

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 19

THE FIVE OTHER CEREMONIES FALSELY TERMED SACRAMENTS

Reformed churches, of which the Presbyterian Church is one, have two sacraments, baptism and communion. The Roman Catholic church has seven sacraments which are, baptism, confirmation, communion, penance (confession), holy orders, marriage and extreme unction, or last rites. Calvin argues that while each of these “ceremonies” marks important events in a Christian’s life, they are not sacraments. Here, with a short introduction, are his comments on the other five “ceremonies.”

Summary: Calvin begins with a reminder that only God can create a sacrament and that a sacrament “...is a seal by which God’s covenant or promise, is sealed...(also)...the Word of God must precede, to make a sacrament a sacrament...” (pg. 1450). What he means by this is that scripture must offer a visible sign (say the water of baptism) and attach to it a promise of God (that those baptized would be forgiven because their sins are washed away).

Confirmation: The Roman church believed that because infants could not profess their faith at baptism, there needed to be a later time when they could profess it and be sealed in the Holy Spirit by “...the laying on of hands...” (pg. 1452). This was and is the purpose of confirmation. Calvin offers two objections to this being a sacrament. The first is that there is no scriptural sign or promise. The second is that the Holy Spirit has been present with persons since their baptisms. Though Calvin rejects confirmation as a sacrament, he still believes that it is an important teaching and learning tool for children.

Penance: The roman church believed that individuals, on at least a yearly basis, needed to confess their sins to a priest to obtain forgiveness. Calvin believes that confession is “...holy and wholesome...” (pg. 1462). It allows people to both examine and reorient their lives. Calvin’s objections to penance as a sacrament are that forgiveness is given at baptism (thus no need for an additional sacrament) and that there is no visible, Biblical sign attached to any scriptures concerning confession.

Extreme Unction. This is commonly known as last rites and it is accomplished by anointing a dying person (persons in extremis) with oil before they die. It is based on a passage in the book of James in which the church is instructed to anoint and pray for the sick. While Calvin believes in praying for the sick, he rejects the concept that prayer and anointing are sacraments because, once again, there is no Biblical promise associated with anointing, and that “...James wishes all sick persons to be anointed” (pg. 1568) in order that they be healed; something that may or may not happen depending on the will of God.

Holy Orders: This is commonly referred to as ordination. In the Roman church, there are seven (some say nine) offices to which a person may be ordained over a lifetime. He calls these “sacramentalings” (pg. 1469). Again, while Calvin believes that ordination is necessary, he fails to find any scriptural promise attached to the action of the laying on of hands for persons called to a particular service in the church. In addition, for Calvin, the sacraments should be open to all persons, which holy orders is not.

Marriage: The Roman church includes marriage as a sacrament because it is often used to describe the mystical union between Christ and his church. Though Calvin believes that “...marriage is a good and holy ordinance of God...” (pg. 1481), he fails to find a promise of Christ attached to the ceremony. Thus, he rejects it as a sacrament. In addition, once again, it is not open to all Christians in that priests are not allowed to marry.

Reflections: As a Presbyterian pastor I walk with persons through each of these ceremonies. They are important markers of life transitions. They bring a sense of meaning to an individual’s faith journey. Yet, for me, they do not carry the profound meaning contained within baptism and communion; meanings informed by the promises of God for forgiveness, salvation and new life.

Questions:

1. Which if any of these “ceremonies” did you think of as a sacrament?
2. What are your memories of your participating in any of these ceremonies? How were they meaningful to you?
3. What do you see as the similarities/ differences between these five ceremonies and the two sacraments?