

## The Sacraments as a Mark of the Church

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*But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12, ESV)*

### **Introduction: Westminster's Crowning Declaration on Sacramental Necessity**

As the Reformation spread like wildfire across European countries and into the British Isles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it left in its aftermath the published evidence of its transforming influence, doctrinal clarification, and unifying power in the form of confessions and catechisms. Cities, regions, and even nations produced statements of the Christian faith and conduct. Though often churches and denominations are noted for their differences from one another, a studied comparison of these documents reveals a remarkable degree of similar treatment of common foci and agreement in what is stated.<sup>1</sup>

Most notably on this occasion, much ink was spilled in the confessions in instructing the church on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whether the 1536 *Geneva Confession*, the *First and Second Helvetic Confessions* (Switzerland) of 1536 and 1566, respectively, the *French Confession* (Gallic) of 1559, the 1560 *Scottish Confession* of John Knox, the *Belgic Confession* of 1561 in the Netherlands, or our own *Westminster Confession* of 1643, chapters on the sacraments in general, and often individual chapters on baptism and the Lord's Supper in particular, are found.

The same emphasis is seen in the catechisms. Remarkably, John Calvin's *Geneva Catechism* contained a total of 373 questions, with the fifth and final section on the sacraments devoting 65 questions to this topic! Later catechisms significantly pared down the number of questions, even as they distilled and clarified the truths regarding the sacraments. For instance, the *Heidelberg Catechism* has eighteen of its 129 questions devoted to the sacraments; the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* has seven of its 107 questions; and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* has seventeen of 196. The Anglican church's 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* was revised in 1662 to add a section on the sacraments and included thirteen questions on the subject.

Certainly, much of this emphasis in the confessional documents of the Reformed churches was aimed at bringing clarity to the confusion caused by the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on the sacraments. Rome identified seven sacraments in number, ascribed sacerdotal power to her

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<sup>1</sup> See Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *A Harmony of the Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

priests in performing them, and saw the sacraments as being a means of salvation rather than a means of grace (by teaching that people would be justified through sacramental observance rather than aided in sanctification by the sacraments). However, a greater reason exists for this extensive treatment of the sacraments. As the visible signs and seals of the new covenant instituted by the church's true King and Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, which showcase his priestly work that "by the means of his own blood" he has secured "an eternal redemption" for his people, it was fitting that this attention was given (Heb. 9:12).

As the "crown jewel" of the Reformed confessions, perhaps there does not exist a more crystalline statement of what the sacraments are than that found in the first paragraph of the twenty-seventh chapter "On the Sacraments" of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

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.<sup>2</sup>

In considering, generally, why the Reformers gave such a significant treatment to the sacraments, and then, particularly, how to understand and apply this Westminster statement in the church, it is necessary to define the nature of a mark that identifies a true church as well as its proper expression.

### **Defining the Sacraments and Their Need to be a Sign *Tekmaria***

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are called sacraments from the Latin word *sacrare*, which means "to consecrate, to make holy." The *Westminster Confession* tells us first that sacraments are "holy signs and seals". What makes the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion appropriate signs and seals or, in other words, a visible mark, of the church?

To answer this in the best way possible, a review is needed. In the 2021 *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*, Frances Turretin and his work *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology* were referenced to establish what constitutes the nature of a mark and why preaching is the chief mark of the church.<sup>3</sup> A review of Turretin's teaching on what constitutes a mark follows, and is then expanded relative to its form as seen in the sacraments.<sup>4</sup>

Turretin taught that a mark must be both "proper" (i.e., not a characteristic common to an object but formal and pronounced) and "somewhat known" (i.e., the mark cannot be of an intangible quality but must be able to be measured in some way). He said that the invisible presence of God's Spirit must be indicated not by mere accidental adjunct signs, which he called the *eikota*, meaning "merely appearing" or "seeming" to be associated. This word is the one we get "icon" from. An app on a smartphone such as Facebook is an icon—it is associated with the program, but it is separate from it. You can draw the Facebook icon on a piece of paper and press it, but the app will not open. Similarly, some signs that may indicate the Spirit's presence are merely probable, such as having

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<sup>2</sup> Westminster Assembly, Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), 27.1.

<sup>3</sup> Barry York, "The First Degree of Necessity: Turretin on the Spirit's Work in Preaching," *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2021).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that though Turretin was a contemporary of the Westminster divines and would certainly have had knowledge of the *Confession*, we do not have evidence that he interacted significantly with them or their work. This providence testifies again to how the Spirit of God was working in the nations of the earth in significant and powerful ways!

the name “Christian” or doing works of mercy. Though associated often with the church, such signs are no proof that a group is truly in Christ.

