



Sacraments: Signs & Seals of the Covenant Selected

^{ESV} **Romans 4:11**...He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Now this morning I want to talk about the sacraments and the fact that they are signs and seals of the covenant of grace. I also want to talk about just what they signify and I want to use our own confession of faith to help guide us along in that conversation. Now I am talking, of course, about the great Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms but I think you could use any of the other Reformed Catechisms to accomplish the same purpose I have this morning which is simply to think through the signs of the Covenant of Grace and what those signs mean or accomplish.¹

Our own Westminster Confession defines the word “sacraments” like this:

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.²

The Shorter Catechism defines the word “sacraments” like this:

Q. 92. What is a sacrament?

A. 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.³

While the Larger Catechism answers the same question like this:

Q. 162: What is a sacrament?

A. A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without.⁴

The famous Reformed catechism...the Heidelberg Catechism defines the word “sacrament” like this:

Q. 66. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross.

And finally, the Belgic Confession defines the word “sacrament” like this:

We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which He has joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which He imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.⁵

Now I wanted to read those five different definitions not to win you over to my position as much as I did to show you the major point of agreement between the great confessions and catechisms of the Reformed faith. The thing I think you probably noticed that every single one of the confessions or catechisms read defines the word “sacrament” using the terms “signs” and “seals”. And, of course, that raises the question, “What do the various confessions and catechisms mean when they refer to the sacraments as signs and seals?”

I think it is simplest to put it like this. “Signs” should be understood as a visible reflection (by that, I mean visible to everyone) of what God actually does in salvation. That is, he washes away sin. He identifies sinners with his people. He pours out the Holy Spirit on his people and so on.

“Seals” on the other hand confirm what God has done to his own peculiar and particular people. “Seals” confirm the reality of what God has done to them. I love the way R. Scott Clark puts it:

The sacraments are signs to all and seals to the elect.⁶

Professor David VanDrunen put it like this:

What is true of the preaching of the word is also true of the sacraments. Reformed theology traditionally has taught that sacraments are signs and seals of Christ and his redeeming work. This language is explicitly biblical, as Romans 4:11 demonstrates, calling the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision both a “sign” and “seal” of the righteousness of Christ that comes by faith. As signs, the sacramental elements are visible representations of Christ and his work. But they are more than this, for as seals they guarantee Christ’s promises to Christians, encouraging, edifying, and assuring them of their salvation in Christ. Is the Spirit active in communicating Christ to us in the sacraments? Indeed he is, for Scripture speaks of the work of sealing as a distinctive task of the Spirit (e.g., Eph 1:13; 4:30). The Holy Spirit, by the sacraments, seals the grace of Christ to us.⁷

Now an even easier way to remember the difference is to think of a wedding ring. It is sign to everyone that sees it that that person is married. But to the mate of the person married it is more. I remember one time my wife lost her wedding ring washing dishes. It came off and went right down the drain. She called me at work crying like it was the end of the world. When I first answered the phone, I thought someone had died. Anyway, I rushed home, crawled under the cabinet, undid the j-trap under the sink, flipped it over and poured out the ring. She jumped on me with me still laying on my back, gave me hug, snatched that ring out of my hand, jumped up, quickly polished it, shoved it on her finger and went about her business like nothing had ever happened. You see it was a sign to everyone else...but it was a seal to her. You see it was not just an empty sign...it had real, tangible, emotive significance to her. It indicated a reality to her that no other sign could.

Now what I would like to do if you don’t mind is to just quickly run through one of the catechism answers and show you the content of what it is that is signified

and sealed in the sacraments. Now I want to do that using the Larger Catechism question and answer but before I do I want to show you an interesting difference between the Shorter Catechism definition of a sacrament and the Larger Catechism definition of a sacrament.

