

Shorter Catechism 91-93 “How Does God Use the Sacraments to Save You?” Oct 13, 2013
Exodus 24
Psalm 27
1 Corinthians 10

Q. 91. How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

That may sound like a strange question!

Many would simply answer that question by saying, “They don’t!”

But the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3, tells us about how God saved Noah through the Ark,
and how “baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you...”

And Ananias told Paul in Acts 22:16

“Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

So if we are going to be faithful to the scriptures,
then we need to say that the sacraments *do* become effectual means of salvation.

The question is not *whether* God uses the sacraments to save us –
but *how* does God use the sacraments to save us.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way:

Q. 91. How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

A. The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that does administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

Notice how we say it:

it’s not that there is any special virtue in the element itself –

Peter will say in 1 Peter 3 that baptism saves –

but *how* does baptism save?

It “saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body

but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (3:21)

In other words, the sacraments are not *magical*.

Just getting wet doesn’t save you –

(if just getting wet saved you,

I’d drive through South Bend with a bunch of water balloons!)

The sacraments become effectual means of salvation,
not from any virtue in them, *or in him that does administer them* –
in other words, the validity of the sacraments

does not depend on the piety of the minister –
*but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them that by faith receive them.*

Or to use Peter's way of saying it:

baptism "saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body
but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (3:21)

Psalm 27 has the same basic attitude.

David says, "The LORD is my light and my salvation."

Salvation belongs to the LORD.

And so David takes refuge in the LORD –

and he asks that he may "dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple."

And when God delivers David,

David promises that "I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy."

Sing Psalm 27

Read 1 Corinthians 10

Okay, so we're talking about sacraments.

What *is* a sacrament?

Q. 92. What is a sacrament?

A. A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ.

There are lots of holy ordinances.

Marriage, civil government, OT sacrifices, and so on.

But in order to be a sacrament of the NT, it must have been instituted by Christ.

And there are only two that meet those criteria.

Q. 93. Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?

A. The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul talks about how the sacraments work.

And he starts with some OT sacraments.

He points out that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

Paul wants you to see a parallel here.

We have been baptized into Christ in water and the Spirit.

They had been baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

The catechism uses the language of “sensible sign.”

In other words, they are signs that reveal Christ through tangible means.

“Sensible” then, means that they are revealed to our senses.

God uses ordinary, everyday things to communicate to us
the benefits of our redemption.

The “cloud” refers to the glory-cloud

(which was the presence of the Holy Spirit with Israel in the wilderness!)

and the “sea” refers to the Red Sea –

the waters of judgment that swallowed up Pharaoh’s army.

These are all *sensible* signs.

And Paul says that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They ate the same spiritual food (the manna) –

and they drank the same spiritual drink (the water from the Rock) –

and *that Rock was Christ*

(in other words, the OT saints partook of Christ in *their* sacraments,
just like we do in ours).

Paul says that the fathers in the wilderness partook of Christ.

But with most of them, God was not pleased – and they died in the wilderness.

Paul makes it clear that outward participation in the sacraments does not guarantee anything.

Israel in the wilderness partook of Christ – but they didn’t believe –

and so they were destroyed.

Indeed, Paul warns in verse 11

that “these things happened to them as an example,

but they were written down for our instruction,

on whom the end of the ages has come.”

Just because you’ve been baptized doesn’t mean you can grumble and complain.

If you turn to idolatry, then you too will perish!

But in order to understand how the sacraments work,

let’s go back to Exodus 24.

A Sensible Sign: Why Word and Sacrament Go Together (Ex 24)

Exodus 19-24 provides the first detailed example of Israel’s worship,

because it is the first corporate worship service in the history of the church.

All Israelite worship services will look back to Sinai as they renew the covenant

which God made with their fathers.

Notice how Exodus 19-24 describes this.

In Exodus 19, God warns the people not to come up to Mt Sinai (19:16-25)

Only Moses is called to come up.

God speaks a second time in the proclamation of the Law – the Ten Commandments (20:1-17)

The people respond with fear and trembling (20:18-19)

Moses replies with the assurance of God's mercy (20:20-21).

“God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you,

So that you may not sin.”

The glory of the Lord—and the thunders of the law
are designed to remind his people of his holiness.

When we remember who God is

–then we are reminded more clearly of who we are,
and how we are to live as his people.

Then God speaks a third time (20:22-23:33)

–what could be called an exposition of the Ten Commandments.
concluding with the promise of the Land (ch 23).

Then Moses is sent down to report all these words,

and the people respond “All the words which the Lord has said we will do” (24:3)

God is establishing his covenant with Israel.

