confession de Foy," article 1, number 5, in *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche,* ed. Wilhelm Niesel (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938), 67, lines 18–21.

of Concord of 1580. Those confessions describe the Lutheran position on the word of God this way:

> We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in Ps. 119:105, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." And St. Paul says in Gal. 1:8, "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."

> Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times. . . .

> All doctrines should conform to the standards set forth above. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith.

> In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong.[3]

From this, it becomes clear that one of the word's primary virtues, at least since the time of the Protestant Reformation, is that it contains the teaching (doctrine) necessary for salvation. Moreover, if something cannot be proved therein, it is unnecessary (and even unlawful) for the faithful to believe it and practice it. What this suggests is that, unlike some of the other prominent world religions

---

3. Formula of Concord, Epitome, Summary, 1–2, 6–7 (hereafter FC, Epitome).

(for example, Judaism, which is marked by practice rather than doctrine, and Islam, which is marked by the Five Pillars), for Protestant churches, as seen in their various confessional documents, doctrine—and the judgment thereof—is as important as (if not more important than) the practice of the Christian faith.

Consequently, the narrowing of both the definition and use of the word of God to the inspired books of the Christian canon, which, by virtue of inspiration, contain the body of doctrine necessary for salvation and the metric for judging truth, has led to the assumption that Scripture is a body of information.[4] Scripture, in this way, sets the parameters for what the faithful can and cannot believe and practice.

While this may have been an inevitable outcome, especially given the dogmatic strife at the time of the Reformation (where a norm for doctrinal information was needed to debate, critique, and eventually separate from the Roman Catholic Church) along with the invention of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century (that same information was suddenly capable of being spread rapidly), one must wonder if this has permanently shifted primacy toward doctrine and away from Christ. In other words, we must ask: Has the faith, as expressed in Holy Scripture, become cerebral rather than a living reality?[5] In some sense, it seems as though it has. However, if the church no longer expects to hear Christ speaking in Holy Scripture, then it would appear that the Scriptures are "not very Christian anymore."[6]

---

4. The same might be said of the Roman Catholic Church, where faith became associated with the assent of the mind instead of trust in the promise of God. To that end, when assent is faith's first word, then the word of God takes on an informational character, which informs a rational faith (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition* [Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1997], 156 [hereafter *CCC*]).

5. Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 99.

6. Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Canon as the Voice of the Living God," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 120.

Yet for the early Fathers of the church, the word of God contained in Holy Scripture was understood rather differently. Certainly, the Fathers did not deny the informational aspect of Scripture, meaning that as the inspired word of God it was a standard for Christian doctrine.[7] However, the Fathers focused upon the Word made flesh, who, by the power of his Holy Spirit, spoke through the mouth and hand of the biblical authors, the materiality of this created world. In turn, the emphasis was not placed primarily upon the doctrinal content of the Scriptures so much as it was upon the one who gave the content: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Therefore, for the Fathers, the biblical *logos* (word) took on a broader meaning than merely a collection of information on a page. As Hilary of Poitiers asserted: "Your plea that the Word is the sound of a voice, the utterance of a thought, falls to the ground. The Word is a reality, not a sound, a Being, not a speech, God, not a nonentity."[8]

Consequently, for the early church, Holy Scripture in written, spoken, and illustrative forms was the standard for divine communication, not simply divine information, for it was the living God himself who was to be found dwelling and, therefore, speaking in the word.[9] In turn, Scripture took on a tangible, incarnational, and even sacramental character.

A few examples might be helpful here. Theophilus of Antioch (second century C.E.), in writing about the authorship of the Old

---

7. See John R. Willis, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 82. Willis notes that the confession of Scripture's inspiration can be traced as far back as the end of the first century. Moreover, it is clear from the history of the church that Scripture was used in the midst of dogmatic strife.
8. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 2.15.
9. As far as icons are concerned, see, for instance, St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 19: "An image is of like character with its prototype." Hence, like Scripture, icons are written, not painted.