The Shorter Catechism says this:

Q. 92. What is a sacrament?

A. 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.⁸

While the Larger Catechism says this:

Q. 162: What is a sacrament?

A. A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without.⁹

Now you will notice no doubt that the Shorter Catechism uses the phrase “new covenant” while the Larger Catechism refers to the “covenant of grace”. And of course, the question comes up did the one group realize that the other group used a different phrase or description from what they used? Where the two groups on the same page? Well the truth is they were on the same page. The Assembly approved both catechisms and no one as far as I know has ever disputed the answer contained by either and the reason they haven’t is because the two terms meant the same thing to the framers of the Confession.

Now let's take the definition of a sacrament as given in the Larger Catechism and work through it quickly...just noting what the Westminster Divines thought a sacrament signifies and seals.

A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace,

Now the first thing you can see is that Presbyterians believe that "sacraments" are holy commands instituted by Christ. And you can see from the phrase that we believe they are commands instituted by Christ in his church and that they are signs, seals and exhibitions to those within the covenant of grace. They are not for those outside the covenant of grace but for those within.

And here's what they communicate.

the benefits of his mediation;

That is, they are both signs of the benefits of Christ's mediation on the part of sinners and seals to the elect that Christ is their mediator.

They also designed:

to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces;

That is, sacraments can be used by the Spirit of God to create faith in those who are not yet redeemed and grow the faith of those that are within the covenant of

grace. In other words, along with preaching and prayer the sacraments are means of grace to believers to grow their faith.

And doing that they also work:

to oblige them to obedience;
to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another;

You see the sacraments are signs and seals to stir us up to obedience and to build our affection for each other. Observing and participating in the sacraments ought to grow you affection for Christ on the basis of what the sacraments signify and seal. When you see someone baptized your heart ought to soar like an eagle with gratitude for the salvation of anyone ever and especially for your own salvation or for the salvation of you children.

When you hear the words of institution or see the broken bread and the cup your heart ought to soar with gratitude for Christ's atoning work on behalf of anyone ever and especially on your behalf. When you stand in line to receive communion with other saints in Christ's body it ought to make your heart soar with gratitude for being included in the great covenant people of God. It ought to make you heart swell with love for the brothers and sisters standing around you also feeding on Christ by faith.

Some of you know that I teach in a Christian school. I teach world literature and I teach Bible. In my Bible class this week I was discussing the terrible persecution of the early church and how Christians suffered with each other and for each other and I had this boy raise his hand and say, "I don't feel that sort of

connection to my church. In fact, I was wondering whether this class might count for my going to church because I really hate going to church at all. But I like this class and what we do in here.”

I have to tell you my heart broke for that young man. He wasn't trying just to smooze me either. He was really reflecting upon his experience in a number of gigantic seeker oriented churches. He had no connection of affection for the people there and I thought to myself, “How can you see someone baptized or take the Lord's Supper with other believers and not long to be with them?” And then I realized they don't baptize people in front of the congregation. They have an early service or special service for that and they take communion about once a year or at a special service and you know I had my answer. The redemptive nature of preaching has been stripped away and replaced with practical aphorisms and seminars and the life changing sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper have been relegated to the least important service of the church. How that broke my heart for this young man...how terrible it is that his story is not much different than that of a great many other people who are wondering what the benefits are of preaching and teaching and administering the sacraments in church where they don't really do any of those things.

How grateful I am that I am a member in a church where the elders have determined that its members need all the grace the means of grace provide. How grateful I am to be in a church where the sacraments are seen and administered and the gospel is preached regularly. Because I am...I love my Lord Jesus more and I love His people more.

And then finally notice what else the sacraments do. They do all of the above:

and to distinguish them from those that are without.

You see the sacraments are signs and seals to distinguish those that are within the covenant of grace from those that are not.

Now the sacraments are important for that reason...very important. But they don't accomplish all those things just because they are employed. They do not accomplish any of those things in and of themselves. They ultimately only seal what they represent through the power of the Holy Spirit using the Word of God to redeem and to regenerate unbelievers.

We do not believe the sacrament is the thing in and of itself. We are not like Catholics who believe that baptism accomplishes what it signifies. That is...they believe the moment they baptize someone...their sins are washed away. They believe the act of baptism accomplishes that apart from anything else. The Latin phrase for that is *ex opere operato* and literally it means "from the work performed."

