

Harvest Christian Fellowship
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Theology @ 9
"Sacraments"
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SACRAMENTS

Christ Instituted Two Seals of God's Covenant

A helpful definition

Throughout this lesson, we will use the terminology "means of grace." We may define means of grace as follows: *The means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to Christians.* The means of grace are simply means of additional blessing within the Christian life, and do not add to our fitness to receive justification from God. Today we will consider the two sacraments (ordinances) of the church, which are also means of grace.

Christ instituted two rites that his followers were to observe: baptism, a once-for-all rite of initiation,

Matthew 28:19

19 *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

and the Lord's Supper, a regular rite of remembrance.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

23 *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

These (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are called "sacraments" in the Western church, "mysteries" in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and "ordinances" by some Protestants who see the other two words as tainted with unhelpful associations. Scripture has no category-word for these two rites.

As the Spirit of Promise, the Third Person of the Trinity brings to fruition Christ's "new creation." The Father speaks, the Son is spoken, and the Spirit

brings about in history the effect and perfection of that speech. But how does the Spirit accomplish this? According to Scripture, it is by the gift of faith. But where does this faith come from? It is created by the preaching of the gospel and confirmed by the sacraments as signs and seals of God's covenant promises.

Romans 10:17

17 *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*

The ceremonies of the sacraments belong to the world of covenant making. Every time we witness a baptism or receive Communion, God is shaking hands on the deal he has made with us. Both the Old and New Testaments confirm this identity of the sacraments as "signs and seals," which is clearly the language of covenant ratification.

Sacrament is from the Latin word *sacramentum*, meaning a holy rite in general and in particular a soldier's sacred oath of allegiance. Study of the rites themselves yields the concept of a sacrament as a ritual action instituted by Christ in which signs perceived through the senses set forth to us the grace of God in Christ and the blessings of his covenant. They communicate, seal, and confirm possession of those blessings to believers, who by responsively receiving the sacraments give expression to their faith and allegiance to God.

The *Second London Baptist Confession* says "Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only Lawgiver, to be continued in His church to the end of the world."

The *Westminster Confession* says:

"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."

It was a medieval mistake to classify as sacraments five more rites (confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction). In addition to their not being seals of a covenant relationship with God, they "have not like nature of sacraments with Baptism and the Lord's Supper for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God" (*Thirty-Nine Articles XXV*). (The Thirty-Nine Articles are the historically defining statements of doctrines of the Anglican Church with respect to the controversies of the English Reformation and were first established in 1563.)

The sacraments are rightly viewed as means of grace, for God makes them means to faith, using them to strengthen faith's confidence in his promises and to call forth acts of faith for receiving the good gifts signified.

The efficacy of the sacraments to this end resides not in the faith or virtue of the minister but in the faithfulness of God, who, having given the signs, is now pleased to use them. As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means.

Sacraments strengthen faith by correlating Christian beliefs with the testimony of our senses. The *Heidelberg Catechism* illustrates this in its answer to Question 75. The key words are *as surely as*.

Question 75: How does the holy supper remind and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all his benefits?

Answer: In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup in remembrance of him.

With this command come these promises:

First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

1 Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25

Sacraments function as means of grace on the principle that, literally, seeing is (i.e., leads to) believing.

Augustine spoke of these acts as "the visible form of an invisible grace" or as a "sign of a sacred thing."

Mysteriously, the sacraments are used by God to confirm divine promises to believers and are somehow the means by which the recipient enters into the truths they represent.

Wayne Grudem lists baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace within the church stating that they are activities within the life of the church that

God uses to bring blessing to us. How so?

Baptism

Since Jesus commanded his church to baptize, we would expect that there would be a measure of blessing connected with baptism, because all obedience to God by Christians brings God's favor with it. Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, not the cause of election, regeneration, and justification.

This obedience is a public act of confessing Jesus as Savior, an act which in itself brings joy and blessing to a believer. Baptism is a sign of the believer's death and resurrection with Christ and it seems fitting that the Holy Spirit would work through such a sign to increase our faith and to increase our experiential realization of: 1) death to the power and love of sin, and 2) the power of new resurrection life in Christ.

