

# The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Sacraments

[Brian Schwertley](#)

The sacraments are an important and unique means of sanctification within Christ's church. The study of the sacraments is important because: (a) They were instituted by Christ Himself (Mt. 28:18-20) and are church ordinances in which all believers are required to participate. (b) Christians need to understand what they are observing and doing. They need to know why the sacraments are important. A biblical understanding of the sacraments will help us fully benefit from what we are doing; will help us avoid taking sacraments for granted and will help us avoid ritualism or externalism. The sacraments are a means of grace. However, they are not a means of grace apart from faith, and faith presupposes knowledge and understanding. (c) There are many erroneous and dangerous views of the sacraments within professing Christendom. The biblical or Reformed view of the sacraments must be defended against the assaults of ritualism, sacramentalism or sacerdotalism as well as Anabaptism and American individualism. While the sacraments are in a sense very simple, they are also deep and profound. As we study the sacraments we will first consider the sacraments in general. Then we will turn our attention to the specifics of each sacrament: baptism and the Lord's supper.

### What Does the Term Sacrament Mean?

The word "sacrament" is used almost universally among Christians to describe the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. The term, which is not found in our English Bible, comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. ("It is derived from *sacro, āre, to make sacred, dedicate to gods or sacred uses*"<sup>1</sup>). In ancient times the word referred to a pledge of money by two parties which occurred in a sacred place. In ancient Rome various gods were invoked when swearing a solemn oath. "But it is used peculiarly to denote a military oath by which soldiers bound themselves by a certain rite and prescribed words to the state and the magistrate, that they would strenuously perform what the emperor had commanded and would not desert the military standard."<sup>2</sup> The post apostolic church employed the term to signify any sacred rite or mysterious doctrine. "Hence everywhere in the [church] fathers you will find the sacrament of the Trinity, of the incarnation, and of faith, and in the general whole Christian religion comes under this name."<sup>3</sup> In the Latin Vulgate the word is used to translate the word "mystery" (Gk. *mysterion*) in a number of passages (e.g., Eph. 1:9; 3:9; 5:32; Col. 1:27; 1 Tim. 3:16; Rev. 1:20; 17:7) even though the word mystery is never used to describe baptism or the Lord's supper.

Perhaps the best New Testament definition of a sacrament is found in Romans 4:11 where Paul describes the Old Covenant sacrament of circumcision. He writes, "And he [Abraham] received the *sign* of circumcision, a *seal* of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised." The best modern definition is found in the Westminster Larger

---

<sup>1</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1860, 70] 1972), 588.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elencic Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3:338.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Catechism which affirms that “[a] sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without....The parts of a sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible sign, used according to Christ's own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified” (A. 162 and 163). Berkhof’s brief definition is helpful. He writes, “A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these in turn, give expression to their faith and allegiance to God.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Word of God and the Sacraments as Means of Grace

In the Westminster Standards the sacraments are listed among others as a means of grace. The Larger Catechism reads: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation” (A. 154; see Shorter Catechism A. 88). Our understanding of the sacraments will benefit if we examine the sacraments in relation to the Word.

The Word and the sacraments have a number of things in common.

- (1) Both were instituted by God as a means of grace.
- (2) Both point men to the person and work of Christ.
- (3) Both can only benefit man if they are appropriated by faith. “This is the only way in which a sinner can become a participant of the grace that is offered in the Word and in the sacraments.”<sup>5</sup>
- (4) Both are applied to the heart of man by the Holy Spirit. Ridgeley writes, “As God works grace by and under them, they are called means of grace; as he seldom works grace without first inclining persons to attend on him in them, and wait for his salvation, they are called the ordinary means of grace; and as they have not in themselves a tendency to work grace, without the inward and powerful influences of the Holy Spirit accompanying them, they are distinguished from it, and accordingly styled the outward means of grace.”<sup>6</sup> Shedd writes,

They are a means of grace, dependent like the other means upon the accompanying operation of the Holy Spirit and consequent faith in the soul of the recipient. Says Calvin (Inst. IV. xiv. 9), “All the energy of operation belongs to the Spirit, and the sacraments are mere instruments which without his agency are vain and useless, but with it, are fraught with surprising efficacy.” “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit.” Westminster Confession, XXVII. iii. Matt. 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water, but he shall baptize with the Holy Ghost.” 1 Cor. 11:28, “Let a man examine himself and so let him eat.” Rom. 2:28, “Neither is that circumcision which is outward.” 1 Pet. 3:21, “The antitype whereunto, namely baptism, doth also now save us (not the

---

<sup>4</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 617.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 616.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton, AB: Canada [1855] 1995), 2:433.

putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God), by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

