

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—  
*Lesson 49—What is a sacrament? Qs. 92-93*

**A holy ordinance**

- I. By nature, a sacrament is *an ordinance instituted by Christ*. This is necessary for several reasons.
  - A. He alone has the authority to bind the conscience to ordinances for worship, WCF 20.2; Lev 10.1-4.
  - B. He alone can attach His blessing and promise to an ordinance so that it serves His people as a means of His grace, 1Cor 10.16; Rom 10.17; Mt 7.7.
  - C. His Spirit alone can bless an ordinance and make it effectual, 1Cor 12.13; 10.16.
- II. It should be obvious, then, why it's called a *holy* ordinance.
  - A. We should reverence Christ's appointments and neither handle them carelessly nor participate in them unworthily, Acts 8.13, 18-23; 1Cor 11.27-30; Lev 10.3.

**Sensible signs signifying and conferring spiritual realities**

- I. The design of Christ for a sacrament is clear.
  - A. He designed them to be *sensible* ordinances, Mt 28.19; Mt 26.26-28; Acts 10.46-48; 1Cor 11.23-25.
  - B. He designed them to be *signifying, sealing, and conferring* ordinances, 1Cor 12.12-13; 10.16.
  - C. He established *a sacramental union* between the sign and the thing signified, WCF 28.6.

**The Communication of Spiritual realities**

- I. A sacrament represents, seals, and applies Christ and the benefits of the new covenant to believers through faith.
  - A. It *represents and exhibits*, as in a sensible picture, to the believer through faith, Acts 8.35-36. A sacrament directs our faith to Christ's person and work for us, in whom and upon which we have believed for salvation by representing Him and His work by a sensible sign, Gen 17.1-2, 9-11.
  - B. It *seals and confirms* the promises of Christ attached to the sacrament to the believer through faith, Acts 10.47. A sacrament visibly confirms and seals Christ's promise to our weak faith.
  - C. It *applies and confers* the spiritual realities themselves, *the thing signified*, to the believer through faith, 1Cor 10.16. A sacrament, received in Christian faith, is used by Christ as a means to apply and confer grace to the soul of a believer, 1Cor 12.13; Rom 6.1-4.

**The Sacraments are for Believers — Understanding the Sacramental Theology of the Westminster Standards** [cf. *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p.212, by William Cunningham]

- I. The Standards present *the doctrine of the sacraments* in a *general* way so that what's said is equally applicable to *both* sacraments.
  - A. Thus, in Q.92, the definition of a sacrament *doesn't* take into account how baptism and the Lord's supper differ or even *acknowledge* the unique nature of infant baptism, but instead provides a *general definition* of a sacrament that embodies the substance of what's taught and indicated in Scripture as being true equally and alike of both sacraments: they are *means of grace* (Q.88) *made effectual in the elect by the Holy Spirit* (Q.91) *through faith* (Qs.91, 92, 93-97).
  - B. And the *reason* for this general approach is because, as a *sensible, representative, confirming* means of grace, the sacraments *can't be understood or fully enjoyed without faith* in the One to whose person and work they point the faith of the believer.
    1. On the one hand, *an unbeliever*, having no faith in the Christ signified, can make no real use of an ordinance designed to signify Christ to faith, seal Christ's promises to faith, and confer Christ to him by faith.
    2. On the other hand, *infants*, having no capacity for faith in Christ, cannot understand the sacraments or fully enjoy a means meant to speak to the faith of the receiver.
    3. And furthermore, *even a believer living in sin* can make no good use of a sacrament which directs him to Christ's person and work because his course of sinning is a practical rejection of Christ's person and work.
- II. *What, then, about infant baptism?*

- A. Infants are clearly not to be allowed at the Lord’s Table, because the receiver needs to be able to examine himself and to discern (see/lay hold of) Christ in the ordinance, Mt 26.26-28; 1Cor 11.27-31; WCF 29.7.
- B. But what about baptism? Why are they allowed to receive the sacrament of baptism?
  - 1. Baptism is applied to the children of believers, not on the ground of their own faith, but purely on the ground of the command of God that the children of believers are members of the covenant made with the parents and therefore, as members, have a right to the seal of the covenant.
  - 2. In Gen 17.1-11, God makes it abundantly clear that when God establishes His covenant with a parent, the *external reach* of that covenant *includes his infant offspring* (cf. “eight days old”).
    - a) Having no indication in the NT that the Lord withdrew that privilege, *but instead seeing* the Lord Himself receive and confirm that infant children were in the covenant (Mk 10.13-16), *and seeing* His Apostles confirm it in their preaching (Acts 2.38-39) and instruction to the churches (1Cor 7.14), we are led to only one conclusion: the children of NT believers are in the covenant just as the children of OT believers were, and therefore not only fall under the same privilege to receive the sign of the covenant for infants but their parents fall under the same obligation as OT parents did to see that the sign is placed upon them (Gen 17.9-14).
- C. How, then, can infants benefit from the sacrament of baptism if faith is required to receive those benefits?
  - 1. In the case of baptism, (and just as true of the Lord’s Supper), WCF 28.6 says, “*the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto [viz. the elect], according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.*”
- III. What we see, then, is that while the Westminster Standards *confess the rightness* of infant baptism (being commanded by God, WCF 28.4), they also by implication *acknowledge the uniqueness* of that ordinance (see the “but...” in WCF 28.4 and WSC 95), and instead focus our confession on what the sacraments signify *to the faith of the believer* who receives them, since, as sensible signs, they’re directly addressed to the faith of the recipient (see even Q. 94 itself and its use of “our”).
- IV. In sum, the Standards hold that the sacraments were instituted and intended for *believers* and produce their appropriate beneficial effects *only through the faith which must previously exist* in the recipient and which is expressed and exercised in the act of partaking in them. In other words, the Standards *deny* that the sacraments are *converting ordinances*, i.e. faith-producing.

### Inferences

- I. It’s clear from Scripture, as Q. 93 affirms, that there are only two NT sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
- II. Bless God for His kindness in giving us sacraments. His Word is surer than heaven and earth, and yet the Lord is so mindful of our frame and of the weakness of our faith, that He graciously instituted signs and seals of the benefits promised to us in the covenant of grace.
- III. Make mighty use of the sacraments! They are given by God for your encouragement, for your nourishing, for your comfort, for your edification. Improve upon your baptism as the sign of your *ingrafting* into Christ by faith and improve upon the Lord’s Supper as the sign of your *well-placed faith and saving communion* in Christ’s atoning work.
- IV. It’s a great sin to slight or neglect the sacraments. God has stooped so low in them that our neglect of them is an affront to His mercy and kindness.
- V. It’s a great sin to abuse the sacraments, coming to them without faith and coming to them in a known, unbelieving course of sin. Regard the sacraments as holy ordinances and use them as gracious means.