

Chapter 27 – *Of the Sacraments*

27.1 THE DEFINITION OF A SACRAMENT

A *sacramentum* – that which was given or done as the result of an oath or pledge

A sacrament is a sign; a sign that seals what it signifies (Rom. 4:11-12)

This idea of a binding oath fits well with within a covenantal context

The divines outline five additional features of a sacrament:

1. They are ‘immediately instituted by God’ (WLC 162 and WSC 92, ‘instituted by Christ’; Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23)
2. They signify or ‘represent Christ and his benefits’ (1 Cor. 10:16)

It may be tempting to think of the sacraments as rites which we perform ... [but] pre-eminently the sacraments ... go beyond the surface appearance and bring us into direct contact with eternal realities in which the grace of God is powerfully at work.¹

3. They ‘confirm our interest in Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:25-26; Gal. 3:27) i.e. ‘they seal or confirm that we belong to him by God’s great grace’.²
4. They distinguish members of the church from ‘the rest of the world’ (Exod. 12:48)
5. They seal the fact that God’s word calls us to a life of devoted service (Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 10:21)

27.2 ‘THE SIGN AND THE THING SIGNIFIED’

The language used of the sign often seems to equate the sign with the effects of the grace signified in the sacrament. The divines noted the following examples:

- Gen. 17:10 – God calls the sign of circumcision ‘my covenant’
- Matt. 26:27-28 – the cup of wine is called ‘the blood of the covenant’
- Tit. 3:5 – Paul is quite possibly speaking of baptism when he refers to ‘the washing of regeneration’

¹ Robert Letham, *Baptism* (Christian Focus, 2012), 22.

² Chad van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 2014), 359.

- A similar text is Acts 22:16 – Peter says that ‘baptism ... saves you’

The earthly matter in the sacrament, is a sign or token, by which under a certain promised similitude, a heavenly matter is signified and represented to the faithful, that so they may be assured, that the heavenly matter is as certainly spiritually present, as they do certainly see the earthly matter, to be bodily present before their eyes.³

It is apparent that as a sign or seal it should not be identified with that which is signified and sealed. That which signifies is not the thing signified and that which seals is not the thing sealed.⁴

The fact is, God chose his sacramental signs so well that sometimes a saving reality and the thing that signifies it are spoken about interchangeably in his holy Word.⁵

27.3 EFFICACY AND ‘THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT’

Roman Catholic view:

- The visible signs, administered rightly, actually convey the grace signified (*ex opere operato*)
- Thus, baptism actually cleanses from original sin
- No particular faith is required by the recipient; they need only submit to the form prescribed by the church and not put any obstacle in the way
- The sacraments have effect only if administered, with proper intent, by an ordained priest of the Roman Catholic Church

Lutheran view:

- Faith is required in adults; there is no *ex opera operato*. In the case of infants, the Holy Spirit kindles faith. Grace is given to all recipients, but faith is required to profit from that grace.

³ Amandus Polanus cited in J. V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Reformation Heritage, 2010), 108.

⁴ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 83.

⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 360.

- The power of the sacraments comes through the word that accompanies the sign; the word always is joined with the Holy Spirit
- Baptism is required for infant salvation

Zwinglian view:

- The sacraments are symbolic only, with no grace sealed at the time
- The word 'ordinance' therefore is preferred

Reformed view:

- The type of grace conveyed is the same as that conveyed by other means
- The accompanying graces often are conveyed at the time of the sacrament, but they need not be so
- No inherent power in the sacraments
- Word of promise / word of institution (Matt. 28; 1 Cor. 11)
- The intent of the administrator is not decisive i.e. the sacrament does not depend for its efficacy on the godliness of the one administering it
- The efficacy depends on the work of the Spirit – sacraments work 'by the Spirit' (Rom. 2:29)
- In proper administration it is the teacher who gives the words of institution and who is commissioned to give the sacrament

27.4 ONLY TWO SACRAMENTS (WLC 176-177)

- Both baptism and the Lord's Supper were established to be lasting ordinances by Christ (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26)
- Only a minister should administer the sacraments because they are seals of the Word and are not to be administered without the Word

27.5 SACRAMENTS IN THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

- Spiritual realities essentially the same (1 Cor. 5:7; 10:2)

The people of God have always had their sacraments of initiation and nurture. What has changed is the visible nature of the sacraments, not the reality of the thing signified.

Chapter 28 – *Of Baptism*

28.1 THE NATURE OF BAPTISM

- Baptism marks the admission of the party baptised into the visible church
- Sign and seal of the covenant of grace i.e. it points to and validates the promises of the gospel
- Ingrafting into Christ (union with Christ) (Gal. 3:27)
- Regeneration (Tit. 3:5)
- Forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:10, 13-14, 19-23; 10:2, 4, 22; cf. Mark 1:4)
- ‘Giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life’ (Rom. 6:1-4)
- The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration but there is nothing automatic about it

The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28:1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration.⁶

Nowhere do the Standards state that a person is regenerated by baptism.⁷

It is important to realize that the significance of baptism in the NT is the same as the significance of circumcision in the OT:

- Circumcision was required to enter God’s covenant people and eat the Passover (Gen. 17:10; 34:14-17; Exod. 12:44, 48)

⁶ Wright ‘Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,’ 169.