(5) Both the *preached* word and the sacrament of the Lord’s supper are public ordinances. That is, they are only lawfully found in public worship and are only lawfully conducted by ordained ministers of the gospel. “In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee” (Ex. 29:24, KJV). Turretin writes, “The less principal is that they may be badges of a public profession and of divine worship by which they who belong to the visible church are distinguished from other assemblies. Hence it is evident how great is the philanthropy (*philanthrōpia*) of God, who, letting himself down as it were to us creeping upon the ground, wishes to seize not only our minds but also our external senses with the haste and admiration of his grace, inasmuch as he subjects it to the bodily senses, to the hearing in the spoken word, to the touch and sight in the sacraments.”<sup>8</sup>

The Word of God is indispensable to public worship and must be read, preached and sung (i.e., the Psalms) at every service. Although the sacraments are commanded by God and thus are necessary, they are not absolutely indispensable to every public worship service. Even Reformed churches which practice weekly communion acknowledge this fact. (Only churches which adhere to a sacerdotal concept of the Lord’s supper would disagree with this statement.)

As a commanded aspect of public worship like the reading and preaching of the Word the sacraments are strictly regulated by Scripture. That is, nothing is to be detracted from the ordinances instituted by Christ (e.g., substituting water or grape juice for wine in communion) and nothing is to be added to these ordinances from the mind of man (e.g., the ritualism and pomp of Anglo-Catholic churches [i.e., high church Episcopalianism] and Romanism).

The Word and the sacraments also have important differences.

(1) The word of God is absolutely essential and indispensable to salvation while the sacraments are not. A person can be saved without the sacraments, but they cannot be saved without the teaching of the Bible. The thief on the cross was saved by believing in Jesus even though he was never baptized. Trusting in Christ as He is revealed in Scripture is sufficient for salvation. Cults who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation are wrong. Further, the church in the time of Moses existed and functioned in the wilderness for forty years without the Old Covenant sacraments of circumcision and the Passover (Josh. 5:5-12). The church cannot exist at all without the Word of God.

(2) The Holy Spirit uses God’s Word both to produce and strengthen faith while the sacraments only serve to strengthen faith. The sacraments are not converting ordinances but are means used to further sanctification. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to give birth to the new spiritual life implanted in regeneration: “having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Pet. 1:23).

(3) The Word is the primary means of grace while all other means of grace are secondary to the Word. This point is true because the Word *defines* the sacraments. Apart from the teaching of the Bible the sacraments are meaningless. The sacraments are dependent upon the Word, but the Word is not dependent on the sacraments. Consequently, the Reformed churches do not allow the Lord’s supper to be served apart from the preached word and words of explanation. Churches which place the administration of the sacraments above the preached word as though the sacraments are more special and convey some unique superior grace are ignorant of the teaching

---

<sup>7</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 2:564.

<sup>8</sup> Turretin, 3:343.

of Scripture. “[W]hile the Word can exist and is also complete without the sacraments, the sacraments are never complete without the Word.”<sup>9</sup>

(4) The Word of God is to be read and addressed to all men calling upon them to repent and believe while the sacraments are to be administered only to people who are in the visible church. Turretin writes, “He wished that ‘the power and efficacy of grace might be more strongly implanted in our minds.’ The word is addressed indifferently and promiscuously to all, but the sacraments single out individuals and far more powerfully and efficaciously move the heart; not only because ‘a sign stimulates the soul thrust through the ear of that which, to the eyes, are subjects of faith’; but also because the special application of the sacraments shows that the blessing of grace belongs to each one using them well.”<sup>10</sup> Anyone, even a rank pagan or notorious sinner, can come into a church building and hear the Word of God read and preached. But, only professing Christians who are members of a church can partake of the Lord’s supper. The Word is open to all while the sacraments are for God’s family alone.

## The Two Main Aspects of the Sacraments

The Reformed standards identify the two aspects of the sacraments as sign and seal. These two aspects are taken directly from Scripture where circumcision is called a sign and seal (Rom. 4:11; cf. Gen 9:12, 13; 17:11).

(1) What does the Bible mean when it refers to the sacraments as signs? It refers to the fact that sacraments are perceived by the senses of the body, especially by sight. Sensible signs are perceived by our physical senses. With the Lord’s supper, for example, we see the bread and the wine. The bread and the wine are visible symbols. In communion we see, touch and taste the bread and the wine. With baptism there is the sprinkling of water. The water is seen being sprinkled or poured out upon the person being baptized. The person being baptized sees the water being sprinkled and feels the water on his body.

As signs, the sacraments have two elements. There are the external symbols used: the holy supper uses bread and wine; baptism uses water. Also, there are the actions or sacred rites which are connected to the symbols. With baptism the minister sprinkles or pours water upon the recipient. In the Lord’s supper there is the breaking of bread and the distribution of the bread and the wine. There is the consumption of the bread and wine together in fellowship as the family of God.

