

CHAPTER 27

OF THE SACRAMENTS

Definition of sacrament

“1. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world, and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.”

The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which in turn is the term the Latin fathers used to translate the Greek word *mysterion* (“mystery”). They applied this term to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. 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. In Pliny’s letter to Trajan, written early in the second century and describing the Christian church in his district, he states that “they bind themselves by an oath [*sacramentum*].”

This idea of a binding oath fits well with the recent understanding which relates the sacraments to ancient treaty obligations and ordeals. By performing sacramental action, the parties to the treaty would bind themselves to obey its provisions and live under its sanctions of penalties or rewards.

In Reformed theology, according to our standards, the sacraments have the following qualities:

- Sign and seal of covenant of grace (Gen 17:7, 10; Rom 4:11)
- Instituted by God (WLC 162 and WSC 92, “instituted by Christ”; Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:23)
- Represent Christ and his benefits (1 Cor 10:16)
- Confirm our interest in Christ (1 Cor 11:25-26; Gal 3:27)
- Put a visible difference between the church and the world (Exod 12:48)
- Promise of Christian service (Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 10:21)

A. A. Hodge summarizes the essence of the sacraments as follows in his *The Confession of Faith*:

- A sacrament is an ordinance immediately instituted by Christ.
- A sacrament always consists of two elements—(1) An outward, sensible sign; and (2) An inward, spiritual grace, thereby signified.
- The sign in every sacrament is sacramentally united to the grace which it signifies; and out of this union the Scriptural usage has arisen of ascribing to the sign whatever is true of that which the sign signifies.
- The sacraments were designed to *represent, seal, and apply* (WSC 92) the benefits of Christ and the new covenant to the elect.
- They were designed to be pledges of our fidelity to Christ, binding us to his service, and at the same time badges of our profession, visibly marking the body of professors and distinguishing them from the world.

Grace in the sacraments

These following two sections explain the relationship of the visible sign to the grace pictured in that sign.

Spiritual relation between sign and grace

“2. There is in every Sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.”

There are passages of Scripture that refer to the sacraments and to the effects of the grace signified in the sacraments in the same manner. The Westminster divines noted the following examples:

- Gen 17:10, the covenant = circumcision
- Matt 26:27-28, the cup = Christ’s blood
- Titus 3:5, “washing of [water] (=) regeneration”
- Note also Acts 22:16, baptized = cleansed

Grace in the sacraments

“3. The grace which is exhibited in or by the Sacraments, rightly used, 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, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.”

This section distinguishes the Reformed view of the sacraments from that of the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians.

Roman Catholic view

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

Lutheran view

- Faith is required in adults; there is no *ex opera 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 in Matt 9:20).
- The power of the sacraments comes through the word that accompanies the sign; the word always is joined with the Holy Spirit.
- Baptism is required for infant salvation.

Reformed view

- There is no intrinsic power in the elements or in the accompanying word.
- The intent of the administrator is not decisive.

- 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.
- The type of grace conveyed is the same as that conveyed by other means.
- The accompanying graces often are conveyed at the time of the sacrament, but they need not be so.

Zwinglian view

- The sacraments are symbolic only, with no grace sealed at the time.
- The word “ordinance” therefore is preferred.

[The verses in section 2 oppose the Zwinglian view.]

The Reformed view of the sacraments is confirmed by the Scripture. The sacraments do not have spiritual power in themselves, only when the Spirit produces faith in the recipients (Rom 2:28-29; 1 Pet 3:21). Nor does the intention or piety of the officiating minister guarantee or deny their power, as the examples of good and bad priests in Israel’s history should prove.

Identity of the sacraments

The next two sections identify the sacraments in both the Old Testament and New Testament dispensations.

New Testament sacraments

“4. There be only two Sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.”

These are the only New Testament ordinances which meet the qualifications shown in paragraph 1. The similarities and differences between these two sacraments are enumerated in WLC 176-177.

Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper were established to be lasting ordinances by Christ (Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:23-26). They are to continue until he returns to the earth (“until the end of the age [KJV ‘world’],” “until he comes”).

These sacraments are to be administered only by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called to that office (cf. 1 Cor 4:1; 2 Cor 3:6; 4:1).

The seven sacraments claimed by the Roman Catholic Church 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 causes of the grace they signify. These seven are as follows:

- 1) Baptism
- 2) Confirmation
- 3) Eucharist (Lord's Supper)
- 4) Penance
- 5) Matrimony
- 6) Holy Orders (Ordination)
- 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 1 Thess 5:2 says that Jesus will come as a thief!

Old Testament sacraments

“5. The Sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New.”

In the Old Testament God gave many sacramental ordinances, for example circumcision, the Passover, and the sacrifices. The significance of circumcision parallels that of baptism, and the Passover that of the Lord's Supper (this will be shown in the following two chapters). All of these point ahead to Christ, as taking our punishment upon himself, and giving us life in exchange.