**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 40: Sacraments (Book 4, Chapter 14)

The sacraments were hotly contested during the Protestant Reformation. For Calvin, the sacraments play an important role for the well-being of our faith because they prop up and strengthen faith.

**Chapter 14: The Sacraments**

1. Calvin begins by discussing the sacraments in general and then addressing the problems of undervaluing them or overvaluing them.
2. Calvin defines sacrament this way: “A sacrament is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of His good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward Him in the presence if the Lord and of His angels and before men.”
3. It’s a sensible (physical) sign that represents and pictures for us God’s invisible grace and helps to explain grace itself. The word itself originates in the Latin and was used to translate the NT Greek word “mysterion” (mystery). The sacraments make plainer to us the mysteries of God.
4. The sacraments are always attached to the promises/Word of God and come after. God makes a covenant with Abraham then adds circumcision. The Lord promises deliverance from bondage then He gives the Passover. God’s Word comes first but then the sacrament comes after to confirm or ratify God’s covenant promise/Word.
5. Why do we need this additional thing? Because we are weak, ignorant, and dull. The problem isn’t with God’s promises/Word, there’s a problem with us. We are affected by sin and feeble in faith, therefore God “condescends” to us to give us a “mirror” to see into spiritual realities.
6. This is what we mean when we say a sacrament is a “sign.” It points to God’s grace and it’s a window/mirror into God’s invisible grace and operations. God gives us physical signs to point to spiritual realities. The sacraments point to the Word of God. We need the sacraments and so they are God’s aids to us. But they are explained and opened up to us by God’s Word so the Word and sacrament but always go together with the Word coming first. This is why preaching precedes the Lord’s Supper and this is why there is always a “homily” or small sermonette before both the Supper and baptism.
7. What does it mean when we say that a sacrament is a “seal”? Calvin uses the analogy of a governmental seal. A seal itself means nothing if it’s stamped on a blank piece of paper. But if there is an important message on a document, then the stamp certifies that this message is from the real king and not a forgery and what it says is true.
8. Romans 4:11 – “He [Abraham] received the **sign** of circumcision as a **seal** of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” Circumcision sealed God’s promises to Abraham so that whenever circumcision was performed, it was a reminder of and pointer to God’s covenant promise and one’s faith was strengthened against doubting that what God said would really happen.
9. So this is what we mean when we say sacraments strengthen our faith. They remind us that instead of doubting, we can take God at His word because He has confirmed His promises from His Word by giving us the visible sacraments. When I look at my baptism, I remember that it is a picture of cleansing by the Holy Spirit. When I’m tempted to doubt my salvation, I can look at my baptism and say that when God says in Scripture that all who believe in Christ will be saved, I can be assured that because I have believed that the Spirit has cleansed my heart which is one thing baptism depicts. Baptism of infants depicts that people belong to God before they are even able to say “Yes” to Him. God has elected us in eternity past so baptism reminds us of God’s sovereign election and salvation being all of Him and we contribute nothing. In justification we are completely passive as it is all a work of the Spirit just like the infant in baptism is completely passive and can do nothing.
10. Calvin writes, “The believer, when he sees the sacraments with his own eyes, does not halt at the physical sight of them, but by those steps rises up in devout contemplation to those lofty mysteries which lie hidden in the sacraments.”

