

## The Sacraments (Ordinances?) of the Church

### Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 269–90. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these questions in class.)

- Clowney begins by countering the argument that everything is sacramental (i.e., “conveying redemptive power”). He maintains that the elements of the Eucharist have to be seen as distinctive—not just signs of God’s power, or even signs of His presence, but signs of “participation in saving grace” (p. 271). Is this language strong enough? Is the Lord’s Supper an identifying sign of redemption, or in some way a means of participation and growth in Christ? Does it convey grace, or is it simply a sign of grace already conveyed by the Spirit? If the Lord’s Supper does convey grace, is that different than the grace conveyed through the fellowship of believers? (See p. 273.)
- Clowney says that the Lord’s Supper requires corporate worship (p. 272). How many people must be present? Under what circumstances? Must certain “qualified” or “ordained” persons be present?
- Clowney raises a very important discussion on pages 274–76. The Reformers emphasized that the sacraments did not have power in themselves to confer grace even to those who receive them in unbelief. Clowney says that the Roman Catholic Church held a different view—not a magical one, but one that regarded the sacraments as effective in and of themselves, regardless of the faith of the recipient. The RC view could be easily misunderstood—make sure you read carefully Clowney’s continuing discussion (p. 276). This will be treated in further detail in the class notes which follow.
- On page 280 Clowney summarizes baptism as “a ceremony of cleansing, of naming, of the gift of the Spirit and of covenantal commitment.” Yet he proceeds to defend the practice of infant baptism. How does he resolve an apparent disparity between the meaning of baptism and the condition of those who receive it? Is his distinction between baptism and the Lord’s Supper persuasive (p. 284)?

### Comment: Sacraments or Ordinances?

As Protestants we often seem to define our position on the sacraments by describing the ways in which we disagree with Roman Catholics. I would rather attempt a more positive synthesis, but the debates between Protestants and Roman Catholics have highlighted so many important questions that they provide an appropriate starting point for our discussion.

#### Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that “Sacraments are ‘powers that come forth’ from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the

Church. They are ‘the masterworks of God’ in the new and everlasting covenant” (1994 Catholic Catechism, §1116). They are dispensed by Christ through the Church, and they convey His grace, not some kind of magical power. Roman Catholics identify seven sacraments, dividing them into the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist), the sacraments of healing (penance and the anointing of the sick), and the sacraments at the service of communion (holy orders and matrimony, which consecrate individuals for service on behalf of others). According to the Catechism, “The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith’” (§1123). Since the Church serves as the divinely appointed dispenser of the grace given through these sacraments, their efficacy depends primarily on the *Church’s* faith—offered apart from the common faith of the Church, the elements themselves would be meaningless. Hence the sacraments must be mediated through the ordained priests of the Church.

That emphasis on the Church’s faith sets up a very important point. Roman Catholics believe that the sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace.” That is, they are always effective when they are “celebrated worthily in faith” (§1127). God responds to the Church’s faith by working through the sacraments *ex opere operato* (by the very fact of the action’s being performed): “From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them” (§1128).

Further, the Church maintains that “for believers the sacraments of the New Testament are *necessary for salvation*” (§1129). Stated another way, if salvation consists of the progressive infusion of righteousness, and if the sacraments are the primary means through which that righteousness is infused (by grace), those who isolate themselves from the sacraments (as from the faith of the church) would seem to isolate themselves from salvation.

The Eucharist (also known as the Lord’s Supper, the Breaking of Bread, the Eucharistic assembly, the Memorial, the Holy Sacrifice, the Holy and Divine Liturgy, the Mass, or Holy Communion) is the central sacrament in Catholicism. They recognize that the liturgical celebration of the Lord’s Supper is an act of remembrance, “a memorial of Christ, of his life, of his death, of his Resurrection, and of his intercession in the presence of the Father” (§1341), and they observe it in anticipation of His coming (1 Cor. 11:26). Catholics believe that the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and the wine, actually (“substantially” or “really”) become the body and blood of the Lord, elevating this sacrament above all others by virtue of His presence. “In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he ‘poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (§1365). According to the Council of Trent, “Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation” (DS 1642, in the Catechism, §1376) “The Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it *re-presents* (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross” (§1366). It does not constitute a new or repeated sacrifice, but is continuous with the one sacrifice offered on the cross, now offered through the ministry of priests in an unbloody manner (§1367). Through this celebration every generation of the Church is identified with the offering of Christ (§1368), and the sacrament yields a number of fruits. It “augments our union with Christ” (§1391), preserving, increasing, and renewing the “life of grace received at baptism” (§1392). It “separates us from sin” (§1393), “wipes away venial sins” (§1394), “preserves us from future mortal sins” (§1395), unites the Church (§1396), and “commits us to the poor” (§1397). The benefit of the sacrament is thus intimately related to its nature—the Mass accomplishes certain things because of its continuity with the sacrifice and presence of Christ.