Since baptism is a physical symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ and our participation in them, it should also give additional assurance of union with Christ to all believers who are present. Finally, since water baptism is an outward symbol of inward spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit, we may expect that the Holy Spirit will ordinarily work alongside the baptism, giving to believers an increasing realization of the benefits of the spiritual baptism to which it points.

When baptism very closely accompanies someone's initial profession of faith and is in fact the outward form that profession of faith takes, there is certainly a connection between baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, for Peter says to his hearers at Pentecost,

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"
(Acts 2:38)

Although we must avoid the Roman Catholic teaching that grace is imparted even *apart from* the faith of the person being baptized, we must not react so strongly to this error that we say that there is no spiritual benefit at all that comes from baptism, that the Holy Spirit *does not* work through it and that it is *merely symbolic*. We mustn't be like those who bend over backward to explain away passages in which baptism is explicitly linked to regeneration and forgiveness of sins.

It is better to say that where there is genuine faith on the part of the person being baptized, and where the faith of the church that watches the baptism is stirred up and encouraged by this ceremony, then the Holy Spirit certainly does work through baptism, and it becomes a “means of grace” through which the Holy Spirit brings blessing to the person being baptized and to the church as well. The question is not what the *sacraments* do to us, but what *God* does for us with them.

The Lords Supper

In addition to baptism, the other ordinance or ceremony that Jesus commanded the church to carry out is participation in the Lord’s Supper which is also very clearly a means of grace which the Holy Spirit uses to bring blessing to the church. The Lord’s Supper is not simply an ordinary meal among human beings—it is a fellowship with Christ, in his presence and at his table.

Once again, we must avoid the idea that any automatic or magical benefit comes from sharing in the Lord’s Supper, whether a person participates in faith or not. But when a person participates in faith, renewing and strengthening his or her own trust in Christ for salvation, and believing that the Holy Spirit will bring spiritual blessing through such participation, then certainly additional blessing may be expected.

We must be careful here, as with baptism, to avoid the mistake of overreacting to Roman Catholic teaching and maintaining that the Lord’s Supper is merely symbolic and not a means of grace. Paul refers to the bread and cup as a sharing in the benefits of Christ’s body and blood given for us (1 Cor. 10:16). The unity of believers is beautifully exhibited at the time of the Lord’s Supper.

There is a spiritual union among believers and with the Lord that is strengthened and solidified at the Lord’s Supper, and it is not to be taken lightly.

When we obey Jesus’ command, “Take, eat” (Matt. 26:26), and go through the physical activity of eating and drinking at the Lord’s table, our physical action *pictures* a corresponding spiritual nourishment, a nourishment of our souls that will occur when we participate in obedience and faith. Jesus says,

John 6:55-56

55 *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56* *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*

As with baptism, therefore, we should expect that the Lord would give spiritual blessing as we participate in the Lord’s Supper in faith and in

obedience to the directions laid down in Scripture, and in this way it is a "means of grace" which the Holy Spirit uses to convey blessing to us.

Covenantal signs and seals

Since covenant theology today is mainly Protestant and Reformed in its outlook, proponents view Baptism and the Lord's Supper as the only two sacraments, which are sometimes called "church ordinances." The sacraments are a sign and a seal of the covenant of grace. Along with the preached word, they are identified as an ordinary means of grace for salvation. The benefits of these rites do not occur from participating in the rite itself, but through the power of the Holy Spirit as they are received by faith.

Must we receive these signs and seals to be saved?

No. These gifts are given by God to strengthen the believer's faith. However, a mark of a born again believer is that he or she will want to be obedient to the Lord Jesus in regards to all things, especially these two rites he instructed them to observe.

To be taken seriously

If a person understands what these sacraments (signs and seals) stand for and rejects them, they are rejecting the covenant itself and may not be included in it even if they think they are. To neglect these out of ignorance is one thing, but to avoid them with an understanding of what they are and that Christ instructed that they be observed, is sin against God and a rejection of offered grace. Of course God alone can judge these things with certainty.

*Most of the forgoing material was from: Concise Theology by J.I. Packer; Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem; Introducing Covenant Theology by Michael Horton; and Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms by Stanley Grenz, and Wikipedia.com.