The physical sensible element of the sacraments raises a good question. Why did God give His church sacraments when the Word by itself is all that is needed for faith and life? While the Bible gives no explicit answer to this question, there are some logical reasons from Scripture and our own experience why the sacraments are of great benefit for the church. First, as creatures who are both physical and spiritual, who have bodily senses that are windows of the soul, that have been corrupted by sin, it is fitting that God should use the senses to help our infirmities and sanctify our souls. “As by the word he insinuates his truth into our ears, so by the sacraments he exhibits it to be seen in some measure by our eyes, so that his word may become as it were visible. Hence not by one sense (to wit hearing), but by many (namely, sight, touch and smell) he wishes to seal the certainty of his grace in our minds, so that we may be carried from sensible and earthy to intelligible and heavenly things.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> L. Berkhof, 616.

<sup>10</sup> Turretin, 3:343.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Second, as sinners who are ignorant and slow to apprehend spiritual truths, God, by the sacraments, helps our ignorance and slowness.<sup>12</sup> Because the sacraments are sensible signs, they are very effective in stimulating our souls and confirming our faith. With a greater use of the senses they are effective in moving the heart.

Sacraments are called signs not only because they are observable by the senses but also because they are symbols which point to something beyond themselves. By earthly visible signs God wants us to focus our attention and faith upon what the sign points to and represents.

In the Lord's supper the bread and wine represent the atonement, the sacrificial death of Christ. The wine which represents Jesus' blood is separate from the bread. Our Lord's blood was separated from His body by sacrifice. The Savior's blood was poured out as an offering for sin. In the Lord's supper there is a visual and sensible sign of the gospel. Christ suffered in the place of His people and died in their stead. The Lord's supper teaches a substitutionary atonement and all the manifold aspects of that work: expiation, propitiation, reconciliation and redemption.

The Lord's supper also points to our union with Christ, to the fact that all of our spiritual nourishment comes from Him. The bread and wine are consumed indicating that we are sanctified by the Spirit of Jesus within us and the knowledge we receive from the written Word. All our spiritual sustenance flows from the person and work of Christ. The Lord's supper teaches us about salvation in the broad sense of the term as deliverance from the guilt and the power of sin. The Lord's supper points to all the benefits secured by the sacrificial death of Christ (regeneration, justification, sanctification and glorification).

In the Lord's supper there is also a corporate element where the body of Christ, that is, the local body of believers, is acknowledged or discerned. Communion is a meal where believers ought to be sitting at tables facing each other as a spiritual family. In communion the love, fellowship and unity of the people of God is recognized. We must not overlook the fact that the Lord's supper is a meal: a time of fellowship, remembrance and celebration. The church is God's family. The church as a corporate body is nourished together, remembers Christ's work together and celebrates His victory together. While there is a solemn aspect of the supper in the fact we are meditating on the torn flesh, the intense suffering and spilt blood of the Savior. There is also a celebratory aspect of the supper as well; for we are communing not just with each other but also with the risen Messiah. He is spiritually present at the meal and nourishes us by His Spirit and Word. Interestingly in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and following where we are commanded to eat and drink in remembrance of Christ and what He has done, believers are warned (v. 29) not to eat or drink without discerning the Lord's body. Paul says that people who do not discern the Lord's body are partaking in an unworthy manner. In context the Lord's body very likely refers to the assembled church—the local body of believers. The Lord's supper is an ordinance that ought to sanctify both individually and corporately. When we understand various aspects of communion (the horizontal and vertical aspects) we will understand why this ordinance should not be neglected or treated as an unimportant after-thought.

The Lord's supper corresponds to the Old Covenant sacrament of the Passover in which the slain spotless lamb and the sprinkling of blood represented the atoning death of Jesus; and, the consuming of the paschal lamb represented the spiritual nourishment received from the Lord. The Old Testament church looked *forward* to the Messiah to come while we *look back* to a perfect sacrifice, a completed redemption. Thus, the Passover used the blood of lambs while the Lord's supper is bloodless and uses wine.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Baptism points to regeneration and the washing away, or removal, of a person's sins. In regeneration the Holy Spirit changes a person's heart causing it to be spiritually alive, cleansed, with a love for Christ and spiritual truth. This truth is especially evident in Old Testament passages which discuss what physical circumcision points to. "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (Dt. 10:16). "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt. 30:6). "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts" (Jer. 4:4). Paul concurs, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit..." (Rom 2:28, 29). In Philippians the apostle writes, "For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3; c.f. Col. 2:11).