Testament, described the interplay between the writer and the word in the following way:

> For the prophets were not when the world came into existence, but the wisdom of God which was in Him, and His holy Word which was always present with Him. . . . And Moses, who lived many years before Solomon, or, rather, the Word of God by him as by an instrument, says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).[10]

Hippolytus (third century) wrote of the prophets' union with the word this way:

> And just as it is with instruments of music, so had they the Word always, like the plectrum, in union with them, and when moved by Him the prophets announced what God willed. For they spake not of their own power (let there be no mistake as to that), neither did they declare what pleased themselves.[11]

Thus far, one notices an established tangibility to the word of God in the prophets, as in Theophilus and Hippolytus, but that word remains more instrumental than personal. In other words, while it is clear that the word was uttered through people, there is no mention yet of it entering into its hearers. One will need Jerome and Irenaeus for that.

Jerome (mid-fourth century to early fifth century) brought out the aural character of the word this way:

> You are reading? No. Your betrothed is talking to you. It is your betrothed, that is, Christ, who is united with you. He tears you away from the solitude of the desert and brings you into his home, saying to you, "Enter into the joy of your Lord."[12]

And Irenaeus (early to mid–second century to early third century) wrote of our consumption of that word this way:

---

10. Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus,* book 2, chapter 10.
11. Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist,* chapter 2.
12. *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary*, ed. Thomas Spidlik (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 16.

> Therefore, like giving milk to infants, the perfect Bread of the Father revealed himself to us on earth in human form, so that we might be nourished by his Word like babes at the breast and so by degrees become strong enough to digest the whole Word of God.[13]

Clearly, therefore, there was a fleshly, christological reality subtending the early church's confession of the word of God. Very simply, "God *did not* stop speaking when his book went to press."[14] For the Fathers of the church, Scripture was something that possessed life; it was something that spoke to the church and the faithful; and it was ultimately intended by the Lord to be taken in through the ear and digested as food for the soul, as Anselm of Canterbury (mid-eleventh century to early twelfth century) has written:

> Taste the goodness of your Redeemer, . . . chew his words as a honey-comb, suck out their flavor, which is sweeter than honey, swallow their health-giving sweetness. Chew by thinking, suck by understanding, swallow by loving and rejoicing. Rejoice in chewing, be glad in sucking, delight in swallowing.[15]

In short, for the early church, Jesus Christ was the unifying principle of Holy Scripture. He was both the "endpoint and fullness" of Holy Scripture.[16] And a proper exegesis of Holy Scripture came to discover that Jesus was disclosed, tangibly, as the Word within the text.

Given its expanding definition in the patristic period, the biblical word for "word"—*logos*—did not "just mean 'word' in a literal or even in a lively metaphorical sense."[17] Instead, it was considered by the

---

13. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.62.
14. Achtemeier, "The Canon as the Voice of the Living God," 122, citing the Lutheran preacher Paul Scherer (emphasis mine).
15. Opening of "A Meditation on Human Redemption," in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert W. Richardson (London: SCM, 1974), 137.
16. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis,* vol. 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 237.
17. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Plato Was Wrong," *Christian Century* 121:26 (December 28, 2004): 16.

Fathers to be "the underlying pattern of the cosmic fabric, the warp and weft by which all things hang together."[18] And that underlying cosmic reality, the *Logos*, which existed before the world began, eventually came to be expressed in the spoken word. And when it came to be uttered in the spoken word, it had the ability to bring creation into existence. Finally, and most importantly, this *Logos*, according to the Gospel of John, actually took on flesh and dwelt among his creation as its creator.[19] And because the *Logos* took on flesh, there is an innate visibility to the relationship between God and humanity based upon the Word.

