THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS

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The ministry of the Word includes the ministry of the sacraments. The Bible was given by God for us to know the truths he wishes to reveal to us. God has given to his church as well various sacraments, which also reveal his truth to us by the use of a visible element, accompanied by the Word and the ministry of his Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament these sacraments included various rituals and sacrifices. In the present dispensation the number of sacraments has been reduced to two, which are more outwardly simple in nature, but still constitute a large portion of the ministry of the Word.1

Sacraments as a Ministry of the Word

The New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are a part of God’s revelation to his church. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* puts it as follows:

\[WLC\ 162\] What is a sacrament?
A. sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church,\(^1\) to signify, seal, and exhibit\(^2\) unto those that are within the covenant of grace,\(^3\) the benefits of his mediation,\(^4\) to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces;\(^5\) to oblige them to obedience;\(^6\) to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another;\(^7\) and to distinguish them from those that are without.\(^8\)

1 Gen. 17:7, 10; Exod. 12; Matt. 28:19; Matt. 26:26-28  
2 Rom. 4:11; 1 Cor. 11:24-25  
3 Rom. 15:8; Exod. 12:48  
4 Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 10:16  
5 Rom. 4:11; Gal 3:27  
6 Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 10:21  
7 Eph. 4:2-5; 1 Cor. 12:13  
8 Eph. 2:11-12; Gen. 34:14

The Scripture verses cited above were chosen by the Westminster divines to demonstrate that the sacraments indeed revealed these truths, and thus are a part of the ministry of the Word. As such, they are means of grace.\(^2\)

The English word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which is the term the Latin fathers used to translate the word \(\mu\sigma\tau\iota\pi\omicron\omicron\) used by the Greek fathers, which in English is *mystery*. They applied this term to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Latin term refers to that which is given or done as the result of an oath or pledge. Often it refers to the oath itself. In the famous letter that Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan, he remarked that, as a part of their worship, the early Christians would “bind themselves by an oath
This idea of a binding vow or oath fits well with the idea proposed by Meredith G. Kline, which relates the sacraments to ancient treaty obligations and ordeals. The Greek term “mystery” and the Latin term “sacrament” actually describe the two aspects of the sacraments. Mystery emphasizes the revelation God shows to us, while sacrament emphasizes the testimony we give to God, ourselves, and the world.

Jesus commanded that both baptism and the Lord’s Supper should be observed in the church until his return. Both of these sacraments are to be done not privately, but in the church. Obviously, the early church did not meet in particular church buildings. Therefore, we understand that they were to be performed in the stated gatherings of the congregation for public worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that private celebrations of the Lord’s Supper are forbidden. This seems to refer to those who desired to avoid public services (such as princes and nobles). It certainly does not rule out administering the Lord’s Supper in small groups for those who are ill or are otherwise unable to attend public services. Likewise, baptism is to be performed publicly as a ministry of the church. Since baptism is not required for salvation, it is not necessary to perform “emergency” baptisms privately or in an irregular manner.

Since both baptism and the Lord’s Supper are a part of the ministry of the Word by the church, they are to be governed by the biblically constituted officers of the church and performed by the church’s ministers of the gospel. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, we believe that the godliness or proper intent of the minister is not required for the sacrament to be effective as a means of grace for God’s elect. The Confession states this most emphatically: “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it.” Rather, their efficacy rests on the faith of the recipient and the work of God’s Spirit. But while God can and does use ungodly or insincere ministers as tools to offer grace through the sacraments to worthy recipients, he does not excuse those ministers from their sin and unfaithfulness to their ministry. By his sincere preaching, prayer, and example the minister is to lead his congregation, and thus be a means God uses in sanctifying the congregation.

**The Teaching of Baptism**

As a part of the ministry of the Word, the sacrament of baptism teaches and declares certain truths. In the traditional Reformed understanding these truths are as follows:

1) Ingraffing into Christ
2) Forgiveness of sins by his blood
3) Regeneration by the Holy Spirit
4) Adoption as God’s children
5) Resurrection to everlasting life
6) Admission to the visible church
7) Engagement to be the Lord’s

The Westminster standards link baptism to the covenant of grace, and combine many of the individual significances found in Scripture. All these significances are positive or beneficial.

These seven significances of baptism can be grouped into four main categories. The first category is our ingrafting into Christ. The Scriptures mention this aspect of baptism often, especially in connection with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. In Romans 6:3-6 we are brought by baptism into union with Christ, are identified with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 and Galatians 3:27-28 we are baptized into Christ, or into his body. And in Colossians 2:11-12 we are “with him” in our baptism. Some would maintain that all these passages refer to spiritual baptism, not to water baptism. Yet even in that case, it seems that the significance of spiritual baptism is maintained in water baptism.