Instead, necessary and essential signs are needed. Turretin used the Greek word *tekmeria* to describe the essential marks of the church. *Tekmeria* means “demonstrative proofs” or “essential signs,” and they are so much of the essence of the thing signified that they are inseparable from it. He used examples such as smoke indicating fire, respiration proving life, or rays of light presupposing the sun to illustrate what he meant. Then, he applied this concept to the church. The internal, mystical, invisible church consisting of true believers is revealed in external, visible, instituted way. How so? As a true representative of the Reformed tradition, Turretin said that “the pure preaching of the word with lawful administration of the sacraments, to which some add the exercise of discipline and holiness of life or obedience given to the word” are those signs.<sup>5</sup>

Turretin called preaching the “first degree of necessity” for this activity above all others signifies the Spirit’s true presence. Turretin then went on to teach that accompanying the preaching of God’s Word are “two appendages,” which are the right administration of the sacraments and proper exercise of discipline.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are a sign *tekmeria*, or an essential mark of the church because they are inseparable from the Spirit’s work of gospel preaching and response. When people hear the gospel, are cut to the heart, and ask as they did on the day of Pentecost, “Brothers, what shall we do?” they are to be told, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:37-39). When people are baptized and brought into the church, how are they to persevere in the faith and experience union with Christ? They are to eat the bread and drink the cup, as Jesus said, “in remembrance of me” for, as Paul later raised rhetorically, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).

### **Associating Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as a Form *Schesei* of Christ’s Blood**

Turretin aids us even further here as he develops the very form a sacrament must take. He explained that sacraments must be in a proper form so as to communicate the proper relation (*schesei*) to what it is signifying. He stated that “the sign to the thing signified ... is so represented in our minds that it is caused also to be truly communicated.”<sup>6</sup> To see this association, consider how both New Testament ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper represent the blood of Christ (c.f. Rom. 6:3; Luke 22:20). For in establishing this association, it will bring a deeper gospel understanding to the sacraments, connecting them to the first mark of gospel preaching.

The association of Christ’s blood with the sacraments is most clearly seen in the Lord’s Supper. As he initiated his meal with his disciples on the night of his betrayal, Jesus held up the cup and stated, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; see also 1 Cor. 11:25). Thus, the connection between communion and Christ’s blood is directly stated by the Lord himself, and is apparent also in the blood-like appearance of the wine.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997), 3:87.

<sup>6</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:340.

Yet what about the sacrament of baptism? Perhaps one might say that the association of the water of baptism with Christ's blood is not so visibly apparent as it is in the elements in the Lord's Supper. Yet, God's Word shows that baptism is a multivalent symbol, representing several salvific concepts such as the washing away of sin (Acts 2:38; 22:16), participating in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:1-4; Col. 2:12), and the regenerating presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Tit. 3:5). In considering each of these meanings, the association of baptism with Christ's blood becomes more evident.

First, the washing of sins symbolized by baptism takes place with the blood of Christ being applied to the believer. The Old Testament rituals of sprinkling blood to cleanse the altar (Lev. 5:9; 8:11), the holy place (Lev. 4:6, 17), the high priests (Lev. 8:30), the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14), and the people (Ex. 24:8) pointed to the need for all things to be cleansed by the blood of Christ. "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22).

This future cleansing of sinners by Christ was also pictured using the imagery of water. The Lord declared through Ezekiel, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:25-26). The New Testament authors pick up this theme of Christ's blood cleansing believers and also use water to describe it. After assuring his hearers that they "have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus," the writer of Hebrews goes on to describe this confidence as being due to having "hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19, 22).

Thus, John Calvin connects the preaching of the gospel, the forgiveness of sin through the blood of Christ, and baptism when he says, "The sinner receives forgiveness by the ministry of the church, that is, not without the preaching of the gospel. But what is the nature of this preaching? That we have been cleansed of our sins by Christ's blood. Yet what is the sign and testimony of that washing but baptism?"<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the Westminster Larger Catechism Question 165 describes baptism as representing this work of Christ's blood when it defines it as "a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit..."<sup>8</sup> As John Murray states, "We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in the virtue of his death and in the power of his resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ."<sup>9</sup>

Second, the blood of Christ is a synecdoche for the death of Christ. Proclaiming the death of Christ, represented by baptism (Rom. 6:1-4; Col. 2:12), is biblically equivalent to speaking of the shedding of Christ's blood. The Lord's Supper equates the two, with the bread and the cup, representing his broken body and spilt blood, a means to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Likewise, Paul in Colossians reminds his readers that the bloody rite of circumcision under the

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.15.4, 1306.

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Assembly, Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), Question 165.

<sup>9</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 5.

Old Covenant represented the heart circumcision done by Christ at the cross in the New Covenant, and correlates this to “having been buried with him in baptism” (Col. 2:12).