*The Sacraments Undervalued*

1. Some argue that the sacraments cannot be “means of grace” because they do not bless all who partake of them. In other words, some are baptized and some even participate in the Lord’s Supper who are not truly regenerate (hypocrites, unexposed apostates). Calvin responds that the same argument could be used against the Word of God, specifically the gospel. The gospel is heard by many but rejected by those who have unbelieving hearts. But because unbelievers hear and do not receive does not negate Romans 1:16 that the gospel is God’s means of converting sinners.
2. “It is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of His grace both in His Sacred Word and in His sacraments. But it is understood only by those who take Word and sacraments with sure faith, just as Christ is offered and held forth by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive Him.”
3. In both cases, the Holy Spirit is necessary. The Spirit is the agent who works both through Word and sacraments. The lack of reception by unbelievers does not negate the promises of God and it doesn’t negate the value of the signs/seals of the promises of God. But the Spirit is necessary to make them effective.
4. “For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by His Word. Secondly, He confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, He illumines our minds by the light of His Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within.”
5. Thus, sacraments are worthless to people without the Spirit. Just like the splendor of light that comes from the sun is lost on a person who is blind, or a voice is lost on a person who is deaf, so the sacraments accomplish nothing for those in whom the Holy Spirit is lacking.
6. But they are still means of grace ordained by God for the building up and strengthening of the faith regardless of their reception or lack thereof. The gospel is intrinsically valuable and powerful and so are the sacraments, but the Spirit is necessary to make both effective.
7. The sacraments are not empty because they are first and foremost God’s pledge to us and only secondarily our response and pledge to God. Grace really is offered in the gospel and the mysteries of God’s grace really are exhibited in the sacraments, regardless of reception.
8. 1 Corinthians 12:13 – “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body….”; Galatians 3:17 – “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” In both of these verses, Paul uses sacramental language, the language of baptism, in talking about salvation in Jesus Christ.

*The Sacraments Overvalued*

1. Calvin now turns toward those who place too much on the sacraments so as to make the sacraments possess some secret, magical power in and of themselves [that is, apart from the Spirit].
2. The RCC teaches that the sacraments confer real grace simply by the performing of them (*ex opere operato*). Calvin writes, “There are those who attach to the sacraments some sort of secret powers with which one nowhere reads that God has endowed them. By this error the simple and unskilled are dangerously deceived, while they are both taught to seek God’s gifts where they cannot be found, and are gradually drawn away from God to embrace mere vanity rather than His truth. For in promising a righteousness apart from faith, it hurls souls headlong to destruction. Secondly, because it draws the cause of righteousness from the sacraments, it binds men’s pitiable minds in this superstition, so that they repose [rest] in the appearance of a physical thing rather than in God Himself.”
3. The sacraments point us to Christ and justification by faith alone, but the sacraments themselves do not give justification to the participant. The thief on the cross was not able to participant in any sacrament, yet was with Jesus in paradise. Justification is granted by faith alone in Christ alone and the sacraments point to that, but themselves do not give it.
4. This continues the theme of the RCC teaching that the Spirit operates apart from the Word. Whereas in Scripture, we see the Spirit works with and in both the Word and sacraments. It’s the Holy Spirit that makes them effective to the recipient, not the mere participation in the sacrament.
5. This leads to the distinction between “the sign” and “the thing signified.” WLC #163 asks, “What are the parts of the sacrament?” Answer: “The parts of the sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible **sign**, used according to Christ’ s own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby **signified**. (Matt. 3:11, 1 Pet. 3:21, Rom. 2:28–29)”
6. Calvin quotes Augustine who writes, “The Lord’s morsel [The Last Supper] was poison to Judas, not because he received evil, but because an evil man evilly received a good thing.” So we are never to confuse the sign with what the sign signifies, that is, points to. Genuine eating of the Lord’s Supper is an actual participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). Without faith, you make partake of the sign, but you don’t actually partake of what the sign points to. But the Catholics teach you participate what the sign points to simply by partaking in the sign itself, regardless of faith and the Holy Spirit. If you eat and drink in an unworthy manner, Paul writes in 1 Cor. 11:29, you eat and drink judgment. Why? Because if you don’t believe and confess that Christ died for your sins on the cross [which is what the Supper signifies], you are an unbeliever and God’s wrath stands upon you.
7. So what are some of the signs of God’s grace [sacraments] we find in Scripture? First, Calvin says there are extraordinary/peculiar sacraments: Tree of Life in the garden and the rainbow. Both are parts of covenants (Covenant with Adam, covenant with Noah), and both pointed toward God’s promises/Word (immortality in Adam’s case upon obedience, preservation of the Earth from God’s wrath by water). Other examples would be the smoking fire pot to Abraham (Gen 15:17), the watered fleece to Gideon (Judg 6:37-38) and the sundial turning back with Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:9-11) all of which supported and confirmed their feeble faith.
8. What are the ordinary sacraments designed for regular use in the Church? In the OT, it would be circumcision & Passover which point toward & foreshadow the NT rites of Baptism & Lord’s Supper