The sprinkling of clean water points to the sprinkling of Jesus' blood or sacrificial death. In the Old Covenant era the high priest on the day of atonement mixed the blood from the sacrifice with water and sprinkled it on the mercy seat and on the covenant people. This sprinkling pointed to the cleansing power of Jesus' blood or the expiation of sin by the Messiah's death. The guilt of sin is covered, removed, washed away, cleansed and thus the penalty of sin has also been forever removed. A. A. Hodge writes, "The inward, spiritual grace, thereby signified is—(1.) Primarily, spiritual purification by the immediate personal power of the Holy Ghost in the soul; and hence, (2.) Secondarily, the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, hence the union of the baptized with Christ, hence regeneration, justification, sanctification, perseverance to the end, glorification, etc., —*i.e.*, all the benefits of the New Covenant."<sup>13</sup>

The connection between baptism as a sign of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins in the New Testament is unmistakable. Note the following passages. In 1 Peter 3:20-21 reads: "...eight souls, were saved through water; also to which an antitype doth now save us—baptism, (not a putting away of the filth of flesh, but the question of a good conscience in regard to God,) through the rising again of Jesus Christ" (*Young's Literal Translation of the Bible*). Peter refers to baptism as a figure of a believer being saved by the resurrection of Christ. The apostle's parenthetical comment regarding "not a putting away of the filth of flesh" is made to make sure the readers of his epistle would not confuse baptism as a sign with what baptism represents, the removal of a person's sins or the cleansing of the heart in regeneration. In John 3:5 Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." The religious use of water to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, would without question be one of purification. Sprinkling with water and the washing with water in the Old Testament symbolically represented God's internal purification of the sinner. This passage is not an explicit reference to baptism but to an aspect of what baptism represents. In Acts 2:38 Peter said, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." Acts 22:16 reads, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." These passages so strongly tie the sign with the thing signified that they have been used as proof texts for baptismal regeneration. Such an interpretation, however, is erroneous and will be considered below when we examine false views of the sacraments.

Baptism corresponds to the Old Covenant sacrament of circumcision which pointed to regeneration or the circumcision of the heart. "In Him you were also circumcised with the

---

<sup>13</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1958), 329

circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11).

In both baptism and the Lord’s supper we must focus our attention on the spiritual graces that are signified both in order to have a deeper understanding of the person and work of Christ and to avoid turning the sacraments into meaningless rituals or even worse magic idols.

## The Sacraments as Seals

When people consider the sacraments as signs they have no problem understanding the meaning of a sign. When considered as a seal, however, people have a more difficult time understanding what is meant by the term seal.

Before we examine how the term seal is used in Scripture an examination of how the English word is used will be helpful. When we speak of a seal we usually use the term in a number of related ways. There is the seal that is pressed on melted wax to seal a contract, a scroll or a letter. The seal is used to guarantee the contents of the letter or scroll. Those of us who are older remember the *Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval*. This sticker certified or guaranteed that a certain product met a standard of quality. Synonyms for seal in the dictionary are: “confirm, establish, ratify, close, fasten, shut.”<sup>14</sup>

Boice writes,

What is a seal? We do not use seals very often today, but we have enough examples to illustrate their meaning and importance. Suppose you want to go abroad. You have to secure a passport issued by the government of the United States. You apply for it, submitting two recent pictures of yourself. When it comes you find that one of the photos has been affixed to the passport with a seal: the great seal of the United States. It is stamped into the passport in such a way that it is impossible to remove or alter the photo without damaging and thus invalidating the document. This seal indicates that the authority of the United States government stands behind the passport in affirming that the person whose picture appears there is a true citizen of the United States. The other use of seals with which we are familiar is the affixing of these to a legal document by a Notary Public. The notary asks us to swear that the representations in the document are true and then affixes his or her seal to validate the transaction.<sup>15</sup>

The Scriptures use the term seal in much the same way we do today. The general idea of a seal in the Bible is the confirmation of a truth, covenant, contract or message by a token or physical sign. The physical sign is a proof, guarantee and reminder of a message, promise, contract or covenant. When a seal is observed the communication, promise or covenant should come immediately to mind.

A brief examination of some biblical passages which use the term will help us understand how it applies to the sacraments.

In the Old Testament, contracts were sealed in order to guarantee the legitimacy of their contents. In Jeremiah 32:10 ff., a deed or contract is sealed when purchasing a piece of land. When the princes, Levites and priests establish a covenant in Nehemiah (9:38, 10:1) the covenant is sealed. When Kings sent official letters they placed their seal upon it. The seal symbolized the king’s authority (see 1 Kings 21:8; Est. 3:10-12; 8:2, 10). Such correspondence must be obeyed.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jean L McKeachie, gen. ed., *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (New York: Collins World, 1978), 1635.

<sup>15</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 1:457.

In the New Testament the term seal is used in the sense of a guarantee. God seals the elect. Paul writes, “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His’” (2 Tim. 2:19). Paul tells the believers at Corinth that they are the seal or visible sign of his apostleship. “For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Cor. 9:2). When John the Baptist spoke of Christ’s revelation of God he said, “He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true” (Jn. 3:33 KJV; the NKJV says “certified”). The Son of God has given His personal attestation to that great truth.

