

Participant Guide for Study 8: Sacraments

Introduction

Today we are going to focus on the sacraments that are discussed within the Bible. Sacraments compose a central work of the church, and it is important that we know what they are, why we do them, and how we do them. There is a great deal of variation between how sacraments are practiced in various church traditions, so you might learn something today that conflicts with your previous experience with a sacrament. That in mind, let's pray and begin.

What does it mean?

What are sacraments? As was already noted, the definition varies between Christian traditions. So, keeping with the Reformed tradition, let's look at the Westminster Confession of Faith to give us a good starting point:

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."

Let's just take two simple ideas out of this section of the Confession: Sacraments are **signs** and **seals**. Sacraments as signs signify something, as all signs do! Street signs signify the right behavior when driving, while billboards and advertisements signify what a company thinks you would find attractive and enticing. All this to say that we are already familiar with this concept of signs. But the best comparison to how sacraments are signs is seen in marriage. If you are married, go ahead and look at your ring. It might remind you of the wedding day, or maybe the best season of the marriage, or perhaps a difficult portion of the marriage that you have worked through. The ring you wear signifies a promise you made to one another to consistently remind you of the ramifications of that commitment. Sacraments signify the new covenant of grace that we live in under Christ. The action of looking at your ring and performing the sacraments as the church bear a similar function: they are signs of a promise. The other concept in the Confession is that sacraments are seals, which basically means that these are the gifts we enjoy *because* we are in the covenant of grace. Not only are sacraments a **sign** of our being in the covenant of grace, they are **seals** of that covenant. Much like the seal on an old letter, the sacraments are a seal of the new covenant.

Read Romans 4:11

[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.

Discussion:

1. What do the concepts of sign and seal mean?
2. How does the ring that married couples wear compare to the sign that the sacraments are?
3. What do the sacraments (Baptism, Lord's Supper) signify?
4. Bonus: What is the covenant of grace?

Why do we practice it?

There are two sacraments and it is important to know why we practice each of them. (WCF 27:4). Before we go into that, though, we need to make a quick note on what the sacraments *do*. As we discussed already, the sacraments signify and seal the covenant of grace we live in. But we need to distinguish our view of the sacraments from at least two others: The Catholic view and the view of a 17th-18th century American pastor named Solomon Stoddard. We should direct our attention to these views because they remain prevalent in many Christian circles today. The Catholic view of the sacraments has historically been that they work "from their working" (or *ex opere operato*). This means that the sacraments work to cleanse us like a recipe works to make a dish; "If we baptize someone, it's the water that makes them clean." We don't believe that the sacraments work by themselves, but by the Lord who has ordained them. Additionally, we believe that the role of the sacraments is to signify a work already done, not to do a new one! As for the view of Solomon Stoddard, he saw the Lord's Supper as something called a "conversion ordinance." This meant he believed in offering communion to non-believers in order to convert them. We believe different: The sacraments are (again) signifying the work of redemption *already* complete or present in the recipient. While chances are these views won't come up in your day to day life anytime soon, knowing about these other views helps us to appreciate what is beautiful about the Reformed view of the sacraments:

WCF 27 Section 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.

WCF 27 Section 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.

Let's word this information in a more accessible way: The Holy Spirit blesses us as we do the sacraments in faith. Each time we come to the Lord's Table and each time we witness a new child baptized into the body of Christ, we are being blessed as we look at the sign of our great redemption in Christ being exhibited again and again. We don't practice the sacraments because they *do* something, but because Christ has already done everything to adopt us and make us one with Him.

Discussion:

1. What is the Catholic view of the sacraments? Discuss this view as a group.
2. Do the sacraments work as "conversion ordinances"? Why or why not?
3. Why do we practice sacraments? What makes you look forward to taking communion or witnessing a baptism?

How do we practice it?

Oddly enough, this is where the most controversy happens! Nearly all Christian traditions believe in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but almost no traditions do these things in the same way. While a comparative study of each different Christian denominations practice of sacraments would be helpful and edifying, it would be too large to fit here. Instead, let's just look at how we at CCPC, a Reformed presbyterian church, practice Baptism and the Lord's Supper in brief. Let's look at a few more excerpts from the Confession:

WCF 28 Section 1.) 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 newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.

Section 4.) Not only those that do actually profess faith in the obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.

Section 5.) Although it be 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.

Let's try and gleam just one insight from each section here. First, Baptism is a sign of our ingrafting, or union, with Christ. Second, it is not only for believers but for their families as well, including infants. Here is where the major divergence between presbyterians and baptists lies. Baptists (Craedobaptists) believe only believing members of a consenting age can be baptized while Presbyterians (Pedobaptists) believe that baptism is a continuation of the sign that circumcision used to fulfill in the Old Testament, and there should be applied to all who are in families saved by

grace.¹ Finally, Baptism isn't *how* we're saved. It's a sign of our salvation. But ultimately we should look at baptism as believers who have a mission to follow:

Read Matt. 28:18-20

Matthew 28:18–20

[18] And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [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, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Discussion:

1. What is Baptism?
2. Who is it for?
3. Does Baptism save us?
4. How does the Great Commission in Matthew 28 relate to the Confessional view of Baptism?

Looking at the Lord's Supper, let's read from the next chapter of the confession:

WCF 29 Section 1.) Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.

Briefly considered, we can see that the Lord's Supper is a remembrance of our Lord to be done by the entire gathered body of confessing believers. Much like baptism, there are many complex issues surrounding the practice of the Lord's Supper, but the scope of this study only lets us affirm what we believe, rather than arguing against the positions we disagree with. This meal signifies our identity as baptised believers. We come together as often as possible to join again in remembering this central fact of our identity as Christians: Jesus died for us, and rose that we might join him in the newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Discussion:

1. What is the Lord's Supper? What are we "remembering" when we come together?
2. Who can practice it? Believers, or everyone?
- 3.

Conclusion

¹ I could not possibly do justice to the complexity of this debate here. Both positions have tremendous biblical-theological evidence backing their position and it should be upon each believer to educate themselves by reading, praying, asking their pastor, and ultimately submitting to the church they are a member of in their view of baptism. Both views are respectable, God-glorifying, and biblical.

Sacraments are central to our identity as Christians. It brings a people who are temporally removed from the life of Jesus on earth into close, tactile contact with the wonderful realities of redemption. We feel the water, we taste the bread and drink the wine, and we affirm the reality of redemption that lies behind these wonderful events.

Discussion:

1. How does this study help appreciate the sacraments more?
2. What are some further questions you have about the sacraments?