

WCF 27: OF THE SACRAMENTS

Introduction

It is sometimes objected that the term ‘sacrament’ is not found in the Scripture and carries with it a vestige of Romish sacerdotalism, and therefore should not be used in the Christian Church, much less in a Confession of Faith. This is one of the reasons, it is supposed, why the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 dropped the term, preferring to call baptism and the Lord’s Supper simply as ordinances.

But in so far as the sacraments (Circumcision and the Passover in the Old Testament; and Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament) are distinguishable from the other ordinances of God (e.g., Lk 1:6; Rom 13:2; 1 Cor 11:2; Eph 2:15; Col 2:14, etc.), there is a good reason for us to retain a special term for them, and to treat them separately.

Why do we use the term sacrament? Calvin suggests that the “the ancients [Church Fathers] had no other intention than to signify that they are [sacred] signs of holy and spiritual things” (*ICR* 4.14.13). In other words, they could have used other words, but the word sacrament (or the Latin *sacramentum*) was chosen for the purpose because it was deemed suitable enough.

Others have tried to explain why the term is retained, though as Calvin demurred,—not very convincingly. It is suggested that the word *sacrament* is derived from the Latin word *sacramentum* which was employed by the early Christian writers as synonymous with the scriptural term *mystery* (Greek: *musthvrion*). It is thought that this synonymous meaning of *sacramentum* was the basis for the Latin Christians to call the ordinances of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism sacraments. They did so partly because, under the external symbols and rituals, the spiritual blessings and significance of the ordinances are veiled, and partly also because of the secrecy with which Christians under persecution were obliged to observe them.

Others have pointed to the classical and dictionary meaning of the word *sacramentum*, i.e., “an oath taken by newly enlisted soldiers” (*Oxford Latin minidictionary*; cf. *ICR* 4.14.13). When a soldier makes a *sacramentum*, he pledges himself to be faithful to his general and not to desert his standard. In the same way, when we who are enlisted in the service of Christ participate in the sacrament, we solemnly pledge to be faithful to the Captain of our salvation and to follow Him whithersoever He leads us (cf. 1 Pet 3:21 where “answer” [*ejperwvthma*] can be translated “pledge”). But as Calvin noted, we must understand that the sacrament is not so much the soldier’s pledge, but “the commander’s act of receiving soldiers into the ranks. For by the sacraments the Lord promises that “he will be our God and we shall be his people” [2 Cor 6:16; Ezk 37:27]” (*Ibid.*).

On the Nature of Sacraments

27.1 *Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace,¹ immediately instituted by God,² to represent Christ and His benefits, and to confirm our interest in Him,³ as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world;⁴ and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.⁵*

¹Rom 4:11; Gen 17:7, 10; ²Mt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:23; ³1 Cor 10:16; 11:25–26; Gal 3:27; 17; ⁴Rom 15:8; Ex 12:48; Gen 34:14; ⁵Rom 6:3–4; 1 Cor 10:16, 21.

- Sacraments are immediately instituted by God, or more specifically, as both the *Larger Catechism* (Q. 162) and the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 92) state: “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ” (Mt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:23–26).
- Sacraments serve three purposes:
 - a. They serve as “holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace... to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him.” A *sign* is something that visibly represents or makes known that which it points to. A *seal* is something that authenticates or confirms that to which it is attached. As a sign a sacrament represents the benefits of Christ in the Covenant of Grace pictorially, just as preaching presents them audibly. As a seal, it confirms our interest in Christ. The terms “sign” and “seal” were used by Paul to describe circumcision: “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11a; cf. Gen 17:7, 10). But it is not difficult to see how it can be applied also to the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

The Lord’s Supper was clearly instituted in the context of the Covenant of Grace for when the Lord instituted the Lord’s Supper, He said: “This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.... This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you” (Lk 22:19–20). The word translated ‘testament’ (*diaghvkh*) may be translated ‘covenant.’ The Lord was referring to the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:8–12, 10:16–17). As a *sign* the Lord’s Supper points to the death of Christ and the benefits that come with it. Thus Paul declares that we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we “do shew the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Cor 11:26). It is as a *seal* that the Lord’s Supper is denoted a communion of the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16); i.e., it points to our spiritual union and communion with Christ. It ratifies our interest in Christ.

