

Making Sense of the Sacraments

What makes a church *a church*? When you consider the variety of organizations that consider themselves to be “churches,” despite how radically different many of these organizations function, the complexity of this question begins to emerge. Five hundred years ago, the leaders of the Protestant Reformation wrestled with the same question. They, like us, were surrounded by a diversity of sects that claimed the name of “church” despite widely varying beliefs and practices. The Reformers consulted the Scriptures, and after much consideration, concluded that the Bible attests to 3 Outward Marks of a true church. Significantly, one of the three marks was the “pure administration of the Sacraments.”¹

If we distributed a poll asking American church-goers to name the most essential characteristics of a true church, what do you think would top the list? I imagine our survey would yield results regarding worship music, preaching, children’s ministry, small groups, discipleship, maybe Sunday morning coffee? But how many of us would list the *Sacraments*, especially in the top 3?! Unfortunately, many of us have only known the sacraments to be more of a sentimental sideshow that occasionally accompanies the main attraction of music or preaching in our worship services. But, as the Reformers argued, the Scriptures place great importance on the right and regular administration of the Sacraments. Why? What is a *sacrament* anyway, and why are the sacraments so essential to the life and work of a true church?

What is a “Sacrament”?

1. An Ordinance Instituted by Christ - the first factor that makes the sacraments unique (and uniquely significant) is that they are instituted directly by Christ Himself. Our church, along with most other Protestant and Reformed churches, believe that the Bible affirms the existence of 2 Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Lord Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper “on the night when He was betrayed”² and He instituted Baptism shortly before His ascension³. As *ordinances*, they are gifts of grace which we are *commanded* to receive and enjoy. Participating in the sacraments, then, is not a matter of personal opinion or preference, but of grace-fueled obedience.

¹ Belgic Confession, Article 29

² 1 Corinthians 11:23

³ Matthew 28:18-20

2. A Sacrament is a *SIGN* - a “sign” is a visible object that points to a reality that is different from and more significant than itself. Augustine, the North African theologian from the 4th century, referred to the sacraments as “visible forms of an invisible grace.” The sacraments are to accompany the gospel *preached* as the gospel in *picture* form. God caters to our creatureliness and makes His love real enough to feel, smell, touch, and taste. In Baptism, water is the sign used that signifies our union with Christ and entrance into His family. In the Lord’s Supper, bread and wine are used to signify the body and blood of Christ and our ongoing communion with Him who loved us and gave Himself up for us.

3. A Sacrament is a *SEAL* - “seals” are not as commonly used now as they once were, but the meaning transcends multiple centuries and contexts. Even today we rely upon seals as we find ourselves searching for a Notary Public to validate important documents or as we present the seal of our nation imprinted upon our Passports while engaging in International travel. A seal does not create a reality, but confirms it. Getting the U.S. seal on my passport doesn’t make me an American citizen, but it does verify and confirm my status as an American. In the same way, the sacraments do not *create* reality by giving us salvation, but they do *certify* the reality of salvation which is always and only by grace through faith in Christ alone.

4. A Sacrament is a *Means of Grace* - On one hand, we could assume that the sacraments are empty rituals which do not confer grace, but merely give us public opportunities to express our faith. This de-spiritualizes and over-sentimentalizes the sacraments. On the other hand, we could drift toward the error of thinking that something always magically happens every time any person celebrates Baptism or the Lord’s Supper. In other words, if we’re not careful, we can attribute to the *signs* the things that are being *signified*, and assume that the signs themselves have the power to confer grace upon the partakers. Both of these errors fail to grasp the Biblical teaching that sacraments are *means of grace*. And, like all means of grace, they are attained by *faith*. Indeed, “Faith holds the sign and the blessing signified together.”⁴ The substance of the sacraments is Christ, and Christ is laid hold of by faith. This is why, when we partake of the Lord’s Supper together, we are not merely going through the motions of a sentimental ritual. Rather, though the bread and wine remain bread and wine, the Lord Jesus does work graciously through them (albeit in a mysterious way) to stimulate and strengthen our faith in Him.

⁴ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*