Rather we believe the sign is true and correct whether the person baptized is a believer or not. The sign represents what the sign represents but it does not make the thing happen. Listen to Thomas McCrie.

Baptism does not save from any virtue in the mere baptismal act. This is the doctrine of the church of Rome, which maintains that the mere act of baptism, or as she calls it, the *opus operatum*, confers grace. This theory is inconsistent with the very nature of the sacrament, and it is wholly at variance both with the letter and the spirit of the gospel. It is inconsistent with the nature of the sacrament, which contains two things, an outward sign, and an inward grace signified thereby. But to maintain that whenever the sign is administered grace is

bestowed, is to confound the sign with the thing signified. And the notion is incompatible with the gospel, both in its letter and spirit. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing."

To imagine any mortal man, be he bishop, priest or presbyter, can, by applying a little water to the body and pronouncing a few sacred words over it, wash away the guilt and pollution of the soul in the sight of God—can regenerate, absolve, and save the sinner—is a piece of the merest folly and presumption.¹⁰

Now I wanted to make that point this morning because baptism is, as a sacrament, both a sign and a seal. It is a sign to those who see it of Christ's great redemptive work and his washing away of sin. It is a pledge that one day the redeemed will be his in all that that means. It is a sign of the impartation of the Spirit of God and wonder of wonders it is a seal of all those things to us whom the Spirit has regenerated.

Q. 165: What is Baptism?

A. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ has ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of...

ingrafting into himself,
of remission of sins by his blood,
and regeneration by his Spirit;
of adoption,
and resurrection unto everlasting life;
and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.

Now., of course, baptism has been variously understood by different denominations of the Christian church in different way. For example, among Western Christians there are four major views on baptism¹¹:

- Baptism is the means of spiritual renewal and initial justification and sanctification through the infusion of grace received in it, in such a way that one cannot be saved ordinarily without it. Baptism communicates saving grace, by the working of its own power. Children of all church members and unbaptized adult converts must be baptized (Roman Catholic).
- Baptism is so closely related to the gospel that through it, Christians receive eternal life and without baptism there can be no assurance of salvation. Both the children of believers and unbaptized adult believers should be baptized (Lutheran).
- Baptism is a public testimony to one's faith in Jesus Christ. Only those who have reached the age of discretion can make such a profession of faith. Therefore, only those who are able to confess Christ should be baptized. (Baptist).
- Baptism is a means of sanctifying grace and a gospel ministry to the people of God. It is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace illustrating what Christ has done for his people and sealing salvation to the same. Therefore covenant children of believing parents as well as unbaptized adult converts should be baptized. (Reformed).

Now what all that means is that baptism is the initial sign of being included in the church or covenant people of God. It is the sign of initiation. But that shouldn't be minimized in any sort of way. It is the sign of initiation into the people of God whether it is done to adults or to babies. And we, as faithful Presbyterians in this place, have an obligation that those adults that receive the sign are faithful to what the sign means. We also have an obligation to the children that receive the sign that we bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and encourage them profess their faith. And should it happen that some child who was baptized as an infant come to young adulthood and not profess their faith we have an obligation to go to them and warn them of the danger of apostatizing against the covenant of grace.

You see we have that obligation because while we believe that baptism is a sign of grace and mercy we also realize it contains elements of judgment to those who reject the gospel. In that regard it is not much different than the Lord's Supper. It is not to be taken lightly and parents are not to promise lightly to raise their children in the faith. You as congregants are not to promise lightly to help others raise their children in the admonition of the Lord and the reason for that is simple enough.

The covenant signs and seals are a blessing to the elect but come also with jeopardy to the reprobate.¹²

Now lastly I thought I might take just a minute or two and read through the Confession of Faith with you concerning baptism.

I. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.

II. The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the Gospel, lawfully called thereunto.

III. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.

IV. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.

V. Although it is a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be

regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

VI. 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 belongs unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.

VII. The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.

Now I suppose that before we stop I ought to talk for a moment about the mode of baptism. The various modes of baptism...immersion (dipping), effusion (pouring), and sprinkling have all been used at one time or another by the Reformed Church and to a degree the mode that was used at any particular time or place in history was mostly determined by what the church thought was being symbolized by baptism itself.

