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## UNDERSTANDING THE LORD'S SUPPER (Part II)

It may be granted," observed G. C. Berkouwer, "that the general doctrine of the sacraments sometimes appears to be arid and dull. Concepts must be defined, and distinctions made; but a closer look reveals that none of this analysis is done for its own sake. Rather, we must remember that these concepts and distinctions occur in the concrete context of the signs and seals of God and of His covenant in Jesus Christ, who is the focal point and the profound context of the sacraments. Thus, a general doctrine of the sacraments is not necessarily a scholastic and dull affair."<sup>1</sup> The English word "sacrament" comes from the Latin **sacramentum**, the root meaning of which is "to make sacred." It was used in Roman society to refer either to money deposited in a lawsuit which if forfeited went to a "sacred cause," or to a military oath of loyalty, a "sacred pledge." The Latin Vulgate (trans. by Jerome in 384 A.D.) used this word to translate the Greek word **mysterion** in Ephesians 3:9, 5:32; Colossians 1:27; I Timothy 3:16; Revelation 1:20, 17:17. It should be noted, however, that none of these texts refer to the activities which later came to be called "sacraments." The term also carries the burden of misunderstanding. It seems to imply sacred activities and that these are seen to be effective by virtue of their celebration in and by themselves.<sup>2</sup> The Reformers, therefore, while retaining the term, expressly denied that the sacraments confer grace as an **opus operatum**. Usage determines meaning, and the Reformed defined sacraments as "signs" and "seals" whereby a professing Christian publicly and openly signifies and seals his profession of faith and promise of service. For this reason, many have (like the Scotch Presbyterians) called the sacraments "sealing ordinances."<sup>3</sup>

### I. THE NATURE OF A SACRAMENT

- A. The first thing required to constitute a sacrament is divine institution. Only God, who is the author of the covenant and promises of grace, can be the author of the seals of the covenant.
- B. Signs - (outward actions, cf. Romans 4:11) which are divinely appointed and have some analogy or resemblance to what they signify by external elements. They are visible signs and must be accompanied by the audible Word of God (the command and the promise).
- C. In addition to being signs commemorative of past events, they are also signs sealing and setting forth God's continuing covenant faithfulness (cf. Genesis 9 and the sign of the rainbow as illustrative of God's promise and as confirmation of our faith).
- D. There must be in the sign the thing signified (i.e. Christ in whom faith is always directed). The sign is pictured to us in our senses, while its meaning is apprehended by faith.

- E. There must be an analogy between the sign and what it signified. This union consists of three things.
1. SIGNIFICATION - the resemblance between the sign and what it signifies (Acts 22:16; I Corinthians 5:7)
  2. SEALING - the outward symbols are intended to stimulate faith in the promises of God<sup>4</sup> (Romans 6:3, 4; Galatians 3:27).
  3. EXHIBITION - because God in the sacraments sets before the faithful what He promises (I Corinthians 10:16, 17)

## II. THE NECESSITY OF THE SACRAMENTS

They are given by God to assist our infirmity.

- A. That He might provide for our weaknesses; because we are ignorant and much influenced by sensible and visible objects.
- B. That our faith might be more and more strengthened as individuals. Faith is produced by the Word and is sustained by the Word. While the Word is addressed to people (plural), the sacraments are administered to individuals and thereby each one is reminded that the covenant of God's grace and promise belongs to the individual. Likewise, the Word is directed to our hearing only, while sacraments affect us through our other senses.

NOTE: The relation of the Word to the sacraments and how they differ is important. Both have God for their Author, Christ for their foundation, and salvation for their end; but they differ as follows: The Word is absolutely necessary, the sacraments only hypothetically; the Word is heard, the sacraments seen; the Word produces faith, the sacraments confirm faith; the Word is freely extended to all in preaching, the sacraments to believers only; the Word profits without the sacraments, the sacraments do not without the Word.<sup>5</sup>

CONCLUSION: The end of the sacraments is the confirmation of the covenant of grace, and the sealing on God's part of our union with Christ, promised in that covenant, and of all His benefits; and at the same time on our part a solemn expression of our gratitude to God. They are also public badges declaring openly our confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The sacraments are, in the words of Calvin, "messengers of glad tidings." They do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty.<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, Studies in Dogmatics: The Sacraments (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Otto Weber, Foundations of Dogmatics II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 586-94. Weber prefers language like "proclamation activities."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. A. Hodge, Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 314.

<sup>4</sup> They confirm faith, according to Calvin, not of themselves (*ex opera operato*) but as agencies of the Holy Spirit and always in association with the Word of God. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Box IV, Ch. 14, sec. 7-13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the remarks of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Benedict Pictet, Christian Theology, trans. F. Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.), pp. 402-403.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, Institutes, Book IV, ch. 14, sec. 17.