And God's covenant is not “negotiable.”

God does not ask them for their input!

The covenant is sovereignly established in chapters 19-23.

But then notice what happens the next day.

The establishment of the covenant at Sinai in chapters 19-23
did not involve the people very much.

But the following day the covenant is ratified.

And this covenant ratification ceremony is what
becomes the pattern for worship.

Ex 24:4-11

What is the difference between Exodus 19-23 and Exodus 24?

The content is precisely the same.

Moses reads the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20-23)

The people profess their faith and obedience once more.

So what is the difference?

The difference is found in the blood of the Covenant.

Moses builds a stone altar (according to Ex 20) with 12 stone pillars (to represent the tribes).

Then he sent the young men (note that the priesthood is not yet established)
to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings.
(We'll talk more tonight about the different kinds of offerings in the OT).

Moses then takes the blood from the sacrifices,
and sprinkles half on the altar—the other half he reserves in basins.
Then after he reads the Book of the Covenant,
the people declare “All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient”
Then he sprinkles the blood on the people,
saying “Behold, the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you
according to all these words” (24:8)

The reason why all these commands are present
is because God does in fact require obedience of his people.

But we also need to see that grace is embedded
within the very structure of the Mosaic Covenant.
If we see the call to obedience apart from the grace of redemption,
then we will forget the whole point of the Mosaic Covenant.

The Mosaic Covenant could be summarized simply in the Ten Commandments,
but its exposition in the Book of the Covenant (chapters 20-23)
is essential for understanding its context.

The very first item that God declares after the Ten Commandments is the law of the altar.
Israel is going to fail.
Israel will sin.

And therefore, right up front, at the very beginning of the Book of the Covenant,
God provides the way of dealing with sin—through the sacrifice.
The rest of 21-23 is mostly focused on life in community:
setting forth the basic principles of justice that Israel must follow.

God expects Israel to follow his law perfectly.
This doesn't mean that he expects Israel to be sinless.
Rather, he expects Israel to repent when he sins!

The law of the altar makes it clear that sinless perfection
is not an expectation of the Mosaic Covenant.
Indeed, according to Hebrews, this is one of the problems of the Mosaic Covenant!
The priests themselves have to offer sacrifices for their own sins!
How is this ever going to accomplish the salvation of God's people?

So the Mosaic Covenant is not a republication of the covenant of works.
God does not promise Moses that he will reward Israel's perfect obedience.
Rather, the Mosaic Covenant sets forth the pattern of the New Covenant.
The reading of the Book of the Covenant calls forth the blood of the covenant.

The book of the covenant cannot be divorced from the blood of the covenant.

The book of the covenant is central.

This is where we hear the content of the covenant.

Without the proclamation of the word of God,
we have no clear idea what we are to believe concerning God,
or what duty He requires of us.

Indeed, the blood of the covenant is meaningless
apart from its connection to the book of the covenant.

If Moses had neglected the reading of the Book of the Covenant,
and merely sprinkled the people with blood,
what would it have meant?

It would have meant that they smelled REALLY BAD!!!

[and indeed the “worship” of the golden calf involved the blood
of the covenant without—and indeed against—the book of the covenant]

Hear Moses when he says:

“Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you
according to all these words.”

The blood of the covenant has meaning
only through its connection with the Book of the Covenant.

This is why our catechism says that the sacraments become effectual means of salvation
“only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them that by faith receive them.”

But the book of the covenant, by itself, only condemns.

The Word of God, apart from the sacrifice, can speak only judgment.

All the words in the world will do nothing to save the people of God,
so long as they remain only words.

The Word of God—apart from the sacrifice—condemns us.

So, if the blood of the covenant finds its meaning in the book of the covenant,
it is also true to say that the book of the covenant is only powerful to save
because of the blood of the covenant.

And our Lord Jesus has instituted two sacraments that reflect this:

baptism – which signifies our cleansing in his blood;
the Lord’s Supper – where the cup is “the new covenant in my blood.”

In Christ, the book of the covenant and the blood of the covenant
have come together in one person.

So now we are ready to behold the strange sight
of the 70 elders of Israel gathered together with Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu,
eating and drinking in the presence of God.

What are they doing here?

God had commanded that no one was to come up the mountain.
But now he allows these 70 to come with Moses.

Why?

Because of the blood of the covenant.

The proclamation of the covenant is not enough.

The enactment of the covenant, through the death of the sacrifice,
MUST happen before Israel may come up the mountain.

And of course, here it only happens in a representative way.

