

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 14 – Part 1
THE SACRAMENTS

In this chapter Calvin offers an overview of the concept of sacraments. In subsequent chapters, he will examine the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Summary: Calvin begins by defining sacraments. He writes that 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 show our piety toward him” (pg. 1277). He also includes Augustine's definition that a sacrament is “a visible form of an invisible grace” (pg. 1277). What these two definitions attempt to make clear is that a sacrament “...is never without a preceding promise, but is joined to it (meaning the promise) as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing, and of making it more evident to us...” (pg. 1278). In other words, sacraments are visible, physical means by which the promises of God such as forgiveness and adoption, are demonstrated to believers. Calvin argues that these outward signs are necessary because our faith is not always strong and so God leads “...us to himself by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings” (pg. 1278). Having defined sacraments Calvin offers three critical concepts regarding them.

The first critical concept is that sacraments must be accompanied by preaching. This is so because it is preaching that helps us to see the promises of God that are attached to the sacraments. Without preaching, the sacraments can either be misunderstood, or not understood at all. He quotes Augustine, “Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament. For whence comes the great power of water, that in touching the heart it should cleanse the heart, unless the word makes it?” (pg. 1279). This matters to Calvin because the foundation of faith, and of the promises that accompany faith, are found in the scriptures. Sacraments merely assist in our “seeing” those promises.

The second critical concept is that sacraments are “seals.” Calvin's illustration of the concept of seal is that of the seals that are affixed to government documents. He argues that such seals are nothing in and of themselves (meaning that an empty document with a seal is still an empty document). However, when a seal is affixed to a legal document “it ...confirms and seals what is written” (pg. 1280). The seal makes it an official action of those in power. Thus, the sacraments are attached to the promise of God as a way of making them visibly official.

The third critical concept is that sacraments are “signs” of the covenant. Covenants are agreements, or contracts if you will, that God makes with humanity. These covenants lay out what God promises us and what we promise God. The sacraments then are visible signs of God's covenant promises. Think of a flashing sign reading, “Get God's promises here!”

Reflection: As Presbyterians, we take seriously Calvin's understanding of sacraments. You will see this in how we go about celebrating the sacraments. First we never offer baptism or communion without preaching. Even when we offer communion to shut-ins we will always have a scripture reading and short reflection, because it is the word that makes clear the promise of God's love and faithfulness. Second, when we celebrate the sacraments, we don't believe that anything magical happens, but that they are “seals” of God's love that reinforce our understanding of being “official” beneficiaries of God's promises. Third, in the language we use in celebrating the sacraments, we try and make clear that the sacraments point us (acting as sign posts) to God's love and grace.

Questions:

1. How would you explain a sacrament to someone who asked?
2. Which of the three concepts makes the most/least sense to you and why?
3. What do sacraments mean to you as you participate in them?