⁷ J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Crossway, 2014), 131.

- Now baptism is required (1 Cor. 7:18-20; Gal 2:3-5)

The meaning of circumcision was the same as that for baptism (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26)

In the OT, circumcision pictured the sanctions of the Abrahamic covenant, as well as the blessings for obedience:

- Blessing for covenant faithfulness: regeneration, cleansing from sin
- Sanction for disobedience: cutting off from people of God

Likewise, in the NT, baptism pictures the sanctions of the new covenant:

- Blessings for covenant faithfulness: cleansing from sin, baptism of the Holy Spirit
- Sanctions for disobedience: death (cf. Mark 10:38-39; Rom. 6), divine judgment

28.2 THE OUTWARD ELEMENT

- Baptism in the medieval church was an elaborate affair – there is to be no salt, no oil, nothing else.⁸
- Water is the element we must use for baptism (Acts 8:36; 10:47; 22:16; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21)
- The formula given by Jesus is ‘in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’ (Matt. 28:19)
- The Confession notes here that the Sacraments must be performed ‘by a minister of the gospel lawfully called’ to that office (Matt. 28:19-20)

28.3 MODE OF BAPTISM

Our Confession notes two things about the mode of baptism:

- Dipping (immersion) is not necessary; and,
- Baptism ought to be by pouring (affusion) or sprinkling (aspersion)

⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Eerdmans, 1992).

- All three modes perform a valid baptism (as long as the requirements in section 2 are met)

The passages cited by the divines would suggest that only a little water was used:

- Mark explains that certain Jews did not eat until they had been baptised along with their utensils and dining couches (Mark 7:4)
- 3,000 people were baptised in Jerusalem on one day (Acts 2:41)
- The Philippian jailer and his family were baptised 'at once' (Acts 16:33)
- Old Testament washing ceremonies which sprinkled blood are called baptisms (Heb. 9:10, 19)

Dipping is not required but rightly administered by sprinkling

- On Romans 6 – Burial and Resurrection see Murray⁹
- The 2014 Report of the Doctrine Committee to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland¹⁰

28.4 THE SUBJECTS OF BAPTISM

- By believing the Confession means 'professing'
- 'If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ?'¹¹

Old Testament parental responsibility:

- Covenant sign to children (Gen. 17:9-14, etc.)
- Train their children (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 5:29; 6:6-9, 20-25; Ps. 78:1-8)

⁹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (P&R, 1980) 26-30. Murray offers an exegetically sound and theologically rich account of baptism in ninety pages. Jay Adams offers arguments against immersion in *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism* (P&R, 1975), 1-15.

¹⁰ PCI Annual Reports 2014, 43-5 available at <http://www.presbyterianireland.org/getmedia/0cd22820-a371-4475-bbfd-d29de6242af1/03-General-Board.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>

¹¹ Calvin, *Inst.* 4.16.7.

- Discipline their children (Prov. 13:24; 19:18)
- Protect from unbelief and apostasy (Neh. 13:23-27)

New Testament parental responsibility:

- Covenant sign to children (Matt 28:19, baptism precedes teaching)
- Nurture and training (Eph. 6:4 examples in 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14- 15)

28.5 THE NECESSITY OF BAPTISM

- It is a sin to neglect or downgrade baptism (cf. circumcision in Exod. 4:24-26; Josh. 5:2-9)
- Yet Abraham was saved before he was circumcised (Rom 4:10), and the thief on the cross never was baptized
- Baptism does not guarantee salvation, just as circumcision did not guarantee salvation, and as many illustrations from the Bible and experience prove

A minister shall encourage baptism of the children of all such as may make a credible profession of faith. More shall not be required, nor less accepted, by way of profession than that authorised by the Church as a whole.¹²

This means that the PCI cannot consider infant baptism as just one more option amongst others.¹³

28.6 THE EFFICACY OF BAPTISM

- The efficacy of baptism is not the same as baptismal regeneration
- There is a focus on the whole of life
- There is a reminder of election
- And God's time¹⁴

¹² For example, the Code of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, paragraph 83(1).

¹³ Doctrine Committee Report (2014), 45.

¹⁴ Cornelius Burgess believed that the elect were ordinarily regenerated at the time of their baptism. Burgess was placed on the committee to craft the confession's chapter on baptism. The result is a wording that allows for Burgess's views. The Confession does not say when God's 'appointed time' is. For many of the Divines (as for many of the later Puritans), that appointed time would have been associated with the time of conversion. But for Burgess and many of the older Reformed theologians, God's appointed time was usually

28.7 ONLY ONCE

- The status of those baptised in the Roman Catholic Church
- The question of 'Rebaptisms'

the time of baptism. Given that Burgess was on the committee that drafted this chapter, it is not at all surprising that the wording permits his view. See Cornelius Burgess, *Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants, professed by the Church of England, according to Scriptures, the Primitive Church, the present Reformed Churches, and many particular divines apart* (Oxford, 1629). An account of the different baptismal views among the Westminster Divines can be found in E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (Yale, 1974).