

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 14 – Part 2  
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:** As a reminder, sacraments 1) are physical actions which remind humanity of the promises that God has made; 2) are always to be accompanied by preaching; 3) are seals of God's promises (like a seal on an official document) and; 4) are signs that point us to God's promises.

At this point in the chapter, Calvin responds to two criticisms of the sacraments.

The first criticism is that because all persons can participate in them, including those who do evil, that the sacraments are unimportant and meaningless. Calvin counters this criticism with the example of an official action of a prince that is sealed and is thus law. Even though people can ignore it and scorn it, such actions do not make it any less official. Thus, even when some people do not take the promises behind the sacraments (or the one making the promises) seriously, the sacraments are still *"...the testimonies of God's grace and are like seals of the good will that he feels toward us, which by attesting that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm and increase..."* (pg. 1282) the faith of those who believe.

The second criticism is that sacraments are not necessary because preaching and the work of the Spirit are sufficient. Calvin counters this argument with the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch [Acts 8:37]. In this story, an Ethiopian official hears the good news of Jesus (as expounded from the scriptures), believes with "all his heart" in Jesus (through the work of the Spirit), but also desires to be, and is baptized. Calvin tells his readers that this story shows that believing with all of one's heart *"...is not to believe in Christ perfectly, but only to embrace him from the heart and with a sincere mind; not to be sated with him, but to hunger, thirst and aspire to him with fervent affection"* (pg. 1283). Therefore the sacraments assist in the process of embracing Christ more and more.

Calvin continues this part of the discussion by expanding upon the relationship between scripture, Spirit and sacrament. He writes, *"For first, the Lord teaches and instruct 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 sacrament to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within...as to the confirmation and increase of faith, I...assign this particular ministry to the sacraments..."* (pg. 1284). Calvin understands that human beings are both spiritual and physical creatures. As such, people's faith needs both the spiritual and physical support of the Spirit, the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. Calvin puts it this way, *"God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient, that all things might serve his glory...He feeds our bodies through bread and other foods, illumines the world with through the sun...in like manner he nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments..."* (pg. 1287).

**Reflection:** Presbyterians have always struggled with the issue of the sacraments; who can participate in them and how often they ought to be celebrated, as examples. We can see this in that many Reformed churches offered communion only once a year (my home church offered it only four times a year) and "fenced the table", meaning only the worthy could partake by coming inside the chancel railings to the table. Here at Everybody's Church, we offer open communion (it is an individual's decision if the sacrament has meaning to them) every week (at our 8:30 service) because we believe that it is an encouragement for many in their spiritual journey. There is no right or wrong answer to these issues, only those that make sense to the local church body.

Questions:

1. What do you think of offering communion to all?
2. What role do the sacraments play in encouraging your relationship with Jesus Christ?
3. What role do you sense that the Spirit has made in your faith journey?