

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XXVII

*(Reading: Romans 4)*

### Why God Confirms The Gospel To His Own

God gives us what we need. Do you believe that? Of course, you say. God cares for us that way. Notice, though, God gives us what we need - not what we want. If it was what we wanted the sacraments we have in our church just wouldn't do. Then it would have to be something really thrilling and exciting. And it would have to change a lot, too!

What is sufficient for our need, however, are the basics. The analogy with everyday food and drink ties in very well here, for as we can live on a simple diet physically so the Lord gives it to us spiritually.

But He does give it to us, though! We not only hear it through the preaching of His Word but it also touches all our other senses. In the words of Psalm 34 verse 8, we may "taste and see that the LORD is good."

So what Scripture tells us is that God doesn't let us go short. The Christian faith is the complete faith. And where you participate fully in it you are richly blessed through it – even if in the eyes of this world it seems so little!

But that's just it isn't it? It is exactly enough for what we need. If we know that we need it! So what follows in this sermon could be equated with the everyday food we need for life and growth.

### The Sacraments are to Affirm Christ to Us

In the first place then, we note, THE SACRAMENTS ARE TO AFFIRM CHRIST TO US. This is what Article 1 is about.

It begins with the word "sacraments". And what does "sacrament" mean?

Can you look at it and see? Yes, it has "sacra" in it. So it's related to that which is something sacred – something sacred because it was instituted by Christ. It wouldn't be truly sacred otherwise, could it?

Now, some have argued against using the word "sacrament". It's not in the Bible they say.

Neither is the word "Trinity", however. But the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly scriptural. And so we can go along with Calvin who said that using this word is quite right, because it always brings us back to the Word.

Then Article 1 goes on in saying "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace."

So, how do signs and seals fit in? Well, a sign points us to something. It's a way in which we are told about something else. For example, when you're travelling to a particular destination a sign tells you where it is and perhaps how far you've got to go to get there.

There are scriptural signs also. The rod of Moses in Exodus 4 was one of these. For when it was thrown down it became a serpent, a snake, and that showed that God had appeared to Moses.

And then there was what we read in Romans 4. Verse 4 there tells us that Abraham's made known "the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." So there its clear circumcision is applied because of faith and points to it. A sign always points to something else.

Otherwise it wouldn't be a sign.

And the sacraments are also called "seals". That's a thing we don't come across so often these days. But hundreds of years ago they would "seal" their letters with wax embossed by a personal

stamp. That proved it was an authentic letter. You can still see an example of this on University degrees that are given upon graduation.

In the Bible, Esther 3 verse 12 tells us about one such seal. In describing letters that went out to all the governors and other officials, it says, "These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring." That ring had his personal emblem on it. He pressed that ring into the hot wax that sealed the letters. Now, that message of Xerxes was genuine without the seal. It was his decree. The seal, though, testified that it was truly his.

This is what the sacraments do. They have no magic within them. You won't get to heaven slower - or not at all - if you haven't had one in those last moments of your life. While the Roman Catholic Church was very quick to give the last Pope the 'Last Rites' when they thought he was about to die, it has no use whatsoever. You see, the sacraments will only mean something to you if you know grace. It can only reassure you of that grace.

So all those sacraments that the Roman Catholic and other churches have added to the biblical sacraments actually only take away from that grace. If the only acceptable way of worshipping God is through what He tells us expressly in Scripture then they have five sacraments which are works not grace. And the two which are based on Scripture have been twisted around to deny grace as well!

Then Article 1 goes into four purposes of the sacraments. They expound further what we have just seen. "To represent Christ and His benefits" is to say that it serves as a sign. "To confirm our interest in Him" is to say that the sacrament is a seal.

And notice here how this confirming our relationship to Christ is what believers benefit from. Sacraments highlight that grace for us. That's what the next purpose, of making "a visible difference between those who belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world," further brings out. This is why the church has to be very careful who receives the sacrament. This is because the sacraments are a distinction. The sacraments make it clear who believes and who doesn't believe. And it has to be kept that way!

Then "solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ" definitely confirms how much this is for believers. The sacraments distinguish those who profess faith in Christ and involve a vow of commitment to loyal service. In fact, looking at what is promised at a baptism and what we need to reflect on before the Lord's Supper is almost identical to a public profession of faith.

### **The Sacraments Are To Join Christ With Us**

So Article 1 is about how THE SACRAMENTS ARE TO AFFIRM CHRIST TO US. In Articles 2 and 3 we go on to see that THE SACRAMENTS ARE TO JOIN CHRIST WITH US. Here we see that while our earthly illustrations for signs and seals are helpful they still don't properly convey what Scripture is telling us about the sacraments. For there is a very close connection between the sign and what it signifies. Article 2 refers to this as "a spiritual relation, or sacramental union."

Mind you, that's a connection which some have drawn too closely. We see that error in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, but there are also Lutheran and even Reformed-Presbyterian churches which hold something similar. Because they have failed to draw a distinction at all! They don't see what Article 2 goes on to say, by stating that because of the connection between the visible sign and the reality signified by it, that it happens that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

This error is illustrated by this incident recorded by an Italian traveller to Russia in the 18th century. He wrote in his memoirs, "While at St Petersburg, I was present at a scene which surprised me - I mean, the blessing of the waters of the river on the day of Epiphany, at a time when the ice on the Neva was five feet thick. They christened children by dipping them in a hole which they had cut in the ice. It happened on this occasion, that the bishop who performed the ceremony of baptising, let a child fall out of his hands into the water; and it instantly disappeared. The bishop, without at all endeavouring to recover the child, turned coolly around, and desired the attendants to hand him another child. This was instantly done. What surprised me most, however, was the joy of the parents at their child's being drowned. I learned afterwards that the people here believe that a child drowned under such circumstances, is sure of going instantly into paradise."