The second category is forgiveness of sins and regeneration, cleansing and purification from sin. This is seen first in the significance of John’s baptism. This explains why, when John was baptizing, “an argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing” (John 3:25). Likewise, several verses speak of Christian baptism as a cleansing from sin, bringing forgiveness and spiritual purification. Thus, it is parallel to our spiritual cleansing from sin, as in Hebrews 10:22, “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

The third category is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The same term, *baptizo*, is used for both events. The two are linked in John 1:33 = Acts 1:5 = Acts 11:16, which passages compare John’s baptism with water to Christ’s baptism with the Holy Spirit. The two baptisms are so closely related that some passages can be interpreted to refer to either water or Spirit baptism. Examples include 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, … and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” and Galatians 3:27, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.”

The fourth category is our initiation into the visible church. Baptism was linked by Christ to discipleship, and from the beginning was a prerequisite for church membership. Baptism is the divinely appointed means of testimony that the believer is to make to the church and the world.

**Baptism and circumcision**

All of these teachings are found in baptism. In these regards there is a close parallel significance between baptism and Old Testament circumcision. Baptism has replaced circumcision as the initiatory rite of entrance into the visible church. The New Testament links the significance of circumcision with that of baptism.

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the
power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.” (Col. 2:11-13)

This parallel is based on the true meaning of circumcision:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom. 2:28-29)

This spiritual significance of circumcision was already taught in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 10:16 God told his people to “circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” This spiritual work is described in the context:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (Dt. 10:12-13)

Thus, circumcision signified the recipient’s regeneration and love for God. “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Dt. 30:6). Later, Jeremiah made a striking parallel between “circumcising your hearts” and “washing your hearts.” He also stated that being uncircumcised in heart means not to know and love God.

Since baptism is practiced in the New Testament dispensation, circumcision no longer is necessary; it now is optional (1 Cor. 7:18-20). As a matter of fact, it was ruled out in the case of the Gentile Titus (Gal. 2:3-5). When we administer baptism today, we are declaring God’s Word by that visible sign, just as the saints in the Old Testament did when they circumcised their infants when they were eight days old.

**Baptism’s underlying significance**

Theologians have always wrestled with the biblical data, trying to find a single unifying significance of baptism that would encompass all the points mentioned above. Recent discoveries of ancient Near Eastern treaties have provided the basis for a possible solution. There are striking parallels between ancient covenants made by the conquering king (the suzerain) with the kings subject to him (the vassals) and the covenants God made with his people found in the Old Testament. In fact, the entire book of Deuteronomy closely follows the form of these ancient treaties of the second millennium BC.

These ancient suzerain-vassal covenants often were accompanied by an oath and a covenant ritual, especially on the part of the vassal. The covenant ritual usually involved the slaying of animals, with imprecations on the one who should break the treaty obligations. The
Old Testament gives two clear examples of this practice: God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:9-21), and Jerusalem’s covenant with her slaves (Jer. 34:18, 19). The ritual often pictured the sanctions of the covenant, usually the curse for disobedience, perhaps the blessing for obedience. Vassals who assumed the covenant also assumed it for their subjects, who were thus bound to the suzerain’s terms. It appears that both circumcision and baptism perform the same function. Circumcision was the covenant ritual for initiation into the people of the Abrahamic covenant, while baptism is the covenant ritual for initiation into the people of the new covenant. Since the new covenant is closely tied to the Abrahamic covenant, bringing its promises into reality, there is a substantial unity between the two signs.

There are sanctions in both the Abrahamic and new covenants. The Abrahamic covenant, as well as the Mosaic covenant, demanded loyalty to Yahweh’s ordinances. God testified concerning Abraham, long before the law of Moses, that “Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws” (Gen. 26:5). He also was faithful in teaching this covenant to his household after him; “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19).

With this background, it is more apparent that the sign of circumcision was the covenant ritual, graphically picturing the sanctions of the Abrahamic covenant. The sanctions for obedience were regeneration and cleansing from sin—both pictured in circumcision. On the other hand, the sanction for disobedience was also pictured—the cutting off of the people from God. Jesus Christ fulfilled the sanctions pictured in circumcision: he received the sanctions for disobedience, and he conveys to us the sanctions for obedience.