In the Fathers, the relationship of the *Logos* to the created order proceeded this way: from mind (prior to creation) to mouth (at creation) to flesh (at incarnation). However, the Reformation reversed this relationship: from flesh to mouth to mind. Consequently, at the Reformation the word of God served primarily to aid in the task of producing and comprehending divine information, thereby shifting the emphasis away from the aural consumption of a tangible presence through divine communication. This informational character of the word of God, as will be discovered, continues to negatively affect the preaching of the Lutheran Church today.

Sacrament

While the word narrowed in definition and use from a thoroughgoing christological reality meant to be consumed to a body of information meant to delineate doctrine and judge teaching, one would not expect the same to be true for the definition of a sacrament. Sacraments intrinsically have a more concrete, tangible

18. Ibid.
19. See John 1:14.

character, particularly among more sacramental Christians. Like the word of God, however, it is important to examine the evolution of the term *sacrament* to see how it, too, might affect the ultimate goal of this work: the sacramentality of the word, particularly within the pastoral act of preaching.

<p style="text-align:center">μυστήριον</p>

While the cultic rites of mystery were originally intended to gain from the gods a good harvest in the ancient world (seventh century B.C.E. to fourth century C.E.),[20] they were eventually broadened to such a degree as to give participants a share in the destiny of the gods themselves.[21] Yet in order for one to be fit to share in this "divine potency," one first had to be initiated;[22] those who were not initiated were "denied both access to the sacred actions and knowledge of them."[23] While the distinction between the actual mystery rite and the rites of initiation was often blurred, it was important that the one who was to partake of the mystery had undergone a prior act of initiation. In the mind of the ancients, the cultic rites of mystery delivered the life of the god behind the mystery, thereby granting the participant salvation.[24]

In the biblical corpus, particularly the writings of St. Paul, "μυστήριον is firmly connected with the *kerygma* of Christ."[25] Why?

20. For this discussion of the term sacrament and the development of definition thereof, I will begin by briefly examining the more ancient of terms employed: μυστήριον.
21. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 4:803 (hereafter *TDNT*). For a brief, yet stunning, overview of the ancient mystery cults, see Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 59–66.
22. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 66.
23. *TDNT,* 4:804.
24. Ibid., 4:803–5. See also Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 66.
25. Ibid., 4:819.

Precisely because Jesus himself is the very mystery of God, and when that mystery is delivered *kerygmatically*, the very same Christ, the mystery, takes up residence in the hearer, thereby bringing to fruition the words of Paul: "To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).[26]

Distinct, in some sense, from the ancient mystery cults (especially the gnostic mysteries), the thrust behind μυστήριον in the Christian tradition was not primarily on the hiddenness of a god behind the cult's mystery.[27] In the ancient mystery cults, only the initiated knew the most sacred secrets of a given cult. These sacred secrets were "oral tradition, passed down from hierophant to hierophant, and never written down. Furthermore, there were severe civil penalties if initiates into the religion ever spoke about or revealed what they witnessed at the Mysteries."[28] Yet the god behind the cult's mystery often remained unknown to those participating in the mystery itself.[29] This unfamiliarity and secrecy became the primary point of divergence between the ancient mystery cults and the mysteries of the Christian tradition.[30]

With the dawn of Christianity, μυστήριον took on a new meaning, referring specifically to the *revelation* of Jesus (the μυστήριον of God), who was delivered through proclamation: the

---

26. See also Col. 2:2.
27. *TDNT,* 4:811–12. The Greek word μυστήριον is derived from the verb μύω, which means to walk about with one's eyes closed (See John W. Kleinig, "The Mystery of Christ" [Adelaide: Australian Lutheran College, 2004], 1).
28. Steven D. Hales, *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 70. See also *The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Third Edition*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 706.
29. David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.
30. Undoubtedly, within the Christian tradition, there still remained a sense of the unknown, particularly within the early church's rites associated with initiation. As Yarnold has noted, "Although the Christian practice of secrecy goes back to the gospels, it seems likely that in the fourth century the desire to rival the pagan mysteries led to an elaboration of the practice of secrecy" (*The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 57).