The term “seal” when applied to the sacraments refers to the fact that they *seal, confirm, or certify* God’s promises in the covenant of grace and Christ’s love to the church—the elect. At the institution of the Lord’s supper Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). Our Lord gave the ordinance a personal character. He made it a seal or token of His love. He wanted us to have a visible sign to certify his love of us and our loving remembrance of Him. Communion certifies our participation in the covenant of grace, our union with Christ and our saving relationship with the triune God.

Once we understand the Lord’s supper as a sealing ordinance we begin to fathom the seriousness of being barred from communion as an act of church discipline. Unbelievers, heretics and scandalous persons are not permitted to partake of the certification of our love and fellowship with Christ. If professing Christians had a deeper meaning of this sacrament then they would tremble with fear at the thought of being cut off from the table. Sadly, today many believers take communion for granted as rather quaint, unimportant ritual.

In the sacraments God by sensible signs promises to give us the benefits of the covenant of grace and further sanctify us if we trust Him and live in accordance with our faith in Christ. When we receive the sacraments we actively assume all of the obligations of Scripture that are part of salvation in the broad sense of the term. We bind ourselves to fulfill them.

In the Lord’s supper the “cup” (which is a term for the wine within the cup) represents Jesus’ blood or death which ratifies the New Covenant. Thus our Lord says, “This cup is the New Covenant in My blood” (Lk. 22:20). The cup or wine represents Christ’s bloody sacrifice and thus it is a visible confirmation of the covenant. In communion the benefits of *the once and for all sacrifice* of God’s Son are signified, sealed and applied to believers.

In Romans 4:11 Paul says that “circumcision [is] a seal of the righteousness of the faith.” In the context it is clear that circumcision (or its New Covenant counterpart baptism) does not regenerate or save anyone because circumcision sealed the righteousness of faith Abraham had *before* he was circumcised. “In Gen. 17:11 God calls it a ‘token of the covenant.’ But this rite was more than a sign or token. It was also a pledge, a seal or confirmation of the righteousness of faith; not the means of begetting faith, much less the efficient cause of it; nor a seal of faith itself; no: but a seal or assurance of the righteousness, which had been imparted to him long before his circumcision, even when he believed God...”<sup>16</sup> “In the case of Abraham, Paul says that circumcision was ‘a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.’ That is, after Abraham had believed God and God had imparted [i.e., imputed] righteousness to him, God gave the seal of circumcision to validate what had happened. In the same way, baptism is a seal that the person being baptized has been identified with Jesus Christ as His disciple...”<sup>17</sup> “Circumcision is thus treated as a subsequent and external seal of that righteous status which Abraham already possessed as God’s free gift.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1870] 1971), 166.

<sup>17</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 1:457-458.

<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1963] 1985), 10.

## The Efficacy of the Sacraments

Having defined the term sacrament, examined the similarities between the sacraments and the Word of God as means of grace and considered the sacraments as signs and seals we will now consider the sacraments as means of grace in more detail. In doing this we need to examine the question of how the sacraments are efficacious—how the sacraments operate as means of grace. How do the sacraments sanctify? Do they have some intrinsic power? Do they work mysteriously upon the soul?

As we examine the efficacy of the sacraments we will sharpen our own definition by refuting common erroneous positions. There are many things to note regarding the power or efficacy of the sacraments.

(1) The power or efficacy of the sacraments does not reside in the sacraments themselves. It does not reside in the water of baptism or in the bread and wine of communion. The Reformed standards emphasize this point in contra-distinction to Romanism and to a certain extent Lutheranism. Papists believe that “the sacraments contain the grace which they signify. That this grace-conferring energy is inseparable from a genuine sacrament, and that as an objective fact, they contain it at all times, and present it alike to all subjects irrespective of character.”<sup>19</sup> A Roman Catholic would not refer to the sacraments as means of grace but as grace itself. According to the papal church, as long as the sacraments are conducted by a canonically authorized priest (i.e., a priest lawfully ordained in the Roman Catholic Church by a bishop in communion with the pope) and the priest has a lawful, proper intention in administering the sacraments, the sacraments always have an inherent power in themselves to effect grace.

For example, Romanists teach that the bread literally becomes Christ’s flesh and the wine is literally His blood. Therefore, they have intrinsic-automatic power to change the human soul. Everyone who is baptized is regenerated and justified. All persons who consume the eucharist are automatically transformed. The Latin phrase used by theologians to describe the idea that the sacraments have intrinsic power and work automatically is *ex opere operato* [i.e., by the outward rite itself]. This doctrine is set forth explicitly by the Council of Trent:

6. If anyone says that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain that grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who place no obstacles in its way, as though they are only outward signs of grace or justice received through faith and certain marks of Christian profession, whereby among men believers are distinguished from unbelievers, let him be anathema.