## Protestantism

The Protestant Reformation produced a variety of positions regarding the sacraments. However, the Reformers generally emphasized the faith of the recipient (against the notion of *ex opere operato* and the RC emphasis on the church's faith). They also distinguished between saving grace (which comes through faith alone) and sanctifying grace (which comes through the sacraments and other means). The Reformers differed somewhat on the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, from Luther's doctrine of "consubstantiation" to Zwingli's belief that the Supper was a memorial. Later Protestants had also to deal with Enlightenment arguments against the idea of sacraments as sanctifying acts. The rites themselves were "desacralized" and became "ordinances." For example, many came to see the Lord's Supper as something that should be done periodically because Jesus commanded it, not as something that had intrinsic worth as a means of grace.

Here are some excerpts from Protestant confessions regarding sacraments (especially baptism and the Lord's Supper):

### Augsburg Confession (Lutheran, 1530)

"It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to Him. On this account the Anabaptists who teach that infant Baptism is not right are rejected. (IX)

"It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected." (X)

"St. Paul taught that we obtain grace before God through faith and not through works. Manifestly contrary to this teaching is the misuse of the Mass by those who think that grace is obtained through the performance of this work, for it is well known that the Mass is used to remove sin and obtain grace and all sorts of benefits from God, not only for the priest himself but also for the whole world and for others, both living and dead. . . . The holy sacrament was not instituted to make provision for a sacrifice for sin – for this sacrifice has already taken place – but to awaken our faith and comfort our consciences when we perceive that through the sacrament grace and forgiveness are promised us by Christ. Accordingly the sacrament requires faith, and without faith it is used in vain (XXIV).

### The Ten Conclusions of Berne (Reformed, 1528)

"4. It cannot be shown from Holy Scripture that the body and blood of Christ are substantially and corporeally received in the bread of the Eucharist.

"5. The mass, as it is now celebrated, in which Christ is offered to God the Father for the sins of the living and the dead is contrary to Scripture, a blasphemy against the most holy sacrifice, passion, and death of Christ on account of its abuse, an abomination to God."

### The Second Helvetic Confession (Reformed, 1566)

"Sacraments are mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, ordained by God himself, consisting of his Word, of outward signs, and of things signified; whereby he keeps in continual memory, and recalls to mind, in his Church, his great benefits bestowed upon man; and whereby

he seals up his promises, and outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs unto us, and therewithal strengthens and increases our faith through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts . . ."

"The sacraments of the New People are Baptism and the Supper of the Lord . . ."

"And as God is the author of the sacraments, so he continually works in that Church where they are rightly used; so that the faithful, when they receive them from the ministers, do know that God works in his own ordinance, and therefore they receive them as from the hand of God; and the minister's faults (if there be any thing notorious in them) cannot hurt them, seeing they do acknowledge the goodness of the sacraments to depend upon the ordinance of the Lord."