For example, if the church wanted to stress the symbolism of being raised from sin into newness of life then clearly immersion would have to be favored. On the other hand, if a church wanted to express being covered with Christ's blood then most likely they would prefer sprinkling. On the other hand, if a church believed baptism presented the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on a person then most likely effusion or pouring would have been preferred. The truth is that in the early Reformed Church, the mode didn't matter very much. Listen to Calvin.

But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water — these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according to the diversity of countries. Yet the word "baptize" means to immerse, and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.¹³

And then listen to Scott Clark:

Regarding the mode of baptism there are two major procedures: effusion (sprinkling, pouring) and immersion. Historically orthodox Christians have accepted any mode of Christian baptism. Baptists, however, usually acknowledge only immersion. Although this has not always been the case. "The original Baptists did not immerse" (B. B. Warfield, "The Archeology of the Mode of Baptism," *Studies in Theology*[Oxford, 1932], 347, n.10). This also unites them with the Campbellites and distinguishes them from the Reformed position. The latter have historically practiced effusion.¹⁴

For my own part, I don't think it matters very much but the custom within American Presbyterianism is to administer baptism in the form of either sprinkling or effusion as opposed to immersion. As a former Baptist minister, I have done both. Still, the mode is probably best determined by what the church sees as the principle thing symbolized by the event. If the outpouring of the Spirit or washing away of sins is the thing principally seen then sprinkling or effusion work best. If being raised to new life is the thing principally seen symbolized then immersion would be best.

Part of the modern Presbyterian practice of effusion may be a reaction to the Baptist position insisting upon immersion. Still, the mode of effusion is very, very old. There have been countless little children discovered in some of the most ancient catacombs buried with their little sea shells...which were used to dip the water poured on them in their baptism.

Alright, let's stop right there and pray.

¹ Allan D. Dtrange, "Baptism as Seal" at http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH00/0007a.html. Strange writes, "The sacraments are defined in the Reformed and Presbyterian standards as being signs and seals of the covenant. In fact, the Belgic Confession (Articles 33 and 34), the Heidelberg

Catechism (Questions 66, 94), the Second Helvetic Confession (Chapters 19 and 20), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), Larger Catechism (LC), and Shorter Catechism (SC) all speak of baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals."

² WCF, 17.1.

³ WSC, Question 92.

⁴ WLC, Question 162.

⁵ Belgic Confession, Article 33.

⁶ R. Scott Clark, This comment is taken from Dr. Clark's "Theses on Covenant Theology, 8.12-14 Ecclesiastical" found at <http://www.wscal.edu/clark/covtheses.php>. I think these assertions are particularly helpful in that Dr. Clark just puts them as plain as he can letting the theological cowchips fall where they may. He also adds, "As signs and seals of the covenant of grace, they are Gospel not Law."

⁷ David VanDrunen, "Experiencing the Holy Spirit" in *Evangelium*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Mar/Apr2005.

⁸ WSC, Question 92.

⁹ WLC, Question 162.

¹⁰ Thomas McCrie, *Lectures on Christian Baptism* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 13.

¹¹ R. Scott Clark, This description is taken from Dr. Clark's "A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism" found at <http://www.wscal.edu/clark/baptism.php>. Very helpful.

¹² R. Scott Clark, This comment is taken from Dr. Clark's "Theses on Covenant Theology, 8.12-14 Ecclesiastical" found at <http://www.wscal.edu/clark/covtheses.php>. I think these assertions are particularly helpful in that Dr. Clark just puts them as plain as he can letting the theological cowchips fall where they may. He also adds, "As signs and seals of the covenant of grace, they are Gospel not Law."

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes* translated by Battles. Book 4, Chapter 15, Section 19.

¹⁴ R. Scott Clark, "A Reformed Defense of Paedobaptism" at his website Heidelbergblog. To read more go to <http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2009/04/04/a-reformed-defense-of-paedobaptism-9/>.