kerygma. It is important to note that "the mystery is not itself revelation; it is the object of revelation. . . . It is not as though the mystery were a presupposition of revelation which is set aside when it takes place. Rather, revelation discloses the mystery as such."[31] Jesus, the mystery, is disclosed within the *kerygmatic* revelation. However, this disclosing of the mystery does not result in full comprehension; something of the mystery remains unknown. This is not meant to imply that a mystery is equivalent to a secret, as has often been the case when translating μυστήριον into English.[32] A mystery differs dramatically from a secret: a secret, once it is discovered, ceases to be a secret. A mystery, on the other hand, remains a mystery and, in fact, increases in its mysteriousness the more one comes in contact with it.[33] The mysteries of the early church not only highlighted the experiential, but also were thought to invoke a sense of reverence for and attraction to that which was behind them.[34]

It is noteworthy that while the use of the term μυστήριον is rare in the Apostolic Fathers (those who wrote just after the apostles), it became more frequent in the apologetic period (third century) as the church struggled against the gnostic notion that there was a dualism between spirit and matter. In gnostic thought, the former was holy and the latter was unholy. Consequently, God, as spirit, was considered in some sense hidden or separate from material creation.[35] He was a mystery.

---

31. *TDNT*, 4:820–21.
32. For example, in the New International Version of Holy Scripture, "mystery" is often translated as "secret." See, for instance, the following: Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; 2 Thess. 2:7 (See Kleinig, "The Mystery of Christ," 1).
33. John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 57.
34. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 57.
35. *TDNT*, 4:825. Kittel noted that the term μυστήριον was used both in reference to the mystery cults of the time and the mysteries of the Christian faith, specifically those from the life of Jesus, and the OT types prefiguring those mysteries. The use of μυστήριον became especially apparent with Clement of Alexandria (150–215) and the Alexandrian School, "who applied gnostic-neoplatonic terminology to the truths of the Christian religion" (William A. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament* [Rome: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1992], 33).

Given the prevalence of gnostic thought, especially as it permeated the church, even Christian doctrine fell under the category of mystery—it was believed that one could never fully mine the riches of the church's doctrinal teaching.[36] Yet as Kittel notes, "a dubious result of this conception of dogma [as mystery] is the separation of the mystery from the *kerygma*."[37] By the fourth century, therefore, mystery was no longer exclusively associated with the church's revelatory proclamation of Christ, but it became associated with the church's task of handing on the doctrinal principles of the faith and, particularly, the quest for theological inquiry.[38] In other words, the informational began to supersede the pastoral as doctrine, not liturgical preaching, became the milieu for mystery.

This observation that the informational superseded the pastoral is interesting in light of the similar observation above regarding the word of God. While these occurred at different times in Christian history, it appears that both the word and the sacrament, when the latter is understood as mystery, underwent heavy pressure to be associated with divine information and not with the divine communication of the person of Christ.

Sacramentum

From the first century B.C.E., *sacramentum* was used by the Romans for the initiatory rites of the army, specifically referring to the oath given by a soldier.[39] As Bohec notes:

---

36. Ibid., 4:826. For instance, consider the impossible task of understanding the Trinitarian teaching of the church.
37. Ibid.
38. See, for example, John Chrysostom, "Homilies on First Corinthians 7:2," in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* 61, 56 (Paris: Migne, 1862) (hereafter *PG*) and Gustav Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen in seinem Einfluss auf das Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1894), 150.

> The mobilization of an army was marked by a ceremony of swearing an oath (*sacramentum*), binding the soldier to the general and the Emperor in the presence of the gods. In the early years of the Empire this rite underwent a degree of secularization (the *sacramentum* became a *iusiurandum*), but reverted to a religious nature in the third century.[40]

The emphasis of *sacramentum*, therefore, was placed upon the actual act of initiation, whereby the oath (*sacramentum*) brought one into full participation with the Roman army, binding one thereto in "loyalty and obedience."[41] Consequently, those who had not sworn an oath were not permitted to serve; they were considered outside the natural bounds of the army, having not been previously initiated.