That baptism is instituted in the context of the Covenant of Grace is not only seen in its identification with circumcision (Col 2:11–12), but also in Acts 2:38–39 where Peter ties baptism with the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Gal 3:14–16). In Acts 2, Peter preached: “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” This promise is the Abrahamic promise, according to Galatians 3:14–16: “That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” Thus Paul speaks about our being baptised into Christ and made partakers of the Abrahamic promise: “For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:27–29). As a *sign*, baptism points to our being baptised by the Holy Spirit into Christ (1 Cor 12:13). As a *seal*, it ratifies our membership in the Church visible which serves to reflect membership in the Church invisible.

- b. They “put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world.” This is clearly the case for baptism: “Then they that gladly

received his word were baptised: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). Baptism then is the divinely appointed badge to mark out a person as a member of the visible Church. That this is not the case for the Lord’s Supper can be seen the fact that the Lord’s Supper, like the Passover, is not open to any but believers. In the Old Covenant, the LORD declared to Moses: “And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will 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 one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof” (Ex 12:48). In the New Covenant Paul declared: “Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11:27–29).

- c. They “solemnly to engage [believers] to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.” Paul, for example, tells us that those who are baptised “should walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3, 4) and that those who participate in the Lord’s Table ought not to be partakers of “the table of the devils” (1 Cor 10:16, 21). Moreover, we are to partake of the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of Christ (1 Cor 11:25), which surely means much more than a mere bringing to mind what Christ has done, without a solemn resolution to love Him, serve Him and obey Him.

27.2 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.¹

¹Gen 17:10; Mt 26:27–28; Tit 3:5.

- A sacrament has two parts: the sign and the thing signified. In baptism, the sign is water, which can be felt and seen. The water signifies the Holy Spirit and application of the water signifies regeneration and Spirit-Baptism: Thus John the Baptist declared: “I indeed have baptised you with water: but he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost” (Mk 1:8; cf. Mt 3:11). Similarly, in the Lord’s Supper, the signs are the bread and wine which may be seen, handled and tasted. The bread and wine signify the body and blood of Christ respectively.
- The spiritual relationship between the sign and thing signified, i.e., the sacramental union, is so close that Scripture frequently uses expressions in which the names of the signs and the things signified are exchanged. Thus in the Old Testament, the Lord said: “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised” (Gen 17:10). Obviously circumcision is not the covenant but signifies the benefit of the covenant. Similarly, Christ giving the bread to His disciples said: “this is my body, which is broken for you” (1 Cor 11:24); and when He passed the wine, He said, “this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt 26:28). Obviously, Christ did not mean as Rome and the Lutherans teach that the bread was literally His flesh or contains His flesh, nor the wine literally His blood or contains His blood. In the case of Baptism, it is the same Paul said: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the

washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit 3:5). Clearly, Paul is referring primarily to the spiritual reality of regeneration, but he alludes to the sign of baptism to remind his readers that baptism as a work does not save, rather, it signifies and seals regeneration. Indeed, sometimes, the name of the sacrament is used, at the same time, to refer both to the sign,—in one sense,—and the thing signified,—in another sense. This is probably how we should understand Colossians 2:11–12—“In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” Here Paul is clearly referring to water baptism (cf. Rom 6:3), yet he says that baptism is “circumcision made without hands” alluding to inward grace. The difficulty is resolved when we realise that Paul is comparing physical circumcision with water baptism by pointing to the same inward reality they both represent. The modern significance to understanding this union becomes clear in the next section.

On the Efficacy of Sacraments

27.3 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,¹ but upon the work of the Spirit,² and the word of institution; which contains, together with a precept authorising the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.³

¹Rom 2:28–29; ¹Pet 3:21; ²Mt 3:11; ¹Cor 12:13; ³Mt 26:27–28; 28:19–20.

- This paragraph is levelled against two errors, namely, (1) that the sacrament has power in themselves, and confers grace *ex opere operato* upon every recipient who does not positively resist. This is an error of Rome; and (2) that the efficacy of the sacrament is dependant on the piety or intent of the person administering it. Rome admits that the efficacy of the sacrament is not dependant on the piety of the person, but they insists that it depends: (a) Upon the fact that the administrator is canonically authorised; and (b) Upon the fact that the administrator exercises at the moment of administration the secret ‘intention’ of doing what the Church intends in the definition of the sacrament (see *Hodge*, 333). Again these erroneous views, our Confession asserts that “the efficacy of a sacrament depend... upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution; which contains, together with a precept authorising the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.” The fact that sacraments do not have intrinsic power can be seen in that many who partake of the sacraments are not partakers of the grace of God, a classic example being Simon Magus (Acts 8:13, 23). Rather the efficacy of the sacrament is dependent on two things primarily: the work of the Holy Spirit and the word of institution—which contains both a command and promise. On the second, Calvin asserts: “the right administering of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word” (*ICR* 4.17.39). It is also secondarily dependant on the faith of the partakers.
- It should also be carefully noted that a sacrament does not only signify and seal, but is a means to apply Christ and the benefit of the Covenant of Grace. The *WSC* 92 makes it clear: “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented,

