

Ordinance or Sacrament

(This podcast shows the difference between an ordinance and a sacrament. The reformers believe that the sacraments are means of grace and a mystery of revealing the Lord to those who participate in them. Conversely, the Baptists maintain they are ordinances given by the Lord to be performed by believers for His honor and glory.)

In our last podcast we noted that the reformers maintain that baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments but Baptists simply believe they are ordinances given by the Lord to the congregation for His honor and glory. In order to try to get a better understanding of what a sacrament is we will quote John Calvin from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter 14, pp. 491-492.

1. Akin to the preaching of the gospel, we have another help to our faith in the sacraments, in regard to which, it greatly concerns us that some sure doctrine should be delivered, informing us both of the end for which they were instituted, and of their present use. First, we must attend to what a sacrament is. It seems to me, then, a simple and appropriate definition to say, that it is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him. You may make your choice of these definitions, which in meaning differ not from that of Augustine, which defines a sacrament to be a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace, but does not contain a better or surer explanation. As its brevity makes it somewhat obscure, and thereby misleads the more illiterate, I wished to remove all doubt, and make the definition fuller by stating it at greater length.
2. The reason why the ancients used this word in this sense is not obscure. The old interpreter, whenever he wished to render the Greek term *μυστήριον* into Latin, especially when it was used with reference to divine things, used the word *sacramentum*. Thus, in Ephesians, "Having made known unto the mystery (*sacramentum*) of his will;" and again, "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God, which is given me to you-wards, how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery" (*sacramentum*) (Eph. i. 9; iii. 2). In the Colossians, "Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but is now made manifest to his saints, to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery" (*sacramentum*) (Col. i. 26). Also in the First Epistle to Timothy, "Without controversy, great is the mystery (*sacramentum*) of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. iii. 16). He was unwilling to use the word *arcanum* (secret), lest the word should seem beneath the magnitude of the thing meant. When the thing, therefore, was sacred and secret, he used the term *sacramentum*. In this sense it frequently occurs in ecclesiastical writers. And it is well known, that what the Latins call *sacramenta*, the Greeks call *μυστήρια* (mysteries). The sameness of meaning removes all dispute. Hence it is that the term was applied to those signs which gave an august representation of things spiritual and sublime. This is also observed by Augustine, "It were tedious to discourse of the variety of signs; those which relate to divine things are called sacraments" (August. Ep. 5. ad Marcell.).

If you are confused after hearing the first two paragraphs of Calvin's chapter on the sacraments you will be pleased to know that the remaining twenty-four paragraphs are equally confusing.

However, as you no doubt noticed, he asserted that a sacrament was (1) a help to our faith, (2) an external sign, (3) a seal on our conscious of God's promises, (4) to sustain the weakness of our faith, and (5) a testimony of our piety towards God before Him and before angels and before men. Then he proceeds to say that this is all a mystery by using the Latin translation of the Scriptures by the Catholics where they substituted the Latin word for sacrament in the place of the Greek word for mystery.

The "Westminster Confession of Faith" equally affirms that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace." However, the 1689 "London Confession of Faith" declares that baptism and the Lord's Supper are "ordinances of positive and sovereign institution." As we previously pointed out in our last podcast, baptism is simply a figure (picture, type) as plainly stated in I Peter 3:21. Regarding the Lord's Supper, Scripture declares that the Lord instituted it as a memorial unto Him. I Cor. 11:24-26 says that the bread and wine were to be taken in remembrance of Him; that is, in remembrance of Jesus Christ. This is what a memorial service is; it is something done in remembrance of another. Baptism is a picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; that is, salvation in a picture. The Lord's Supper is a memorial service of the death of Christ and a proclamation of the gospel. I Cor. 11:26 says, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." The Greek word for shew is translated preach, declare, etc. in other places in the New Testament.

When we simply take the Scriptures as written we do not find that baptism and the Lord's Supper are some mysterious sign of some invisible grace for the purpose of helping our faith or sealing some covenantal promise. They are simply a memorial service and picture of our salvation that was purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, there are various blessings and benefits received by those who participate in these commands of the Lord, but they are not some mysterious function that add to our faith or some means of grace that contributes to our salvation. As the Scriptures declare, "Salvation is of the Lord." Christ paid the debt in full and when He bowed His head on the cross and cried "It is finished," His righteousness was accepted (and continues to be so) of our Heavenly Father on our behalf. What greater blessing to know and relish when participating in these ordinances? We do not have to wonder if we have missed out on something because of some hidden mystery we fail to understand. It is the simple message of the gospel that is set forth in these ordinances.

In conclusion, a Baptist should not be guilty of referring to baptism or the Lord's Supper as sacraments. Equally, we should not refer to the Lord's Supper by calling it the Eucharist. It is not a thanksgiving feast. It is simply a memorial service. As we said earlier, there are many blessings and benefits to those who partake of these ordinances scripturally and we plan on addressing some of these in the future. However, we should never forget the basic meaning of these ordinances as found in the Scriptures.