

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 14 – Part 3
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.

Calvin begins this section of the chapter by denying that the sacraments have any "magical" power. To understand this discussion, we need to remember that the medieval Roman church believed that the sacraments contained the ability, in and of themselves, to save people. In the language of the church, participation in the sacraments transferred "merit" to an individual; merit being "spiritual currency" that when it grew large enough, earned an individual the right to enter heaven. It was against this view that Calvin argues.

Calvin writes, "...assurance of salvation does not depend upon participation in the sacraments, as if justification (being made right with God) consisted in it. For we know that justification is lodged in Christ alone and this it is communicated to us no less by preaching of the gospel than by the seal of the sacrament..." (pg. 1290). Calvin wants his readers to understand that the "sign" of the sacrament, the bread and wine of communion, and the water of baptism, do not contain grace or merit. They are merely physical realities. He insists that the church ought to understand that for the sacraments to have power, people must "...apprehend in faith the word (meaning the scriptures preached)" (pg. 1291).

Jesus Christ is the center of faith for Calvin, and the sacraments are only beneficial when "...we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm and increase true knowledge of Christ in ourselves...but that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there" (pg. 1291). In fact, he writes that "...the sacrament is a worthless thing if it be separated from its truth...therefore let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same (purpose) as the Word of God; to offer and set forth Christ to us...(thus)...they do not bestow any grace of themselves..." (pg. 1292-3).

Sacraments, using Calvin's definition, were also present in the Old Testament. These included the rainbow for Noah, showing that God would never again flood the world; circumcision as a means of showing God's election of the Jewish people (similar to baptism); and the Passover meal showing God's saving love (similar to communion). Calvin calls these sacraments not only because they are accompanied by scripture, and are signs and seals of God's grace, but because they show forth Christ; though, the Christian sacraments point more completely to Christ. "Therefore, whatever is shown us today in the sacraments, Jews of old received in their own-that is, Christ with his spiritual riches. They felt the power in their sacraments as do we in ours; these were seals of divine good will toward them, looking to eternal salvation" (pg. 1299). Though the church is no longer bound by the Old Testament rules, such as circumcision, Calvin encourages us to see them as gifts of God.

Reflections: The challenge in the 21st century for those of us who participate in the sacraments is two-fold. The first challenge is to not invest the sacraments with magical powers; as if they are what saves us. The second challenge is to see that they are more than mere ceremonies; ceremonies without any real power. What we profess is that Christ is present at the sacraments, but not in the words or elements. In other words, Christ is present when we baptize or take communion, and he uses those actions to draw us more closely to himself and to encourage us on our journeys of faith.

Questions:

1. If you went to church as a child/teen, what were you taught about the sacraments?
2. How do the sacraments encourage your faith?
3. Can you recall a time when a sacrament had special meaning for you? Why was it special?