One of the earliest uses of *sacramentum* in reference to Christianity was by Pliny the Younger in a letter to Emperor Trajan (early second century). Pliny wrote:

> But they confirmed this to have been the principal matter either of their guilt or of their error, that they had been accustomed to assemble regularly before light on a fixed day, and to sing a hymn to Christ as if to a god and to pledge among themselves by a sacrament (*sacramento*) not unto any crime, but that they might not commit fraud, robbery, or adultery, that they might not break faith, that they might not refuse to repay a deposit. After these things had been accomplished, they had the habit of departing to their homes and of meeting again in order to take a common and harmless meal . . . ; although they had ceased to do this after my edict by which, according to your command, I had forbidden fraternities to exist.[42]

---

39. See Daniel G. Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*: Historical Sketches," *Antiphon* 11:3 (2007): 246–47; *TDNT*, 4:827; and Patrick Regan, "Signs that Signify and Sanctify: The Scholastic Contribution to Understanding Sacraments," *Assembly: A Journal of Liturgical Theology* 34:4 (2008): 51.

40. Yann Le Bohec, *The Imperial Roman Army*, trans. Raphael Bate (London: Routledge, 2000), 239.

41. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament,* 36. Cf. David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26, where he advocated an understanding of *sacramentum* that highlights the secret entailed within the rite (more in the way of μυστήριον) as opposed to an oath of allegiance as described above.

While *sacramentum* had no direct connection with the true character of the ancient mystery cults themselves, the understanding that *sacramentum* was an oath or a pledge (particularly, as noted by Pliny, a pledge to do good and not evil) naturally caused it to become associated with the Greek word μυστήριον, as the rites of the ancient mystery cults "also . . . entailed an oath."[43] Furthermore, this indirect connection between *sacramentum* and μυστήριον caused, at times, a conflation of the terms, as is especially apparent in Augustinian sacramental theology. As Mathai Kadavil has noted:

> He [Augustine] used *sacramentum* and *mysterium* without a proper distinction. Unlike the Greek patristic term, *mysterion*, which depends upon a play of *hidden* and *manifest*, albeit emphasizing the *hidden*, Augustine's *sacramentum, mysterium, figura,* and other related words have an *obscure meaning*. That is for him sacraments are signs, and his emphasis is on understanding them. Thus, under the influence of Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy, he taught that the sacrament is a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace.[44]

For Augustine, a clear distinction between *sacramentum* and μυστήριον was not as evident as it was, for example, in Ambrose, who understood *sacramentum* as a sign or rite and μυστήριον as the reality behind the *sacramentum* (i.e., the μυστήριον was salvation, which came by way of the *sacramentum*).[45] However, while a

---

42. Pliny the Younger, "Letters to the Emperor Trajan," 10.96, trans. in Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*," 249.

43. *TDNT*, 4:827. See also Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, 37, who noted another use of *sacramentum*, specifically, "the money to be deposited in a sacred place by the litigants" in a civil case. As for the lack of a direct connection between *sacramentum* and μυστήριον, see Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*," 251. There, Van Slyke noted that Tertullian and other Latin Christian authors preferred *sacramentum* over μυστήριον for the sole reason that *sacramentum* lacked a connection with the mystery cults.