Just as the Abrahamic covenant required obedience to experience its blessings, so the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and Hebrews 8, demands obedience for blessing—the life of faith. Without saving faith the person finds himself under even greater curses than those of the old covenant (Heb. 10:28-29). The New Testament sign of baptism signifies the sanctions of the covenant of grace, as spelled out in the Abrahamic and new covenants. The sanctions for obedience are cleansing from sin and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The sanctions for disobedience are death and divine judgment (cf. Mark 10:38-39; Rom. 6). Again, Jesus fulfilled the sanctions pictured in baptism. By assuming the covenant curses, he secured its blessings for those united to him.

This understanding of the significance of baptism harmonizes all the various Scriptural passages into one concept, which in turn corresponds to ancient practice. If this correspondence is correct, the underlying significance of baptism is that we place ourselves and those under us (children, in the NT) under the obligations of the new covenant. God has commanded that all people do this. Baptism would therefore symbolize our obligation to accept the blessings available through faith and obedience, and the curses resulting from disobedience and rebellion.

It can be seen that baptism is a powerful aspect of the ministry of the Word. Baptism confers no promise or blessing other than that received through faith (this point would be true at least in the case of adults). It places one in God’s covenant community, and obligates one to
keep God’s new covenant. For the elect, baptism seals the blessings of the covenant; for the nonelect, it seals the curses of the covenant.

**The Teaching of the Lord’s Supper**

Just as ancient treaties stipulated an initiatory rite to establish the covenant, so they required periodic rituals of covenant renewal. The Lord’s Supper serves a similar function under the new covenant. On a regular basis the church testifies to its acceptance of the new covenant and pledges its loyalty to the Lord of the covenant.

**The Lord’s Supper and the Passover**

It is generally recognized that Jesus celebrated the Passover and instituted the Lord’s Supper at the same meal. Several passages make clear that the two sacraments are related.

The Mosaic Passover was a powerful ministry of the Word, graphically picturing the death of the lamb as providing the protection from God’s wrath and judgment. As the Lamb of God, Jesus shed his blood to protect us from God’s judgment against our sin, “for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). At his final Passover on earth Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper to be the equivalent sacrament of the new covenant.

The Passover clearly was a part of the ministry of the Word in the Old Testament. At the very beginning Moses commanded, “When your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” (Exodus 12:26-27).

The Lord’s Supper is the sign of the new covenant. This is shown by Jesus’ words of institution, “this is my blood of the covenant” (Mt. 26:28 and Mk. 14:24), and “this is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20 and 1 Cor. 11:25). The church now operates under the new covenant. The old (Mosaic) covenant is no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:6, 13). This event is so pivotal that it appears that the transition to the new covenant appears to be not Pentecost, but the institution of the Lord’s Supper during Passover. Thus it can be seen that, just as baptism is the initial covenant ritual, so the Lord’s Supper is a repeated renewal ritual. It is clear that the sanctions of the new covenant are pictured: death for disobedience (the penalty paid by Christ), and life for faith and obedience.

**The Significance of the Lord’s Supper**

The Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper best accounts for the biblical statements. The Reformed view denies both the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. It also avoids the pitfall of the Zwinglian view, which empties the sacrament of any spiritual content or any promised grace. Rather, the sacrament exhibits
and conveys grace to the elect who exercise faith and obedience in receiving it. This grace is always subject to God’s sovereign will. This grace operates directly on the spirit, not through the material elements. This grace is of the same type as that conveyed through the other means of grace. In a true but spiritual sense, worthy partakers do feast on Christ in the Lord’s Supper.27

The administration of the Lord’s Supper in Reformed churches reflects the profound simplicity and solemn dignity of the sacrament:

How hath Christ appointed bread and wine to be given and received in the sacrament of the Lord’s supper? A. Christ hath appointed the ministers of his word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord’s supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants: who are, by the same appointment, to take and eat the bread, and to drink the wine, in thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed, for them. (WLC 169)

The pastor and the people should partake of both elements. Obviously, there should be no adoration of the elements; nor is it necessary to receive the elements in a kneeling position. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated frequently in the Apostolic church; today many churches celebrate it quarterly, monthly, or even weekly.28 The elements should be “bread and wine.” The bread may be leavened or unleavened. There is no New Testament requirement to keep the ceremonial law against unleavened bread at Passover. The wine may be fermented, but need not be. American evangelical churches usually use unfermented grape juice, to avoid giving any offence or cause of stumbling. As A. A. Hodge pointed out, these matters relating to the mode of administration do not comprise the essence of the sacrament.29