---

<sup>19</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 592. R. L. Dabney writes, “In the scholastic jargon of Rome, means of grace naturally divided themselves into two classes—those which do good *ex opere operato*, and those which only do good *ex opere operantis*. The former do good by the simple performance of the proper ceremonial, without any act or movement of soul in the recipients, accommodating themselves intelligently to the grace signified. The latter do good only when the recipient exercises the appropriate acts of soul; and the good done is dependent on those exercises, as well as on the outward means. Of the latter kind of means is preaching, &c; but Rome holds that the sacraments all belong to the former. Her meaning then, is that the mere administration of the sacrament does the appointed good to the recipient, provided he is not in a state of mortal sin, whether he exercises suitable frames or not. So Council of Trent, Sess. 7, Canon, 6-8. But Romish Theologians are far from being of one mind, as to the nature of this immediate and absolute efficacy” (*Systematic Theology* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1871) 1985], 739).

7. If anyone says that grace, so far as God's part is concerned, is not imparted through the sacraments always and to all men even if they receive them rightly, but only sometimes and to some persons, let him be anathema.

8. If anyone says that by the sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred *ex opere operato* [i.e., by the outward rite itself], but that faith alone in the divine promise is sufficient to obtain grace, let him be anathema.<sup>20</sup>

Romanists inconsistently teach that, in the case of adults, faith is needed; that atheists and professed infidels do not benefit from the saving power of the sacraments. But, they define faith as mere assent to the teachings of the church. “[I]t is true the recipient must be a believer; but whether he has what St. Peter calls ‘precious faith of God’s elect,’ or the same kind of faith that Simon Magus had, makes no difference.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, one can observe members of the mafia and other scandalous sinners partaking of the mass.

The Roman Catholic position on the Lord’s supper was solidified at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Theologians refer to their view of communion as transubstantiation. Erickson writes, “Transubstantiation is the doctrine that as the administering priest consecrates the elements, an actual metaphysical change takes place. The substance of the bread and wine—what they actually are—is changed into Christ’s flesh and blood respectively. Note that what is changed is the substance, not the accidents. Thus the bread retains the shape, texture, and taste of bread. But what it essentially is has been changed. All who participate in the Lord’s Supper, or the Holy Eucharist as it is termed, literally take the physical body and blood of Christ into themselves.”<sup>22</sup> This bizarre, mystical view was developed by Thomas Aquinas who based his metaphysics in a large part on Aristotle the Greek heathen philosopher.

If one observes a Roman Catholic mass, one will notice that the priest places the “host” (a little piece of bread) directly on the tongue of the recipient. Also, one will observe an altar boy holding a gold or silver plate underneath the mouth of the recipient to catch any crumbs. The purpose of this is to make sure that any pieces of “Jesus” do not fall onto the floor where they can get dirty or be stepped on. Such is the absurd, superstitious nature of transubstantiation.

The Lutheran doctrine also holds that the sacraments have an inherent power or efficacy apart from the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. Berkhof writes,

The Lutheran Reformation did not entirely rid itself of the Roman Catholic conception of the sacraments. Luther did not regard the water in baptism as common water, but as a water which had become, through the Word with its inherent divine power, a gracious water of life, washing and regeneration. Through this divine efficacy of the Word the sacrament effects regeneration. In the case of adults Luther made the effect of baptism dependent on faith in the recipient. Realizing he could not make it so in the case of children, who cannot exercise faith, he at one time held that God by His prevenient grace works faith in the unconscious child, but later on professed ignorance on this point. Later Lutheran theologians retained the idea of an infant-faith as a precondition for baptism, while others conceived of baptism as producing such a faith immediately.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the Lutheran idea of consubstantiation which asserts that Jesus according to His human nature, that is, His real flesh and blood, is in, with and through the elements of bread and

---

<sup>20</sup> John Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1973), 425-426.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:512.

<sup>22</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1115-1116.

<sup>23</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 627.

wine places an inherent power in the Lord's supper. Although Lutherans reject the Roman Catholic doctrine that the sacraments effect grace *ex opere operato*, they still teach that the sacraments intrinsically have a grace-conferring efficacy. Thus, there is a sense in which every person with or without faith receives what the sacraments objectively have. But the sacraments only take effect in people who have the genuine faith that can receive them. Their intrinsic power only works for good upon believers. Charles Hodge writes,

Lutherans are wont to refer to the analogy between the Word and sacraments. The difference between them and the Reformed as to the sacraments, is analogous to the difference between the two churches as to the Word. The Reformed refer the supernatural power of the Word, not to the literal Word as written or spoken; not to the mere mortal truth therein revealed, but to the cooperation, or as Paul calls it, the demonstration, of the Spirit. The Lutherans, on the other hand, teach that there is inherent in the divine Word (not in the letters or the sound but in the truth), a supernatural divine virtue, inseparable from it, and independent of its use; and which is the same to believers and unbelievers; sanctifying and saving the former, because of their faith, and not benefiting the latter, because of their voluntary resistance. So the sacraments have an inherent, divine power, certain of producing saving effects, if they meet with faith in those who receive them.<sup>24</sup>