sealed, and *applied* to believers.” The word ‘applied’ as used here may surprise some of us because most of us have a tendency to overreact to the Romish doctrine in which the efficacy of the sacrament are derived *ex opere operato*, i.e., grace is conferred by the actions of the priest; so that we swing to the other end of a clean dichotomy between the sacrament and the things signified, so that the meaning of the sacraments are changed. Thus the Lord’s Supper is seen only as a commemorative rite and baptism is seen as testimony of faith to the public. This is partly the reason why many prefer not to call sacraments as sacraments. But the Scripture with its frequent interchange of terms applying to the sacramental signs and the things signified; and the Westminster Confession teach otherwise. Thus, *WCF* 28.6 speaks of the efficacy of the baptism in this wise: “The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and *conferred* by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time.” In other words, baptism is a means by which the benefit of the covenant, namely regeneration is applied, though the actual application is not dependant on the time of the baptism, i.e., it may be before or after. Thomas Boston remarks:

“[Baptism] is not of absolute necessity to salvation, as if the simple want thereof could hinder salvation; for God has not made baptism and faith equally necessary, Mark 16:16.... It is necessary by divine precept, as an instituted means of salvation. So that the contempt of it is a sin, and a great one, that will damn men, unless it be pardoned through the blood of Christ, Luke 7:30...” (*Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* [SWRB], 2.479).

This position must be distinguished from those who hold to baptismal regeneration—that regeneration is dependant upon baptism so that those who are not baptised remain unregenerate until they are.

On the Number and Administration of the Sacraments

27.4 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.¹

¹*Mt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:20, 23; 4:1; Heb 5:4.*

This paragraph is again levelled against two errors of Rome.

- Firstly, she has added five spurious sacraments, namely ordination, marriage, confirmation, penance, and extreme unction. None of these can be considered a sacrament solely by Scripture alone.
- Secondly, Rome also permits laymen and midwives to administer the sacrament of baptism in cases of necessity. This is due to the Romish doctrine that unless a person or infant is baptised, he is doomed. Our Confession, asserts, rather that none but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained, has any warrant to dispense the sacrament. This is because, firstly, “the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer [i.e., apply] and set forth Christ to us, and in Him the treasures of heavenly

grace” (ICR 4.14.17); and secondly, on 1 Corinthians 4:1—“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” The “mysteries of God” appears to refer to the sacraments.

27.5 *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.*¹

¹1 Cor 10:1–4.

- The sacraments of the Old Testament were circumcision and the Passover. The sacraments of the Old Testament pointed to Christ to come, while the sacraments of the New Testament point to Christ who has already completed His work pertaining to His incarnation. Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. Both were rites of initiation (cf. Gen 17:14; Acts 2:41). Both signified spiritual regeneration (cf. Deut 10:16, 30:6; Mt 3:11). Thus circumcision is to a Jew what baptism is to the New Testament Christian (Gal 3:27, 29; Col 2:10–12). In the same way, the Lord’s Supper supersedes the Passover when the Lord took the elements of the Passover and gave them new meaning (Mt 26:26–29); and so Paul speaks of Christ as our passover: “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Cor 5:7); and John refers to Christ as being the passover Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 36; 19:33, cf. Ex 12:46).
- The Covenant of Grace is called the everlasting covenant (Gen 17:7 and Heb 13:20). This means that there is only one plan of salvation running throughout all history. The outward form has changed, but the covenant has not changed. The way in which the covenant has been administered has changed, but not the covenant itself. This is illustrated as follows:

ONE EVERLASTING COVENANT	
Gen 17:7; Heb 13:20	
The Old Testament Form	The New Testament Form
<p><i>Circumcision</i> - Gen 17:7 (1-14) Administered once to believers and their children picturing cleansing from sin and covenant union in a bloody sign.</p>	<p><i>Baptism</i> - Acts 2:39 (Gal 3:29, etc.) Administered once to believers and their children picturing cleansing from sin and covenant union in a bloodless sign.</p>
<p><i>Passover</i> - Ex 12:43 (12:3-17) Administered often to adult believers picturing nurture in a bloody sign.</p>	<p><i>Lord's Supper</i> - 1 Cor 5:7 (11:23-34) Administered often to adult believers picturing nurture in faith in a bloodless sign.</p>