

The Sacraments and the Church

I. The church has authority to bind and to loose

- Matt 18:18 [Jesus speaking to the disciples] “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The context is that of church discipline: see v. 17.
- Jesus Christ has granted the keys of the kingdom to the church:
 - The church can bind sins: when a person lacks a credible faith, or is living in sin without repentance, then the church must bar the way to membership, or enforce discipline if that person is already a member.
 - The church can loose sins: when someone comes to trust in Christ and repent of their sins, the church can declare on the authority of Christ that their sins are forgiven by admitting them into membership.
 - These keys are given to the church as a whole, and are wielded by the elders, whom God has made stewards of his household (Tit 1:7; Heb 13:17)
 - Note #1: this does not mean that when the church recognizes someone as a Christian, that they are automatically saved. See 1 Jn 2:19; Rom 9:6
 - Note #2: this does not mean that the church has some magical ability to determine whether someone is a true Christian (regenerate).
- Implications:
 - You can’t go around saying you are saved when the church refuses to recognize your faith as legitimate. (See Jer 7:9–10)
 - Being a Christian is not a private matter between “me and Jesus.” Jesus takes us rotten branches, makes us new, and engrafts us *into his people* (Rom 11:17–24). To be united to Christ is to be united to his people.
 - John Calvin: “those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother” (Institutes, 4.1.1)

WCF 25.2: “The visible Church . . . consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

II. Every instance of the sacraments is an authoritative act of binding and loosing

- In baptism, the Lord pronounces through his church, “this one is ‘in’; marked as my own.”
 - Gal 3:27 “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (cf. Rom 6:3)
- In the supper, the Lord pronounces through his church, “this one is still ‘in’; still marked as my own.”
 - 1 Cor 10:17 “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”
- The height of church discipline is when a person is denied the supper.
 - Matt 18:17 “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (See also 2 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Thess 3:6, 14; Tit 3:10; 1 Tim 1:20).
 - Excommunication is how Jesus “corrects” a baptism that was not blessed by the Spirit. Not everyone who is baptized will be saved. Eventually, a person’s lack of faith will become clear.

WLC 173 Q. May any who profess his faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it? A. Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction and manifest their reformation.

- Remember: church discipline is a form of love: not allowing someone to go on deceiving himself as though he belonged to Christ when that person's deeds deny him: Tit 1:16 "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him."
- Implications:
 - If you are not a member in good standing of a Bible-believing church, you ought not to receive the sacraments, and if you do not receive the sacraments, you cannot claim to be "in" with God.
 - This is why I fence the table in this way.
 - If you receive the sacraments, then God *authoritatively* assures you that you are "in" even if you doubt or struggle: see WLC #172.
 - So much grace! You don't have to have killed all your sin or quenched all your doubts or have all your theology figured out!

III. The church is the only legitimate context for the sacraments

- An analogy to the word of God:
 - The *church* is the steward of the mysteries of God (that is, the Bible; Rom 3:2; 1 Cor 4:1; 1 Tim 3:15). God entrusted the Bible to the visible church (Matt 28:18–20).
 - While individual believers should certainly speak the word to their friends and neighbors, ordained men who are gifted and held accountable by the presbytery are the ones who should preach and teach the gospel publicly and authoritatively (Acts 11:22; 13:2–3; 1 Tim 4:14).
- An even stronger restriction applies to the sacraments: if the sacraments are inextricably bound up with the keys of the kingdom, no one ought to wield them other than the visible church.
 - Remember from last time: God does the sacraments *through his appointed and duly called messengers*
 - The king's seal is only to be wielded by the king's messengers!
 - Unfortunate breaches of this principle:
 - InterVarsity's Urbana missions conference doing the Lord's Supper
 - "All school" communion at Wheaton College
- Likewise, since the sacraments mark people as "in" and show our joint unity with Christ, they should only be given to the church *as a whole*.
 - Unfortunate breaches of this principle:
 - A minister giving communion in the privacy of a person's home (WCF 29.4)
 - Youth group on a retreat
 - A married couple receiving it at their wedding

Conclusion: the church's authority to bind and to loose is a gracious gift from Jesus Christ. It confronts the self-deceived with their need to repent, and it comforts the weak with the genuineness of their faith. Both of these churchly functions (rejecting some, accepting others) are carried out *through the sacraments*.