

The New Testament Sacraments

Text: Romans 4; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25

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“How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the New Covenant or Testament?” Answer 68 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* responds: “Two, namely, holy baptism and the holy supper.” This biblical simplicity sets the stage for proper preparation for the Lord’s Supper. As we approach the table next week, we must prepare by examining our hearts. That means humbling ourselves for sin, testing our faith, and renewing our resolve to walk uprightly in gratitude before God. Sacraments, rightly understood, are not empty rituals or magical ceremonies. They are appointed by Christ for the blessing of His people.

Lord’s Day 25 addresses this directly, asking in Q&A 66, “What are the sacraments?” The answer: “They 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.” That promise is that God grants remission of sins and eternal life—not through our works, but “for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross.” Sacraments are not man’s inventions, nor are they means to earn grace. Rather, they confirm what the gospel already declares.

Answer 65 makes it plain that faith does not come through sacraments but through the preaching of the Word: “Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed? From the Holy Ghost, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.” Preaching is primary. Sacraments are secondary and confirmatory. This prepares us to understand the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments in contrast to Rome, Arminianism, the Federal Vision, and even Baptist minimalism. The sacraments are not what man does for God, but what God graciously does for His people—through appointed signs and seals of His saving work in Christ.

The Antithetical Idea of the Sacraments

Lord’s Day 25 opposes Rome’s system of seven sacraments and countless “sacramentals”—rosaries, relics, holy water, statues, dances, and other additions. These human inventions are defended by the claim that “Holy Mother Church” has instituted them. But Q&A 68 emphasizes Christ as the sole

institutor of sacraments. There are only two: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Nothing else qualifies.

Rome further misplaces the sacraments in its hierarchy of grace. Preaching is pushed down, while the mass is exalted above all. But the Reformed faith asserts what Scripture teaches: "The Holy Ghost works faith by the preaching of the gospel" (Q&A 65), not by eating wafers or performing ceremonies. Preaching is the chief means of grace. The sacraments, says Q&A 67, serve to "assure us... that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ." This one sacrifice was made once for all, not re-enacted in every mass. Rome's view of *ex opere operato* – the idea that sacraments work by their own performance – is especially dangerous. It claims the grace is received simply by doing the act, regardless of faith. Unless someone is in "mortal sin" (as Rome defines it), grace is supposedly imparted. But this turns the sacrament into a magical transaction. Many rely on their attendance at mass or their lack of serious sin as their confidence before God. This is a damning delusion. The Reformed confessions state clearly: sacraments do not confer grace apart from faith. Q&A 65: "We are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits *by faith only*." Sacraments are only of benefit to *believers*.

This also separates Reformed doctrine from Arminianism, which teaches that faith arises from man's will. But faith, says Q&A 65, comes solely "from the Holy Ghost." It is not the result of free will. The gospel teaches that faith is the sovereign gift of God, not the result of human decision.

The Federal Vision errs by asserting that all baptized children receive Christ's benefits. But sacraments are not for every baptized person – only for those who *believe*. Faith is not presumed; it is *given* by the Spirit to the elect. Christ did not die for all indiscriminately. As Galatians 2:20 says, "The Son of God... loved me, and gave himself for me." Christ died for His church, not the whore of Babylon. His death was both particular and personal.

Even many Baptists fall short here. The *1689 Baptist Confession*, patterned after the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, shortens the chapter on sacraments from five sections to *two*. It omits the role of ministers (Q&A 75 mentions the sacrament administered "by the hands of the minister"), the covenantal context of sacraments (Q&A 68 speaks of the "new covenant"), and the truth that sacraments are "seals" of gospel promises (Q&A 66). They even avoid the word "sacrament," preferring "ordinance," which could refer to anything appointed by God. But the sacraments are not mere religious observances. They are God's appointed means to confirm faith in the elect.

The Human Anatomy and the Sacraments

To grasp the sacraments, consider how God created us to receive grace—through heart, ears, and eyes. First, the heart. Q&A 65 says the Holy Ghost “works faith in our *hearts*.” This doesn’t refer to the physical organ that pumps blood, but to the spiritual center of man’s being—the soul. Faith resides in the heart. “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness” (Rom. 10:10). The heart is where spiritual life begins: “As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Ps. 23:7). “Out of [the heart] are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). It is in the heart that God implants true faith—spiritual knowledge and trust.

Second, the ears. God works through the audible preaching of the gospel. The Holy Spirit uses preaching to teach and awaken faith. Q&A 67 affirms this: “The Holy Ghost teaches us *in the gospel*.” Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. The heart is the spiritual organ that receives faith; the ears are the physical means through which God delivers it.

Third, the eyes. The sacraments are visible. Q&A 66 says: “They are holy, *visible* signs and seals.” This is essential to their definition. Baptism involves visible water; the Lord’s Supper includes visible bread and wine. Just as faith comes through the ears by the Word, it is confirmed through the eyes by the sacraments. God knows that we are weak and sensory creatures. He gives us both preaching and sacraments—ears to hear, eyes to see.

But when the visible sacraments are corrupted—as in Rome’s superstitions—idolatry follows. Images of Christ, the “Sacred Heart,” or saints are substituted for biblical sacraments. People lose their appetite for hearing and replace it with seeing what God has not commanded. But the Lord gives us only two visible sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are sufficient.

So God uses the Word (through our ears) and sacraments (through our eyes) to reach the heart. That is how grace comes to the elect: by means of preaching and sacraments. These are God’s tools. That is why the administration of the Lord’s Supper requires this self-examination: “Do I believe the promise of the gospel that I hear in preaching and see sealed in the sacraments?” If so, then come—because this is how God confirms faith in His people.

The Central Purpose of the Sacraments

What is the purpose of the sacraments? One word sums it up: assurance. That’s their goal. Q&A 67 says: “The Holy Ghost *assures* us by the sacraments.” Q&A 65: “He *confirms* faith in our hearts by the use of the sacraments.” And Q&A 66:

“They more fully *declare and seal to us* the promise of the gospel.” God’s purpose is to give His people *assurance*.

So if someone says, “My faith is weak; I’m not sure I should come,” the right response is not to stay away – but to come, *that your faith might be strengthened*. The sacraments are given precisely to confirm what the gospel proclaims: the free forgiveness of sins in Christ.

Romans 4:11 describes circumcision as “a sign... and a seal of the righteousness of the faith.” God gave Abraham a sacrament to assure him of what he already believed. And God gives His church baptism and the Lord’s Supper as seals – to confirm, not replace, faith. These sacraments *assure* you: the gospel is true – not just for others, but for you.

This strengthens the believer’s confidence in Christ. And as faith is strengthened, Christ is honoured. He is glorified when we rest in Him alone. Romans 4:20 says of Abraham: “He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.” Faith gives glory to God because it says: God is true, Christ is sufficient, and the gospel is all I need. Amen.

Our Father in heaven, help us to prepare ourselves rightly whenever we approach the Lord’s table. Cause us to hear Thy Word with faith and reverence, and to come not carelessly or unthinkingly, but with spiritual readiness. Forgive us for our past sins and neglect in this holy matter. Grant that we may come as needy sinners, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, looking wholly outside of ourselves and finding all our salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Amen.