That the sacraments in themselves apart from a work of the Holy Spirit and the faith of the recipient contain no special grace that is appropriated by the receivers has been concisely proved by the early Presbyterian theologian John Brown of Haddington. He writes,

1. It is not their nature to contain or produce inward grace, but to signify and seal that which God brings along with them. The rainbow gave God's full security against a second universal deluge; but it did not hinder the waters from rising, rain from falling. Seals annexed to the patents or donative letters of kings do not confer anything, but merely confirm the royal grants contained in the sealed writs. 2. If the sacraments of themselves conferred or produced inward grace, it must by some natural power of the corporeal signs, or by some spiritual power infused in them, –both of which are equally absurd. 3. Common sense loudly proclaims, that *material* signs can never produce purification, or nourishment, in a soul. 4. Scripture declares, that mere partaking of sacramental signs is of no avail for securing salvation, Rom. ii. 25-29. Gal. vi. 15. v. 6. 1 Pet. iii. 21. 1 Cor. xi 27-29. 5. All the blessings which are sealed by the sacraments to believers, are ascribed to the mercy and grace of God, not to the operation of the outward signs, Isa. i. 18. xliii. 25. Ezek. xxxvi. 25-31. Phil. ii. 13. 6. Faith and repentance are pre-required, as necessary to render sacraments effectual for salvation, Mark xvi. 16. 1 Cor. xi. 27-29.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years a new form of baptismal efficacy has arisen that achieves the same end as *ex opere operato* but in a clever indirect manner. The Auburn Avenue theology (the Federal Vision, Monroe Doctrine, etc.) says that the water of baptism does not have any intrinsic magical power. But, since baptism makes a person a member of the church and being a member of the church (according to their view) automatically unites a person to Christ; and, thus procures all the benefit of Jesus' redemptive work, then it is proper to say that the ritual of baptism is always efficacious and has true saving power. The Auburn Avenue theologians achieve a similar end to

---

<sup>24</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:505.

<sup>25</sup> John Brown, *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002), 533.

Romanism but do so through their unique ecclesiology rather than intrinsic efficacy.<sup>26</sup> Having said this, there are other statements by these theologians with regard to baptism and the Lord's supper that could be interpreted in an old-fashioned sacramentalist manner.<sup>27</sup>

The important thing to note regarding this theology is the separation of a genuine faith from the efficacy of the sacraments. The external form of the sacrament, or the sign, and the application of the sign by a minister of the gospel are *never* efficacious apart from a work of the Holy Spirit and the faith of the recipient. This point is proved by Acts 8 where in verse 13 Simon Magus is baptized by Philip the evangelist; but who in verses 21 to 23 is told by Peter that he is not saved at all. If the Auburn Avenue doctrine was true, then Simon Magus was truly saved but the within the space of a few hours apostatized and lost his salvation. Such thinking is absurd.

(2) The power or efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on or derive from the person who administered the sacraments. When God appoints or authorizes certain persons (teaching elders) to administer the sacraments He does not bestow any special supernatural powers upon that person which renders the sacraments effectual. If the efficacy of the sacraments was dependent on the worthiness of the person administering them, then one would know if the sacraments were effective or lawful because the person distributing them may be a secret hypocrite or even unregenerate. Such a concern would take away from the sacraments and one's attention to the person and work of Christ and unduly focus on the officiating church officer. Fortunately, the strengthening of our faith and our sanctification does not depend on the virtue, holiness, qualifications or special priesthood of the man dispensing the sacraments. This point was a matter of great debate early in the Reformation because people wanted to know whether or not their baptism at the hands of an ignorant, immoral priest was a valid baptism. The Reformers decided unanimously that Trinitarian baptism was valid because it did not depend on the character or intent of the priest. Further, at that time they regarded the papal church as a visible church as regards its being, although a scandalously corrupt church.

(3) The biblical view of the sacraments which is taught in the Westminster Standards is that first and foremost the efficacy of the sacraments depends on the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the efficacy of the sacraments depends on the faith (biblically defined) of the recipient. The work of the Holy Spirit is said to be primary because: a) The faith of the recipient is originally (regeneration) and continually a work of the Holy Spirit. b) The Holy Spirit applies the Word and sacraments to our hearts making them effectual.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments is emphasized in the Westminster Standards. Larger Catechism Answer 161 reads: "The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not by any power in themselves, or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of him by whom they are administered, but only by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing

---

<sup>26</sup> Auburn Avenue apologist Peter Leithart writes, "If baptism initiates into the church, the question about baptismal efficacy is not what power is in water, but what the church is—what *is* this community into which baptism inducts me? If, as I have argued above, the church is the saved community and the people in fellowship with the Father through the Son in the Spirit, then baptism as the entry rite into this community, must give the baptized a share in this community and this fellowship. If the church is the family of God, baptism, by inducting people into the church, makes them children of their heavenly Father. If the church is the body of Christ, then baptism makes the baptized member of the body a branch of the vine. If the church is the temple of the Spirit, then baptism makes the baptized a pillar or stone of that temple and himself a temple indwelt by the Spirit" ("Trinitarian Anthropology: Toward a Trinitarian Re-casting of Reformed Theology" in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons* [Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004], 70-71).

