'A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' That definition from the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer is hard to beat. A sacrament is a sign in that it points to something other than itself. But a sacrament is more than a sign. It gives something - an inward and spiritual grace - to the person who receives it.

We know from everyday experience that spiritual things can only be expressed through physical or material things. We shake hands to convey forgiveness or friendship. We kiss to show affection or love. We share food and drink as a sign of friendship and community.

A musician may compose a great symphony, but it will need to be scored for musical instruments before it can be shared with others. An artist may imagine a masterpiece, but it will mean nothing to anyone else until it is translated into paint on canvas.

Similarly, the great spiritual truths of faith must be translated into words and signs before they can be shared and sacraments are our means of sharing - through physical and material signs - the deepest mysteries of faith.

The Anglican Church has always distinguished between two 'Gospel Sacraments' that are necessary to salvation and five others that are 'commonly called sacraments'.

The Gospel Sacraments are those directly commanded by Jesus: the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The five 'commonly called sacraments' - Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony and Unction - were not commanded by Jesus but they have been part of the Church's life from the earliest times.

Baptism

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

The Nicene Creed

We baptise because Jesus commanded us to baptise. He said, '...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' (John 3:5) And he said, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. (Matthew 28:19)

Two things happen in baptism. First, the candidate for baptism reaches out in faith and says 'Credo. I give you my life and my heart'. Then the baptising minister either plunges the candidate under water, or pours water over the candidate's head, while announcing that this person has now entered into a new state of life; a state in which he or she belongs to God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The outward and visible sign of the sacrament is the water in which the person is baptised and the precise form of words, 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. The inward and spiritual grace towards which the sign points is death to sin and rebirth into a new way of life.

But what does it mean?

Jesus' teaching about baptism is clearly stated in his discussion with Nicodemus. (John 3:1-8)

Jesus says that at our natural birth we are born into the present age. But if we would be citizens of God's Kingdom, the new age of God's rule, we must be born again into a new quality of life.

Saint Paul expresses the same idea when he says that we are born 'in Adam' by our natural birth while at our new birth we are born 'in Christ'. (1 Corinthians 15:22) He
speaks of dying to the old way and rising to the new way; (Romans 6:3-11); of being made part of Christ’s body. (1 Corinthians 12:12f)

As we have already noted, this is not an easy concept to understand. Nonetheless it is a vital part of our Christian experience.

In Acts chapter 9, as Saul of Tarsus journeyed to Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed about him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ Saul answered, ‘Who are you Lord?’ and the voice replied, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’ (Acts 9:3-5)

It is significant that Saul had never met Jesus and had certainly never persecuted him in person. But this experience on the road to Damascus convinced Saul that the relationship between Jesus and his disciples was so close that when Saul persecuted the Church he was persecuting Jesus himself. Consequently the converted Saint Paul taught that in baptism we not only join the Church, we become one with Christ himself.

Being one with Christ we share the benefits of Christ’s Life, Death and Resurrection. Our old life of sin and separation is washed away (that is what the Creed means when it speaks of ‘baptism for the forgiveness of sins’) and, in Christ, we are adopted as sons and daughters of God. (Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 8:15-17) We must live and do all things ‘in Christ’ (Ephesians 1:3) and allow his life to live through our lives.

Hard to understand? Remember again that here we are dealing with truths which lie at the very edge of our understanding. They are truths of faith that must be understood not only with the mind, but also with the heart.

Most of all, they are truths which must be experienced. Saint Paul’s understanding of the identification of Christ with his Church came as a result of his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road. He spent the rest of life trying to explain and interpret that experience.

Why do we baptise babies?

There are those who point out, quite rightly, that there is no direct reference to the baptism of children in the New Testament. They then go on to affirm that the Church should not therefore baptise children. But the Anglican Church would want to disagree.

We argue that while the New Testament contains no direct reference to the baptism of children, it is there by inference. Jesus says, ‘...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God’. (John 3:5) He also says, ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God’. (Mark 10:14) So if children are to belong to the Kingdom of God, and if admission to the Kingdom of God is only by baptism, then surely Jesus intended that children should be baptised.

We also note that the baptism of children is a custom dating from the very earliest days of the Church. In Acts 16:15 Lydia was baptised ‘...with her household...’ and in 1 Corinthians 1:16 Paul says, ‘I did baptise also the household of Stephanus’.

These two references testify to a prevailing custom in those times. If the head of the household believed, he would be baptised along with all the household - his wife, his children, his servants and his slaves.

That’s not entirely foreign to our own experience. Most parents make most decisions on behalf of their children. They decide where their children will live, what they will wear and eat, how they should behave and where they will go to school. It’s common sense that they should also make decisions about their child’s faith.

Finally - and perhaps most important of all - we believe that the baptism of children witnesses to an important spiritual truth: our faith begins with what we do for God, but with what God does for us. In baptising children we remind ourselves of that important fact over and over again.

Think about it

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologian and Martyr.