

“The Sacraments”
(WCF 27.1-5)

WCF 27.1 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.

I. What are sacraments?

A. Sacraments are signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace, instituted by Christ to represent Him and His benefits.

1. What is a sign and seal?

a. A sign is something that points beyond itself to something else.

(i) Like a road sign that indicates a city is so many miles beyond itself – it is not the city, but points to it.

(ii) A sacrament points beyond itself to the reality it represents. What do the sacraments point to? Christ and His benefits.

(a) Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.’ God said further to Abraham, ‘Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised’” (Gen. 17:7-10).

(b) Circumcision pointed to the righteousness of faith: “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them” (Rom. 4:11).

(c) The New Covenant sacraments point to the same blessings in Christ.

(1) “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).

(2) “In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:25-26).

(3) “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3:27).

b. A seal is an authoritative confirmation.

(i) A seal was used by kings to indicate that their authority backed up what was written in a document.

(ii) The Lord seals His promises to us in the sacraments, which means if we trust in Christ, He will give us what was promised.

(iii) They confirm our interest in Christ.

2. Who instituted the sacraments in the church? They were instituted by Christ.

a. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

b. “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread . . .” (1 Cor. 11:23).

B. What other purposes do the sacraments have besides signifying and sealing the blessings of the covenant?

1. They remind us that God has set us apart from the world to be in covenant with Him.
 - a. Only those who were part of God’s covenant people – who were circumcised – could participate in the Passover: “But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Ex. 12:48).
 - b. Circumcision put a visible boundary between God’s people and the world – they were not to intermarry with the uncircumcised: “They said to them, ‘We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us’” (Gen. 34:14).
2. The sacraments also remind us of the covenant we have made with God to walk according to His Word. They remind us that we are partakers of His life and death:
 - a. “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).
 - b. “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

WCF 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.

II. What is sacramental union?

A. The Scripture sometimes identify the sacraments with the blessings they represent.

1. Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ – therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken” (Gen. 3:22-23).
2. “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10).
3. “And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:27-28).
4. “Peter *said* to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38).
5. “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21).

B. Why is this the case?

1. Because of the spiritual relationship between the sign and what it signifies.
2. Sometimes the two are so closely identified that the sign is represented as though it is the reality.
3. We must be careful not to confuse the two, since Scripture clearly distinguishes them. We are not saved by the Lord’s Supper or by baptism, but by grace through faith alone (Rom. 1:16-17).

WCF 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: 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.

III. What makes the sacraments effective?

A. They do not contain that grace or depend on any man for that grace.

1. They do not contain that grace.
 - a. Rome believes once the elements are consecrated by a consecrated priest, they contain grace, and simply by receiving the element, you automatically receive that grace.

- b. This confusion arises partially because of sacramental union.
2. Their effectiveness does not depend on the one administering it.
 - a. The Donatists of the 4th and 5th Centuries believed that sacraments administered by unconverted clergy, or traditores (those who surrendered copies of the Scripture to the Roman authorities), were invalid.
 - b. Rome believes they must be administered by priests in apostolic succession.

B. They are made effective by the Spirit and God's promise.

1. God promises a blessing through them.
 - a. "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16).
 - b. "And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:27-28).
 - c. This is why the word of institution is read before the sacrament is ministered.
 - (i) The sacrament is a visible Word, a visible representation of God's promise.
 - (ii) Without the Word to explain it, the symbol is mute – we can't understand it.
 - (iii) But once it is explained and understood, faith can lay hold of the reality behind it as we look to Christ for the blessing.
2. He confers this blessing through the Holy Spirit.
 - a. "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 which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29).
 - b. "Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21).
 - c. "But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7).
 - d. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).
 - e. The sacraments are means by which God communicates to us the help or influence of the Holy Spirit.

WCF 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.

IV. How many sacraments has Christ instituted, and who may administer them?

A. The Lord instituted only two sacraments:

1. Baptism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).
2. The Lord's Supper: "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread" (1 Cor. 11:20-23).

B. Only a minister lawfully ordained may administer them.

1. "And no one takes the honor to himself, but *receives it* when he is called by God, even as Aaron was" (Heb. 5:4).

2. The one who administers the sacraments must be authorized by Christ to represent Him, since He is the One who is signifying and sealing this grace to us.

WCF 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.

V. The sacraments of the Old Covenant and the New are essentially the same.

A. What are the sacraments of the Old Covenant?

1. Circumcision.
 - a. Circumcision was the removal of the foreskin of the flesh performed on males.
 - b. It was the sign of the Abrahamic and Old Covenant: “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10).
 - c. It represented the new birth – the circumcision of the heart – in Old Covenant terms.
2. Passover.
 - a. Passover was the celebration of the Lord’s deliverance from Egypt and commemoration of when He passed over the Jewish first-born in His judgment, involving the sacrificing and eating of a lamb (Ex. 12).
 - b. The Lamb represented the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and how His life would be sacrificed to spare His people: “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

B. How are the sacraments of the Old Covenant related to the sacraments of the New?

1. They signify the same thing:
 - a. Circumcision/baptism: the need of the new birth.
 - (i) “Moreover 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, so that you may live” (Deu. 30:6).
 - (ii) “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13).
 - b. Passover/the Lord’s Supper: the need of Christ for the new birth.
 - (i) “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).
 - (ii) “And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:27-28).
2. The difference between them is that the Old Covenant sacraments are bloody, while the New Covenant sacraments are not. Since Christ’s blood has been shed, it no longer needs to be represented to us in this way.