<sup>27</sup> See Brian Schwertley, "A Defense of Reformed Orthodoxy Against the Romanizing Doctrines of the New Auburn Theology" in Wayne Rodgers, ed. *The New Southern Presbyterian Review* (Cummins, GA: Chalcedon Presbyterian Church, Summer 2004), 51-55.

of Christ, by whom they are instituted.” The Confession says: “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that does administer it:<sup>28</sup> but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (27:3).” Calvin concurs: “But the sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears. Therefore, I make such a division between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the former, and the ministry alone is left to the latter—a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power” (IV, XIV, 9).<sup>29</sup>

A good way to understand the power of the sacraments is to compare them to God’s Word. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God in precisely the same manner as the sacraments. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to teach us about Christ, to strengthen our faith and sanctify our hearts. The Holy Spirit applies the Word to our hearts, enlightens our minds, causes us to believe and applies Scripture to our lives. The Bible teaches us; it is didactic. However, apart from the Spirit’s work in us, it is a dead letter with no intrinsic power or real ability to save or sanctify. Likewise, the sacraments serve a didactic function. They do not have any secret mysterious power or intrinsic efficacy. They present truths in visible, tangible, sensible form. Only when the sacraments are accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit who opens our minds and enables us to understand and receive what they teach by faith are they efficacious. Although the sacraments function spiritually like the Word they are not exactly the same; for the sacraments depend upon the Word while the Word is served by the sacraments. Calvin writes, “Yet when words precede, the laws of covenants are by such signs ratified, although they were first conceived, established, and decreed in words. The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s word. And because we are of flesh, they are shown us under things of the flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children. Augustine calls a sacrament ‘a visible word’ for the reason that it represents God’s promises as painted in a picture and sets them before our sight, portrayed graphically and in the manner of images” (IV; XIV; 6).<sup>30</sup>

When Reformed churches teach that the Holy Spirit accompanies the sacraments and sanctifies believers they set themselves apart from the sacramental views of Romanists, high church Episcopalians and Lutherans, as well as the mere memorial view of the Lord’s supper that is common among modern evangelicals. The sacraments are true means of grace.

The crucial role of the Holy Spirit in applying the sacraments as means of grace is clearly taught in Scripture. Note the following passages: “I indeed baptize you with water unto

---

<sup>28</sup> Rom. 2:28-29 says, “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” 1 Pet. 3:21 reads: “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill ed., Ford Lewis Battles, Trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1284.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 2:1281.

repentance.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 3:11). “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 11:12). “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (Rom. 2:29). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” (Gal. 6:15). “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21).

## The Sacraments as Badges of Profession

The sacraments also serve as visible badges of membership in the Christian church. That is, they put a visible difference between members of the visible church and the heathen world. This point is especially true of circumcision and its New Testament counterpart baptism. Thus the term uncircumcision or uncircumcised is sometimes equivalent to pagan. Note the following passages: “And they said to them, ‘We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a reproach to us’” (Gen. 34:14). “And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it” (Ex. 12:48). The person who is baptized and partakes of the Lord’s supper is set apart from the world and has all the external privileges of membership in the visible church. The sacraments should be seen as great gifts of God for His own family. The world is outside of the wedding feast of the lamb.

## The Number of the Sacraments

According to the word of God there are only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s supper. This fact is acknowledged by virtually all Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, penance, orders, communion, marriage and extreme unction. While papists sometimes make feeble attempts to justifying the five sacraments that they have added to Scripture by appealing to the biblical passages (e.g., confirmation, Acts 8:17; penance, Jas. 5:16; orders, 1 Tim. 4:14; marriage, Eph. 5:31; extreme unction, Mk. 6:13, etc.), it is generally acknowledged that these church ordinances have grown out of the soil of church tradition without any divine warrant. We know this is true because Christ only instituted two sacraments, not seven.

There are a few Anabaptist groups that regard feet washing as a sacrament. These sects, however, are mistaken because: (a) Foot washing was never designed to convey grace; (b) It merely was a symbol on a special occasion designed to demonstrate the need to serve and love one another; (c) The wearing of sandals on streets of dust does not exist in most modern cultures; therefore, obedience to Jesus’ example can take many forms.

Copyright 2008 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)