Only 70 Israelite elders are allowed to see God.

And these 70 “worship from afar”.

Only Moses and Joshua are allowed to approach God himself.

But through these representatives, Israel comes into the presence of God,
because God has looked upon the blood of the covenant,
and his justice is now satisfied.

Now there is peace between God and man,

and so the elders partake of the covenant meal on the side of Mt Sinai.

Notice what they see:

“They saw the God of Israel.

And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone,
and it was like the very substance of the heavens in its clarity.” (v10)

They are looking up, and they see a clear blue pavement above them.

And they see God’s feet standing on that pavement.

The pavement is said to be “like the very substance of the heavens in its clarity”.

In other words,

it looks like a piece of the sky has come down from the heavens,
and God has ridden it down to Mt Sinai.

God wants Israel to understand that heaven is his throne, and earth is his footstool.

When they look up to the peak of that blue dome above them,

he wants them to remember that he dwells enthroned in the heavens.

In other words, he is sovereign over the whole of creation (19:5).

But at the same time, he is a God who draws near to his people.

He is a God who rules over all,

And he is a God who comes near to His people.

The sovereign God of the universe desires to be near to YOU.

He *wants* to have fellowship with you.

You are not some tiresome pest that God begrudgingly saves.

NO!

You are a special treasure to him.

Because, in Christ, you are his child.

This is why Exodus 19-23 is incomplete without Exodus 24.

The proclamation of the Covenant is incomplete without the blood of the covenant.

And the blood of the covenant allows us to draw near to God,

and to partake of the covenant meal before him.

It is interesting to note that every biblical worship service is consistent with this pattern.

Throughout the OT, you see a consistent movement,

starting with the slaughter of the burnt offerings and peace offerings,

followed by the proclamation of the Word (the meaning of the sacrifice),

and the response of the people,

concluding with the covenant meal.

NT worship has the same focus.

Christ is our once-for-all sacrifice,

but you see the same twin focus on word and sacrament in the NT.

The Book of Revelation even sees the history of redemption in liturgical terms.

It starts with the sacrifice of Jesus (chs 4-5),

moves to the proclamation of the Word (the various sevens),

each concluded with the response of the saints,

and concluding with the wedding supper of the Lamb.

This is why Christian worship has always followed the same pattern as that of Exodus 24.

We come into the presence of God on the basis of the sacrifice.

Without the sin offering, the Word of God can only bring judgment.

But then, having received the forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ,

we may hear the Word of God—the Book of the Covenant—read and preached.

And in response to that Word, we profess our faith and obedience,

asking in our prayers that God will continue to be faithful to His Word,

and declaring in our confession of faith that we believe his promises.

And finally we come to the covenant meal—the Lord's Supper,

where we partake of the same blood of the covenant that has washed us.

We eat and drink before God.

We do this because in our worship we are reminded of our true identity—

our true place in redemptive history.

Redemptive history moves from the sacrifice (Jesus)

to the Word (the apostolic preaching)

to our response (faith and obedience—the spread of the church)

to the covenant meal (wedding supper of the Lamb).

And our worship every Sunday participates in this.

How Does God Use the Sacraments to Save Us?

- 1. By the Blessing of Christ and the Working of His Spirit**
- 2. By Representing, Sealing and Applying to Us Christ and His Benefits**
- 3. Because All God's Blessings Are Received by Faith**

But we must never forget that the purpose of the sacraments is to strengthen and nourish faith. They are not magical.

Rather, they are sensible signs that God uses to communicate to us his grace.

As with all signs, they benefit only those who read them aright.

Since their meaning and power is bound up with the Word,
if you do not properly hear the Word, you will not properly see the sign.

Now, remember how Paul said in 1 Cor 10 that Israel drank from the spiritual Rock
“and that Rock was Christ”?

But most of the Israelites rebelled and were destroyed.

How can someone partake of Christ but be destroyed?

Faith is the instrument by which we receive all the benefits of Christ.

The presence or absence of faith does not change what the sacraments mean.

John Calvin said it well:

“Man's unworthiness does not rob the sacraments of their significance.

Baptism remains the bath of regeneration

even though the whole world was faithless.” (Ezek 20:20)

Calvin is simply articulating what Peter says in Acts 2:

“repent and be baptized, every one of you for the forgiveness of sins,
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

What is baptism for?

It is for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But you can only receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit by faith!

We confess one baptism for the remission of sins,

and that is what baptism signifies, regardless of whether you believe it!

But you will only receive the forgiveness of sins through baptism

if you believe the promises of God in Jesus Christ.