44. Mathai Kadavil, *The World as Sacrament* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 45.

45. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, 39. As for Ambrose's distinction, see Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 21–25.

conflation in terms may have caused an obscurity of meaning in the terms employed in the Augustinian construction, the emphasis, for Augustine, was not on the obscurity, "but on the meaning" of the sign itself, while yet retaining a "hidden characteristic."[46] This conflation in search of meaning was most evident in his homily on Jacob's wrestling with God, where Augustine proclaimed: "Therefore, it is a mystery, therefore it is a sacrament, therefore it is a prophecy, therefore it is a figure; *therefore let us understand*."[47] What this reveals, however, is that, as David Brown has noted, "a tension . . . exists in almost all forms of religion," particularly a tension "between explanation and mystery, between the conviction that something has been communicated by the divine (revelation) and the feeling that none the less God is infinitely beyond all our imaginings."[48]

Here it must be noted that Augustine's emphasis on understanding the intelligible reality behind the sign, the *res*, carried with it the latent risk of narrowing the whole of his sacramental theology, as in fact may be observed in later Latin theology (see the discussion in the following section, "Constituting the Sacramental"). Not only did this subsequent emphasis begin to define sacraments more explicitly but when understanding became the goal, the informational aspect effectively came to supersede the communicative aspect.[49]

---

46. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, 39, and Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*," 259, respectively.

47. Augustine, *Sermo* 122.3.3*,* in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* (Paris: Migne, 1854), 38:682 (hereafter *PL*; emphasis mine). See also Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, 39.

48. The two foregoing citations are from Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 22.

49. Lewis Ayres (see, for example, his "Augustine's Trinitarian Theology" in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless [New York: Routledge, 2000], 51–76) would argue that, according to Augustine, development and purification of the intellect occurred by way of the person of Christ, whose function it was "to lead our intelligence beyond an obsession with the material, to imagine the immaterial reality of the divine as the source of our material world" (69). Consequently, he suggests, it was not the case that Augustine dismissed understanding; rather, for him understanding must be placed

There is similarity in Jerome who, in his Latin Vulgate, famously translated the "mystery" of Eph. 5:32 as *sacramentum*, providing for no distinction in terms. For Jerome, this latter word was charged "with the value of a sign—hidden yet revealed."[50] For Jerome, Christ was of course the ultimate revelation behind the sign, though Christ's hiddenness implied that the revelation was not particularly clear to the receivers. In other words, revelation did not equate with clarity. That something had been revealed did not guarantee that it was easily perceptible or understandable. Hence the *sacramentum* seemed inextricably bound to mystery.

Jerome is especially important because his Vulgate "gradually superseded the numerous versions of Scripture that circulated in the first centuries of Latin Christianity."[51] In turn, the theological import that Jerome placed on *sacramentum* "permanently influenced Christian vocabulary."[52] Because Jerome chose to translate μυστήριον as *sacramentum*, almost every translation available today considers these two terms to be equal in definition.

It was this equating of μυστήριον with *sacramentum* that may have led to the wide use of the latter term in much of the first millennium. For example, Augustine gave the title of "sacrament" to the following: the font of baptism, the giving of salt during baptism, the ashes at baptism, the Lord's Prayer, and the Feast of Easter.[53] The function of these rather unexpected sacraments was summarized well by Hugh of St. Victor (late eleventh century to mid-twelfth century): "There are some sacraments in the Church in which, even if salvation

---

in its proper christological context. Nevertheless, this purified intellect still retained a *conceptual* aspect, which is the very point that concerns us here.

50. Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*," 259.

51. Ibid., 255.

52. Ibid.

53. Derek A. Rivard, *Blessing the World: Ritual and Lay Piety in Medieval Religion* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 39.

does not consist principally, salvation is increased, insofar as devotion is exercised."[54]

Constituting the Sacramental

Taking into account the evolution in terms referring to sacrament in the ancient world and, especially, how both μυστήριον and *sacramentum*, each in its own way, underwent a narrowing in sacramental definition (the former because of its connection to doctrine, the latter because of its emphasis on understanding, and both because of their seeming conflation in definition), at this point it might be helpful to explore what constitutes a "sacrament" in the various western Christian traditions today. It would particularly be helpful to see whether the word of God fits within that category. When discussing this sacramental constitution, however, the sacrament of the Eucharist will be used by way of example, as it is a sacrament common to all Western traditions.