The Heidelberg Catechism connects the death of Christ as seen in baptism with Christ’s blood when it asks in Question 69, “How does holy baptism remind and assure you that Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross benefits you personally?” and then gives the answer, “In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it promised that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul’s impurity, that is, all my sins.”<sup>10</sup> The Catechism goes on further to explain this washing in the next question by referencing Colossians 2:11-13 and stating, “To be washed with Christ’s blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven our sins because of Christ’s blood poured out for us in his sacrifice on the cross”.<sup>11</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession states in the second paragraph of the twentieth chapter that the bloody death of Christ gives new life, which is promised by baptism: “But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him adopts us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant joins us to himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are assured by baptism.”<sup>12</sup>

Third, the presence of the Spirit, also signified by baptism, is linked with the blood of Christ scripturally and theologically. For a positive example, Peter tells the elect that they are “in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet. 1:2). On the negative side, Hebrews warns that once-professing Christians who reject the gospel are also profaning Christ’s blood and insulting the Holy Spirit. “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” (Heb. 10:29).

This biblical association between the blood of Christ and the Spirit of Christ caused theologians to link them when describing their representation by baptism. Turretin taught that baptism is

... the first sacrament of the Christian church, by which upon the covenanted, having been received into the family of God by the external sprinkling of water in the name of the Trinity, remission of sins and regeneration by the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit are bestowed and sealed,” as we gather from the passages of Mt. 28:19; Rom. 6:3, 4; Tit. 3:5, 6; Acts 2:28.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, each of the six questions on baptism in Heidelberg Catechism (Questions 69-74) describes baptism as representing Christ’s “blood and Spirit.” As Hodge concludes, “As by common consent the design of the institution is either to symbolize or to effect the cleansing of the soul from the guilt and pollution of sin, by the blood and spirit of Christ, it would seem to follow that washing with water, however done, is all that is necessary to the integrity of the ordinance.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Question 69.

<sup>11</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Question 70.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Chapter 20, paragraph 2.

<sup>13</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:380.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 2001), 3:526.

### **Applying the Necessity of the Sacraments in the Life of the Church (WCF 27.1)**

With the sacraments established in both essence and form as a proper mark of the church, how is the church to respond to them? Four applications taken from the phraseology of the *Westminster* statement can be made.

*“Represent Christ and His Benefits.”*

Theologians call the sacraments the “visible gospel” because of the way they portray gospel realities. As Christ “by means of his own blood” secured “an eternal redemption” for us (Heb. 9:12), and gave us sacraments to picture this redemption, we must faithfully represent Him and the benefits of his salvation by partaking of them. Sadly, one of the effects of Covid is to cause people to wander away from God’s house. They think they can worship God and be identified with Christ online. They are not heeding the warning in Hebrews which states that we are “not to forsake our own assembling together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Heb. 10:25). The church must work diligently to regather and recultivate the godly habit of regular observance of the sacraments that represent Christ and His benefits. The Lord’s Supper can serve as a rallying point for those who hunger and thirst for Christ to return to His house.

*“Confirm Our Interest in Him.”*

As I have discussed elsewhere, the Scriptural analogy of the church being Christ’s bride could lead to a comparison of the sacraments to a wedding ring.<sup>15</sup> A wedding ring testifies to marital love. Conversely, its removal can often signify unfaithful and adulterous behavior. The church either confirms its interest in and love for Christ as His people celebrate the sacraments or exhibits a cold disregard for Him by their neglect. As the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish pastor Horatius Bonar asks in his short book *The Blood of the Cross*, “How far have I learned to prize that blood, which, though once my accuser, is now my advocate?”<sup>16</sup> The church’s attention to God’s Word with participation in the sacraments marks how much it prizes Christ’s blood.

*“Putting a Visible Difference Between the Church and the World.”*

The sacraments are a line of demarcation. Just as circumcision set Abraham and his descendant nation Israel apart from heathen nations, baptism is an indication of the church’s separation from this world of darkness. Likewise, Passover was instituted at a time when the placing of the blood of a lamb distinguished between those who believed God and trusted in His provision, and those who did not. These holy signs and seals tell the world that Christians belong to Christ and to no other. It is not uncommon for students from Asian countries who convert to Christianity at Western universities, to refuse to profess their new faith publicly for fear of baptism. Perhaps they understand the gospel better than many professing Westerners because they know the cost of returning to their homeland with this mark upon them.

*“Engaging Solemnly in the Service of God in Christ.”*

The sacraments help to give us a holy mindset. When the church engages in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, remembering that the blood of our Savior is upon its members, these times fortify

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<sup>15</sup> Barry York, *Hitting the Marks: Restoring the Essential Identity of the Church* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Horatius Bonar, *The Blood of the Cross* (Pensacola: Mt. Zion Publications, 1997), 7.

the congregation to engage solemnly in His service. By His Spirit and presence, Christ helps believers grow in their resolve to offer their lives in service to Him and others.

### **Conclusion**

With the nature of the sacraments firmly fixed in our minds and their marking nature clear, may we remember the admonition of John Calvin: “Let us therefore carefully keep these marks imprinted upon our minds and esteem them in accordance with the Lord’s will.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.11, 1025.