

The Meaning of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Summary of our beliefs about the sacraments

Nearly every church regularly conducts baptisms and the Lord's Supper. However, each denomination tends to have their own perspective on how they should be viewed and practiced. In the Presbyterian Church of Australia, we follow the Westminster Confession of Faith as a summary of what we believe the Bible teaches. It presents these two sacraments as signs and seals from God for his people.

- Signs and seals of God's gracious promises rather than works we do to secure grace.
- They operate as a means of grace – spiritual union between them and the grace they signify.
- Baptism = Union with Christ. Covenantal view so believers and their children are baptised.
- The Lord's Supper = Communion with Christ. Genuine faith and prior baptism are necessary.

What does the word *sacrament* actually mean?

Sometimes these two Christian practices are referred to collectively as *sacraments*, from the Latin word *sacramentum*, meaning *sacred thing*. In the Roman era, it was used to describe the practice of both parties in a legal case depositing money with the officers.¹ So the word includes the meaning *deposit* or *pledge*. It was applied to baptism and the Lord's Supper because they are a pledge of God's promises to us. However, the meaning of the word has shifted over the millennia and so we must make sure we do not derive our understanding of the sacraments solely from the changeable meanings of a term. John Calvin (1509-1564) gives a helpful definition: *An outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promise of His goodwill toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward Him in the presence of the Lord and his angels and before men.*² In other words, sacraments are signs of God's grace to us and seals of his promises to us.

Some churches hold to a mechanical view of the sacraments where they automatically convey the grace signified – leading to views like baptism always causing regeneration or the Lord's Supper removing previous sins.³ Others take a wholly memorial view such that there's no connection between the signs and the spiritual reality they point to – leading sometimes to a low view of the sacraments. We hold to a means of grace view where there is a spiritual union between the signs and what they signify. Therefore, it matters who receives them but faith must be present for there to be any benefits.

What does it mean that sacraments are signs and seals?

We can learn about Christian sacraments by looking at the sacraments God's people were given under the old covenant. Circumcision in particular is mentioned many times and provides a useful framework.

God entered into a covenant⁴ with Abraham, promising him land, offspring and blessing (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5, 18). God gave circumcision as a sign of that covenant (Gen. 17:9-11). This circumcision acted as: 1) a pledge from God that he would keep his promises, 2) a physical sign of the greater spiritual circumcision of the heart (Deut. 30:6) and 3) a warning that disobedience/unbelief would lead to the whole person being cut off from God (Gen. 17:14; Num. 15:30-31).

Romans 4:4-13 makes it clear how the seal aspect of circumcision works. Paul argues that it is wrong to think that Jewish circumcision is what saves, rather it is faith. In fact, Abraham was justified by faith *before* he received circumcision and therefore it was actually a seal of the righteousness he had by faith. In other words, it was a guarantee or seal of approval from God that Abraham and his descendants would certainly be made righteous if they trusted in God.

¹ The money from the loser would be used to pay expenses and was devoted for certain religious purposes.

² J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, chapter 14, section 1.

³ This view is held by the Roman Catholic Church. Some churches refer to the sacraments as *ordinances* (ceremonies *ordained* by Christ) so as to distance themselves from an unhelpful understanding of the sacraments.

⁴ A covenant is a regulated relationship formally entered into by two parties, typically with blessings for obedience and punishments for disobedience. God's covenants tend to be gracious such that he promises to uphold both sides of the agreement.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments too, being signs and seals from God of the new covenant established by Jesus. They are visible words from him. This is why they must be explained so that we understand them properly and can respond to God in faith. It also means that baptism and the Lord's Supper are not our means of commitment, but God's means of grace. By them he reassures us of his grace to us and, as his Spirit works, our faith is strengthened and confirmed.

It must be stressed that the sacraments are not necessary for salvation otherwise we would be justified by works not by grace through faith! Therefore, we observe them out of thankful obedience to God who has kindly provided them for the strengthening of our faith. (Acts 2:38; 3:19; Romans 4:10; 10:9-13).

What is the meaning of baptism?

Baptism was instituted by Christ (Matthew 28:18-20) and is a sign of our union with him. It is the external and public act that visibly marks someone as a follower of Jesus. It does not save the recipient, just like circumcision did not save under the old covenant. However, Christians are expected to be baptised as an act of obedience to Christ and an expression of their faith. It's what marks them as a member of God's visible people.

We see in Colossians 2:11-12 that Paul links circumcision and baptism, showing that they both pointed to the same spiritual reality.

11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. Colossians 2:11-12

We can see from this that baptism replaces circumcision as the new sacrament for God's people that points to membership of the covenant community and the internal renewal of sinners. In particular, the water of baptism symbolises the baptism of the Spirit who comes to cleanse us of sin and give us new birth (Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). It operates as a seal because just like circumcision under the old covenant, it points to the certainty of God's promise to cleanse all who trust in him.

What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ (Luke 22:13-20) and is a sign of our communion with him. It is the external and public act that gives expression to our ongoing fellowship with Christ and his people. The bread symbolises the body of Christ which was given for us so that we might live and the wine or juice symbolises the blood of Christ which was shed for our cleansing. As we eat and drink in faith we are assured of our forgiveness and our faith is graciously strengthened.

There are many links to the Passover meal which helps us to see that the Lord's Supper replaces that old covenant sacrament with Christ serving as the ultimate Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7). This sacrament operates as a seal which means it guarantees God's promises to believers who partake but this seal aspect also means that those who participate in unbelief will risk the judgement of God (1 Cor. 11:25-32). This is one of the reasons why it is necessary for someone to first be baptised in obedience to Christ (Matthew 28:19-20) before they partake.

Do I have to affirm infant baptism to be a member of a Presbyterian church?

We take a covenantal view of baptism which means it is a sign for God's visible, covenantal people (Acts 2:38-39). The children of believers are viewed as insiders and are encouraged to live as Christians. Therefore, they are able to be baptised as a sign and seal of God's promises. When they profess faith in Christ, they will receive the salvation held out in those promises. While some may struggle with this idea, we see it at work in how baptised adults who later come to genuine faith aren't rebaptised.

Having said this, the DPC elders and other key leaders are expected to believe and defend infant baptism but regular members are not. Just keep in mind that it will be taught as our church's position and the congregation is invited to make promises at each infant baptism.