The proper administration and reception of the Lord’s Supper is indeed a ministry of the Word, as our dependence on Christ for spiritual life is demonstrated (cf. Jn. 6:56, 63). At the same time, the command to examine ourselves further ministers the Word to us, as we compare our lives with the righteous standard of his law.30

“Improving” the Sacraments

The sacraments are a vital part of the ministry of the Word. Yet, as with the preaching of the Word itself and with prayer, they profit nothing when not empowered by the sovereign will of the Holy Spirit and received in faith. We who receive the sacraments have the obligation to “improve” them, to use the old language of our Westminster standards. The Larger Catechism asks, “How is our baptism to be improved by us?” (WLC 167). It further asks, “How are they that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s supper to prepare themselves before they come unto it?” (WLC 171), “What is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s supper in the time of the administration of it?” (WLC 174), and “What is the duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord’s supper?” (WLC 175). All of these questions, with their attendant answers, demonstrate the profound extent to which the sacraments are vital in the
ministry of the Word. As the church member “improves” his baptism and fulfills his duties related to the Lord’s Supper, the sacraments continue to work in his life as means of grace.

1 WCF 7:6; WLC 35.
2 WCF 27, WLC 161-64, WSC 91-93.
5 Mt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:26.
6 WCF 29:4.
7 WCF 28:5.
8 WCF 27:4.
9 WCF 27:3; see also WLC 161; WSC 91.
10 WLC 165; see also WSC 94 and WCF 28:1.
12 Mt. 3:6 = Mk. 1:4 = Lk. 3:3.
13 See also Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Col. 2:12-13; Tit. 3:5; and 1 Pet. 3:21.
14 See Mt. 28:19; Acts 2:41.
15 Jer. 4:4, 14.
16 Jer. 9:24-26.
17 For the argument of this section, see Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned.
18 This is a powerful argument for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as opposed to the critical theory that these books were written during the first millennium BC by unknown authors. See for example Kenneth Kitchen, Ancient Orient and Old Testament (1966; reprinted, Chicago, Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 128.
19 “Sanctions” means rewards for obedience or punishments for disobedience.
20 Cf. the negative connotation in Ex. 4:24-26.
22 Mt. 26:17-20; Lk. 22:15-16; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7-8.
24 During the middle ages the Catholic church developed the idea of transubstantiation, which is that the essence of the bread and wine in the eucharist actually changes to become the body and blood of Christ, physically. However, the accidents, or appearance of the elements, remain the same. Therefore, the elements are actually God, and are to be worshiped. Eating and drinking the elements actually brings Christ into the person, bringing all the grace promised. This doctrine is specifically denied in Reformed theology (WCF 29.6: “That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ’s body and blood

(commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries.”).

25 Martin Luther rejected the Catholic idea of transubstantiation, but he still believed that Christ was corporally present in the elements. The essence of the bread and wine remains, but the corporeal body of Christ is present “in, with, and under” the elements, much as light is present in air. Thus, one “chews Christ with the teeth.” This takes place regardless if the communicant is a believer or an unbeliever. Non-Lutherans frequently use the term consubstantiation to describe the Lutheran view. However, Lutheran theologians reject this term, since it was used by several late-medieval writers to describe a somewhat different doctrine of “the body and blood of Christ as becoming substantially present together with the substance of the bread and wine, when the elements are consecrated” (Richard A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], p. 80). For a definitive definition of the Lutheran view (in Latin and English) see the Formula of Concord, Art. 7, in P. Schaff, Creeds of Christendom 3/135-146; see also the thorough discussion in C. Hodge, Systematic Theology 3/661-673. Much stock is placed in (1) Christ’s omnipresence, which is referred to his body as well as to his spirit, and (2) the word “is” (ἐστίν) in the words of institution. Lutherans believe that grace will come to the person who partakes in faith, through the elements and the accompanying word. The Reformed standards oppose the Lutheran doctrine of real presence (WCF 29:7, WLC 170). It is theologically difficult to base special significance for the Lord’s Supper on such a “sacramental presence” of Christ’s body. Also, the word “is” often is metaphorical, meaning “represents, is similar to”; cf. “I am the door.”

26 This approach to the Lord’s Supper makes it to be only a memorial ordinance. There is no promise of grace other than that which comes through obedience to any other command. The objective act is more important than the subjective experience.

27 WCF 29:1, 7, WLC 168, 170, WSC 96; and see thorough treatment by Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion 4:17.

28 Cf. WLC 177.

29 A. A. Hodge, Outlines of Theology, pp. 614-615.