Roman Catholic

According to Roman Catholic teaching,

> The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.[55]

---

54. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Minoribus Sacramentis et Sacris,* in *PL* 176:471. While these are no longer considered sacraments in the narrow sense of the term, they are considered *sacramentals,* or "liturgical actions with a basically epicletic structure (or a structure made up of anamnesis and epiclesis)" (Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992], 318).
55. *CCC*, 1131.

Within the sacramental realities of the Roman Catholic Church, the emphasis is clearly placed upon the "visible rite" by which grace is made present, though that grace is described as "free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God," and which is "infused into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it."[56]

To better understand the particular doctrinal position of Rome and the history of sacramental thought, however, it might be helpful to take a cursory look at the history of what constituted a sacrament in the universal catholic tradition before discussing the position of the Roman Catholic Church today.[57] First, in opposition to the gnostics of his day, Tertullian confessed that the material (for example, water, bread, wine, hands, and so on) brought about divine healing when he wrote:

> I should *thereby* teach all the more fully, that it is not to be doubted that God has made the material substance which He has disposed throughout all His products and works, obey Him also in His own peculiar sacraments; that the *material substance* which governs terrestrial life acts as agent likewise in the celestial.[58]

In short, earthly matter, when coupled with the sanctification of the Spirit, is capable of bearing the divine.[59]

Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) likewise emphasized the sanctification of the material object, but did so by way of the *spoken word*, thereby narrowing the focus of the word *sacrament* from the entire "action to object."[60] In the Eucharist, for example, the

---

56. Ibid., 1996 and 1999, respectively.
57. A small "c" is intentionally used here as a reference, not to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In this discussion, the article by Patrick Regan ("Signs that Signify and Sanctify," 51–56) proved most helpful.
58. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, III (emphasis original). See also Patrick Regan, "Signs that Signify and Sanctify," 51.
59. Tertullian, *On Baptism*, IV.

"sanctification of the bread and wine changes them into the body and blood of Christ," thereby confecting a sacrament.[61] Cyril wrote of this in his catechetical lecture on the mysteries:

> For as the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist before the invocation of the Holy and Adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, while after the invocation the Bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the Wine the Blood of Christ, so in like manner such meats belonging to the pomp of Satan . . . become profane by the invocation of the evil spirit.[62]

Note well the *slight* narrowing in definition that has begun already in the fourth century, with Cyril delineating as "sacrament" that particular bread and wine that has received the spoken word of invocation. Interestingly, however, the particular set of words to be spoken by the priest, as a guarantor of sacramental presence and a delineator of the precise moment of consecration, has yet to be determined.[63]

---

60. Regan, "Signs that Signify and Sanctify," 52. See also David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 40, n. 48, who helpfully directed his readers to the *Didache,* chapters 9–10, as an example of the liturgy as a whole serving to bring about the sacramental. Interestingly, in the *Didache* one finds a eucharistic prayer, but no actual recitation of the words of institution.

61. Regan, "Signs that Signify and Sanctify," 52.

62. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures,* 19.7.

63. See, for example, Louis Bouyer (*Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968]) who describes the fact that, while there were certainly early eucharistic formularies present, their function was "as examples to guide the celebrants rather than *ne varietur* formulas" (137). In a similar vein, Frank C. Senn (*Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997]) makes the helpful point that, while some of the early Fathers may have referred to the words of Christ in relation to the consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood, "what is not clear is whether [they are] referring to the words of Christ once spoken, and recorded in the institution narratives of the New Testament, or to the recitation of these words by the bishop or priest in the eucharistic rite" (245). See also Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 238–40, along with the liturgies mentioned by him. On the other hand, Josef A. Jungmann (*The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959], 68–69) disagrees with Dix's assessment of the liturgy of Addai and Mari. However, Jungmann's perspective has been proven false, at least from a Roman Catholic perspective, given the Vatican's recognition of the validity of the Eucharist in the liturgy of Addai and Mari, which lacks the words of institution (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the*