But it's an error in Reformed circles also. Amongst us it has shown up in a teaching called 'presumptive regeneration.' This was an issue which caused much controversy some seventy years ago in the Netherlands. And it has had a bit of a comeback in America of late. It goes something like this: Because baptism is a sacrament instituted by Christ it means what He says. So, since the command and promise made by God in baptism presumes regeneration that child is saved. It's no wonder that churches believing this have children of all ages participating in the Lord's Supper. We can briefly answer this teaching by saying that the way we understand the seed of the covenant as regenerated doesn't at all imply that each child is born again. God's Word says that not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Romans 9 verse 7 says, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Notice, not from Abraham, but from Isaac.

This is why in the preaching there must always be the challenge to serious self-examination. Only he who believes and is baptised will be saved! That's what Acts 2 verse 38 is clear about. But you can see what this false teaching does to the sacraments, can't you? For then the sacraments become an equal way with the Word by which you can be saved.

That's why in those teaching presumptive regeneration there comes a works righteousness. For example, some of them insist that the child has to be baptised within eight days. This is why Article 3 is keen to highlight the work of the Spirit. It cannot be anything in the sacrament itself or in the person who administers the sacrament.

The framers of the Confession were fully aware of the heresy of Rome in this. They knew it could not be up to us in any way, shape, or form, at all. It's the sure promise of God and the work of the Spirit that counts. What an assurance that is! Because imagine if it were up to us?

You see, Rome insists that only her priests may administer sacraments. If there's a danger, though, that someone would die without being baptised, then Rome says any one else may and should baptise.

### **The Sacraments Are To Show Christ In Us**

And this leads us into the third aspect this afternoon. For Article 4 and 5 bring out that **THE SACRAMENTS ARE TO SHOW CHRIST IN US.**

Now, it may seem that in Article 4 we appear to become more sacerdotal than the sacerdotalists. Because here we confess that the sacraments must be administered by a lawfully ordained minister of the Word. We confess this because there is no evidence from Scripture that in the Apostolic Church anyone except a church officer ever administered the sacraments. And we confess this also because there's the fact that sacraments don't save people. Otherwise every believer would have to administer them every chance he gets!

But what is the believer to do at the first possible opportunity? Yes, he is to witness. No one can be converted without hearing the gospel. As the sacraments are seals of the Word and are not administered without the Word, it is the ministry of the Word which the Lord has ordered to do it through. Those situations where this rule has been broken show us how quickly people leave the grace of Christ for a different gospel.

Article 4 also speaks about the actual sacraments themselves. It says that there are only two. Now, this is quite different than Rome. She says there are seven. That's a nice number – a number found often in biblical symbolism. And they stress its symbolic fullness by teaching that their seven sacraments cover each stage of the whole of life. But doesn't that prove again that it's not grace at all? It's works. It's what you have to do and how you have to do it and when you have to do it. The Scriptural teaching, though, brings out how gracious God has been with providing for our need. Article 5 brings this out with the continuity of the sacraments in Scripture.

Here what G. I. Williamson writes is helpful. You see, there have been only two essential sacraments through-out the history of the Church, both under the Old and New Testaments. So circumcision and baptism are basically the same. They signify the identical thing spiritually. The same is true of the Passover and the Lord's Supper. The Old Testament rites - circumcision and the Passover - have become the New Testament rites - baptism and the Lord's Supper. The new is in the old concealed, and the old is in the new revealed. The bloody signs were superseded by two bloodless signs. But the significance stays the same. Here a chart the Rev. Williamson drew up is helpful:

*Circumcision-Baptism*

1. Administered only once to each.

*The Passover-The Lord's Supper*

1. Administered repeatedly to each.

*Circumcision-Baptism*

2. Administered to believers and to their children.

*The Passover-The Lord's Supper*

2. Administered to believers only

*Circumcision-Baptism*

3. Picture of inception of union with God (cleansing, justification, etc.)

*The Passover-The Lord's Supper*

3. Picture of maintenance of union with God (nourishment, growth, sanctification, etc.)

*Circumcision-Baptism*

4. Recipient wholly passive (he is circumcised-baptised; he receives what another performs)

*The Passover-The Lord's Supper*

4. Recipient active (he participates by his own action)

We see this cross identification when Paul speaks in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10 verse 1 of the Israelites being baptised in the wilderness. Of course they were circumcised. And then there is Colossians 2 verse 11 when the apostle speaks of them being circumcised when in fact they were baptised. The same occurs with the other sacrament. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5 verse 7 Paul speaks of the Passover as belonging to the Corinthians though we know it was the Lord's Supper. This all proves how this 27<sup>th</sup> Chapter of our Confession of Faith began. For in Article 1 we confessed, "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace". The covenant of grace! The sacraments of old and new are linked together because of their relation to that grace. THE SACRAMENTS ARE TO SHOW CHRIST IN US.

What a God! He provides for His own through all the ages and in their every age so wonderfully, in the doing and dying of His Son.

Think of that! We are not short of anything! In fact, doesn't this tell us how He fills all things?