



## Five

*Draft for All Saints Chapter Discussion*

### Sacrament: Mystery and Meaning

*They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread.* Acts 2:42c  
*We should be regarded as people . . . entrusted with the mysteries of God.* 1 Corinthians 4:1a, c<sup>1</sup>

Language plays a crucial role in sculpting meaning from our lived experience. Language is not an individual undertaking; we inherit a whole forest of words and meanings. Much like our experience with a forest, we are aware of only the most apparent parts of it, unaware of interconnections beneath the surface, and even less aware of the “sensing” taking place among its many components. In addition to the language that we learn from our first care givers and the communities in which we grow up, language is a part of the forest of meanings into which we are grafted by groups of which we are a part. We are largely unaware of how a word has come to mean what it does, and its deeper meanings go unnoticed until we dig into its interactions.

Rather than investigating the meaning of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, let’s start with the question: what do Lukans mean when we use the word “sacrament?” The word *sacramentum* is not a word used in the Greek New Testament at all. It was used in early Latin translations from Carthage to translate the Greek *mysterion*, a practice continued by Jerome in the Vulgate. The Latin word *mysterium* was also available and continued to be used by these translators as well. We’d like to know why they chose to use words for sacrament rather than mystery, but the honest answer is “we don’t know.”

One possibility, which also aids us in understanding our use of the word “mystery”, is that the prevalence of mystery religions at that time might have caused persons to think that the mystery the Christians were talking about was similar to that of those religions. For the Greco-Roman mystery cults, the mysteries were closely guarded secrets. In contrast, Paul writes of “making known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19).<sup>2</sup> Although hidden in past ages, this mystery is now made manifest publicly (Romans 16:25-26, Ephesians 3:1-6). This contrast between concealment and open proclamation may have contributed to the choice of the word *sacramentum*.

While *mysterion* continued to be used in the East for what we think of as the sacraments, liturgical and theological writings in the West increasingly use *sacramentum*.<sup>2</sup> While these two words are not equivalent, our sculpting of meaning is enriched by remembering their inter-relationship.<sup>3</sup> How are we to understand and appropriate the depth dynamics of this grove of meanings for the word sacrament?

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<sup>1</sup> NIB

<sup>2</sup> My computer’s autocorrect always corrects *Mysterion* so that it begins with a capital M, indicative of its common use for “The Mysteries” in the Eastern Churches (parallel to “The Sacraments” in the West).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of *mysterion* and *sacramentum*, see Browning and Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy* (*op. cit.*), pp. 26-64.