

CHAPTER 4

THE MEANS OF GRACE AND THE SACRAMENTS

The means of grace

The means of grace are the outward methods by which we receive saving grace; cf. WLC 153, WSC 85. They are related to the means of sanctification.

The means of grace which are specifically related to the church are the word of God, prayer, and the sacraments.

1) The word.—The visible church is given the primary responsibility of proclaiming and teaching the word of God (Matt 28:19-20, etc.). The word is a definite means of grace (WCF 1, WLC 155-160, WSC 89-90). This subject is discussed in the course Doctrine of the Word of God.

2) The sacraments.—The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are also means of grace (WCF 27, WLC 161-64, WSC 91-93). They will be discussed in this section.

3) Prayer.—Prayer is a means of grace (exposition of the Lord's Prayer in WLC 186-96, WSC 99-107). Genuine prayer is one of the first signs of regeneration. Prayer benefits the Christian two ways:

- a) Objectively, as God answers his specific prayers
- b) Subjectively, as the Christian in prayer draws near to God and submits to his will

Helpful classic books on prayer:

- Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Prayer*
- C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, ch. 1-4; *The Power of Prayer* (excerpts from sermons); *The Power of Prayer in a Christian's Life* (sermon excerpts compiled by Robert Hall)
- Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, various portions

Meaning of the term *sacrament*

Derivation

The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which is the term the Latin fathers used to translate the Greek word μυστήριον *mysterion*, the term used by the Greek fathers. They applied this term to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Basic meaning of sacrament

The Latin term refers to that which is given or done as the result of an oath or pledge. Often it refers to the oath itself; cf. Pliny's letter to Trajan (Bettenson, p. 5), "They bind themselves by an oath [*sacramentum*]."

This idea of a binding vow or oath fits well with the idea recently proposed by Meredith G. Kline, which relates the sacraments to ancient treaty obligations and ordeals (*By Oath Consigned*, p. 81).

Meaning of sacrament in Christian theology

Cf. WCF 27:1, WLC 162, WSC 92

According to our standards, sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace; they must be instituted by God; and they must be symbolic of the benefits of redemption, which are thereby represented, sealed, and applied (WSC only) to the elect.

Identity of the sacraments

Sacraments of the OT

Cf. WCF 7:5; 27:5

These sacraments include circumcision, the offerings, the religious feasts.

Two of these sacraments had the same significance as their NT counterparts: circumcision (Col 2:11-12), and Passover (1 Cor 5:7-8).

Sacraments of the NT

The only sacraments during this period are baptism and the Lord's Supper; WCF 27:4, WLC 164, WSC 93.

The similarities and differences between these two sacraments are enumerated in WLC 176-177.

Roman Catholic sacraments

The seven Roman Catholic sacraments seem to have been standardized by Peter Lombard in the twelfth century. He held that these seven sacraments were not only “visible signs of invisible grace,” but also “the cause of the grace it signifies” (*NIDCC*, p. 768; see also Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 2:79-85).

The seven Roman Catholic sacraments are as follows:

- 1) Baptism
- 2) Confirmation
- 3) Eucharist
- 4) Penance
- 5) Matrimony
- 6) Holy orders
- 7) Anointing the sick (extreme unction)

John Calvin noted that if marriage was a sacrament because it pictured Christ and the church, then thievery should be a sacrament, since Jesus will come as a thief! (*Institutes* 4:19:34, use of 1 Thess 5:2).

Efficacy of the sacraments

Roman Catholic view

- 1) The visible signs, administered rightly, actually convey the grace signified: *ex opere operato*—it operates by the action.
- 2) Thus, baptism actually cleanses from original sin; penance actually forgives sin; eucharist actually gives spiritual life, etc.
- 3) No particular faith is required by the recipient; he need only submit to the form prescribed by the church.
- 4) The sacraments have effect only if administered, with proper intent, by an ordained priest of the Roman Catholic Church (see Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 179-80, concerning proper intent).

Lutheran view

- 1) Faith is required in adults; there is no *ex opere operato*. In the case of infants, the Holy Spirit kindles faith. Grace is given to all recipients, but faith is required to profit from that grace (cf. the woman who touched Jesus' garment, Matt 9:20).
- 2) The power of the sacraments comes through the word which accompanies the sign; the word always is joined with the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Baptism is required for infant salvation.

Reformed (Calvinistic) view

Cf. WCF 27:2-3, WLC 161, WSC 91

Calvin's particular view is well summarized in the "Consensus Tigurinus," which he composed in 1549 (<http://www.creeds.net/Tigurinus/tigur-bvd.htm>); cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3:631-632. It has been recently promoted by Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (2002).

- 1) There is no intrinsic power in the elements or the accompanying word.
- 2) The intent of the administrator is not decisive.
- 3) The sacraments have two parts: the visible sign, and the spiritual efficacy or grace. The spiritual efficacy of the sacrament depends on the sovereign pleasure of the Holy Spirit, who normally operates through the faith of the recipient.
- 4) The type of grace conveyed is the same as that conveyed by other means.
- 5) The accompanying graces often are conveyed at the time of the sacrament, but they need not be so.

Zwinglian view

- 1) The sacraments are symbolic only, with no grace sealed at the time.
- 2) The word "ordinance" therefore is preferred.
- 3) Purpose of sacraments is only to teach and remind the believer of Christ's work.

Reformed answer to Zwinglian view

Cf. WCF 27:2, WLC 163

In many ways

The Scriptures tie the sacraments and their spiritual benefits very closely together. E.g.,

Gen. 17:10, the covenant = circumcision

“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”

Matt 26:27-28, the cup = Christ’s blood

“Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

Acts 22:16, baptized = cleansed

“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

1 Cor 11:28-31, unworthy taking of Supper results in physical illness and death

“A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.”

Titus 3:5, “washing of (=) regeneration” (genitive of apposition)

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”