"We do not, therefore, so join the body of the Lord and his blood with the bread and wine, as though we thought that the bread is the body of Christ, more than after a sacramental manner; or that the body of Christ does lie hid corporeally under the bread, so that it ought to be worshiped under the form of bread; or yet that whosoever he be who receives the sign, receives also the thing itself. The body of Christ is in the heavens, at the right hand of his Father; and therefore our hearts are to be lifted up on high, and not to be fixed on the bread, neither is the Lord to be worshiped in the bread. Yet the Lord is not absent from his Church when she celebrates the Supper. The sun, being absent from us in the heavens, is yet, notwithstanding, present among us effectually: how much more Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, though in body he be absent from us in the heavens, yet is present among us, not corporeally, but spiritually, by his lively operation, and so as he himself promised, in his Last Supper, to be present among us (John xiv. xv. and xvi.). Whereupon it follows that we have not the Supper without Christ, and yet that we may have meanwhile an unbloody and mystical supper, even as all antiquity called it." (XXI)

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Reformed, 1646)

"I. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

"II. There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and the effects of the one are attributed to the other.

"III. 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, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of the institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

"IV. There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained." (XXVII)

"II. In [the Lord's Supper] Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead, but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all, and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same; so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass, as they call it, is most abominably injurious to Christ's one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect.

“V. The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly, and only, bread and wine, as they were before.

“VI. 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.” (XXIX)

The Thirty-Nine Articles (Anglican, 1563)

“Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God’s good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.” (XXV)

“Transubstantiation . . . in the Supper of the Lord, can not be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions. The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is Faith.” (XXVIII)

The Schleithem Confession (Anabaptist, 1527)

“In the breaking of bread we are of one mind and are agreed: All those who wish to break one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ, and all who wish to drink of one drink as a remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, shall be united beforehand by baptism in one body of Christ which is the church of God and whose Head is Christ”

The Dordrecht Confession (Mennonite, 1632)

“We also believe in and observe the breaking of bread, or the Lord’s Supper, as the Lord Jesus instituted the same . . . and commanded it to be observed by believers in commemoration of the death and sufferings of the Lord. . . . So also is the observance of this sacrament also to remind us of the benefit of the said death and sufferings of Christ.” (X)

The New Hampshire Confession (Baptist, 1833)

“. . . the Lord’s Supper, in which the members of the church, by the use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ, preceded always by solemn self-examination.” (xiv.)

Abstract of Principles (Baptist, 1859)

“The Lord’s Supper is an ordinance of Jesus Christ to be administered with the elements of bread and wine, and to be observed by His churches till the end of the world. It is in no sense a sacrifice, but is designed to commemorate [sic] His death, to confirm the faith and other graces of Christians, and to be a bond, pledge and renewal of their communion with Him, and of their church fellowship.” (XVI)

The Roman Catholic and Protestant differences yield a number of questions. These seem to be most prominent:

- How many “sacraments” are there?
- Do they both signify and sanctify? (If they signify but do not sanctify, they are signs or ordinances, but not sacraments.)
- If grace is conveyed through the sacraments, is it conveyed automatically or perhaps “semi-automatically” (in response to the Church’s faith)? If not, upon what does the distribution of grace depend?
- Are the sacraments necessary for salvation? (This is a question already dealt with in Soteriology, but it’s worth raising again here.)
- Is there a “real presence” of Christ in the elements of the Lord’s Supper?

I believe that the Lord’s Supper and baptism are means of grace, but not necessarily *unique* means of grace. Baptism may surpass any other action in bringing a sense of finality to one’s conversion or an assurance of one’s identification with the church, and the Lord’s Supper may cause believers to remember and respond to the death of Christ in a way that nothing else can match, but I would be hard pressed to argue that this is definitely the case. The New Testament churches clearly practiced baptism and the Lord’s Supper as central expressions of their common faith, and they are treated as divine commands, but the Scriptures do not single out particular “sacraments” as special means of grace.

However, that does not give us the freedom to trivialize God’s commands for the church (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23–28). The New Testament churches gathered “to break bread” (Acts 20:7), and their evangelists joyfully baptized new converts (Acts 8:36–38; 10:48), but many evangelical churches seem to treat these rites as irrelevant interruptions, not central expressions of our corporate faith.

#### **Further Reading and Reflection**

- Is the Eucharist worth fighting over? Consider some of the ecumenical dialogue presented in John Reumann’s *The Supper of the Lord: The New Testament, Ecumenical Dialogues, and Faith and Order on Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).
- Did the Reformers really understand Roman Catholic teachings on Eucharistic sacrifice? For a Roman Catholic perspective (can you guess his answer?) see Francis Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960).