

On Being Presbyterian
Chapter 5 - “Sacraments: Signs and Seals of God’s Grace”

“For many people with backgrounds in broader evangelicalism, Presbyterian beliefs about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are perhaps the greatest intellectual hurdles to overcome.” (p. 82)

Seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church: baptism, Holy Eucharist, penance, matrimony, anointing of the sick, confirmation, holy orders

Two sacraments of the Presbyterian Church: baptism, Lord’s Supper
On Presbyterian understanding, sacraments of the New Testament are:

- directly established by Jesus himself
- directly represent Christ and his benefits

I. What is a Sacrament?

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 engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.

(Westminster Confession 27.1)

A. Signs and Seals

Sign → like a road sign, pointing beyond itself to God’s promises

Seal → like a seal of authenticity, assuring us His promises can be trusted.

“As signs, the sacraments represent and exhibit to us the Lord’s gracious promises because of the weakness of our faith, as seals, the sacraments actually nourish our trust in God’s promise as we receive them in faith, and thus objectively ground us in assurance and confident hope.”

(Ligon Duncan, explaining Calvin’s view)

“The sacraments are nonverbal forms of communication. They were never intended to stand alone without reference to the Word of God. Sacraments confirm the Word of God so that the administering of the sacraments and the preaching of the Word go together.” (R.C. Sproul)

B. Visible Difference

“[B]aptism is like a jersey that marks us as part of the baptized team. It identifies us and our children as members of the visible church, those who have been baptized and who profess faith in the triune God. In a similar fashion, the Lord’s Supper marks of those who have made a good profession in Jesus Christ from the rest of the world that has not.” (p. 84)

“Baptism and the Lord’s Supper do not visibly mark believers in the eyes of those who do not witness these. It is the Church which makes the distinction, and it is in the Church that the distinction is recognized.”

(G.I. Williamson)

C. Validity and Efficacy

“A sacrament is *valid* – that is, we have warrant for a sacrament – because it is based on God’s command and promise, contained in the words of institution. But a sacrament is *efficacious* – it ‘works,’ if you will – because the Spirit applies Christ and his benefits to the individual who responds in faith to the promise.” (p. 85)

Versus *ex opere operato* (“from the work worked”) – Roman Catholic view that proper performance of the rite insures grace is conveyed unless recipient places a spiritual impediment in the way.

Dangers of confusing validity and efficacy.

II. Baptism: Entrance Into God’s Visible People

“The sign of baptism is rooted in God’s larger unchanging purpose in human history. From the very beginning, God has been redeeming a people for his own possession and for his own glory. While God certainly calls individuals to himself, he has, from the very beginning, especially emphasized the relationship of professing believers and their households, and their place within his larger and unchanging purpose of redemption.” (p. 87)

Genesis 17.23-27

Acts 2.39

Acts 16.14-15

1 Corinthians 7.14

“Once we shift our view of who makes up the visible church [to the Presbyterian view], our understanding of baptism as a sign of initiation into the visible church shifts as well. Suddenly, baptism is no longer *our* act of testifying that we are regenerate and following Jesus in obedience; rather, it is *God’s* act of initiating us into his visible people.” (p. 89)

Q. 165. What is Baptism?

A. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath 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.

(Westminster Larger Catechism)

III. The Lord's Supper: Strength for the Journey

Q. 168 What is the Lord's supper?

A. The Lord's supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body.

(Westminster Larger Catechism)

Presbyterians do not believe the following views:

Transubstantiation (Roman Catholic view)

Consubstantiation (Lutheran view)

Mere Memorialism (common Evangelical view)

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.

(Confession of Faith 29.7)

Presbyterian view of Lord's Supper sometimes identified as "spiritual presence view" or "true communion with Christ view."

The Lord's Supper sets before us and celebrates our union both with Christ and with one another in His body:

"That is the significance of [Paul's] call for us to discern the body [1 Cor. 11.29]. Which means, not discerning a mystical and special presence of Christ's humanity in the Supper, but rather the discernment of the church as the body of Christ, and hence a discernment that our union with Christ establishes a communion with his people, his ecclesial body, that must be practically manifested in community, mutual love and concern, and accountability." (Ligon Duncan)

Lord's Supper as covenant renewal

Fencing the table