

## —Westminster Shorter Catechism—

### Lesson 48—How are the sacraments made effectual to salvation? Q. 91

#### Introduction

Before speaking about the sacraments themselves (Q.93-97) and even before defining what a sacrament is (Q.92), the Catechism asks about the matter of *efficacy*. What are the sacraments *designed* by God to do? *How* do they actually do it? And *upon whom* does this efficacy take place?

#### What were the sacraments designed by God to do?

- I. By *means of salvation*, the Catechism means *means of grace*. So that the question is: how do the sacraments become efficacious for the *communication* of spiritual blessings by the Spirit and the *reception* of those blessings by the believer?
  - A. To answer that question, we have to begin with two others.
    1. *What is* a means of grace?
      - a) The sum and substance of the Christian experience of salvation is *union and communion with Christ in grace and glory*. Salvation is only attainable by being united to and having communion with Christ as Saviour and Mediator, which can only be received by God's grace. God in Christ is the gracious giver of all spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph 1.3) and we are the receivers of His free and sovereign grace and love through Christ (Rom 5.1-2).
      - b) This means the outward rites and ceremonies of Christianity are not performances by which we do something to obtain blessing from God, render payment to Him, or accomplish a work on our own. Rather, they are exercises, appointed by Him, in the believing observance of which we receive what He freely gives.
      - c) These rites or ordinances are consistent with salvation being by free grace because it's God Himself who calls upon us in the gospel to use the means suitable and necessary to receive the blessings of that salvation.
      - d) For our salvation, God has appointed *inward* and *outward* means. The *inward* means are worked sovereignly by God (faith and repentance) and are absolutely necessary because salvation is impossible without them, but the *outward* means are appointed by God for our observance and we're to diligently use them (Q.85), because they are necessary as means by which He's pleased to work His grace in us. The sacraments fall into this category.
        - (1) But they are *distinct* from the Word read and heard, from prayer and praise (Q.88), because they are *sensible signs*. The sacraments are sensible means by which Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to our mind and heart.
          - (a) Boston, "The Word is the leading means of salvation, and the sacraments are the subsequent means of salvation. The Word is to first have its effect upon the soul and then the sacraments can have theirs, 1Cor 3.5; Rom 4.11."
          - (2) Candlish, "It is the characteristic mark of a sacrament, as distinguished from the other ordinances and means of grace, to represent *spiritual* things by *sensible/material* signs. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are symbolic or representative. They set before us in outward things and actions a *picture*, as it were, of *spiritual* realities in the gospel and their peculiar power arises in large measure from their having this representative character."
      - (2) What are the sacraments *designed by God to do*?
        - a) Being designed by God to *represent, seal, and apply Christ and the benefits of redemption to the mind and heart of a believer*, the sacraments sensibly seal and confirm to our faith the spiritual realities of the salvation we've received by faith.
        - b) It's *in this way* that the sacraments primarily *differ* from the Word. The Word is the means of *begetting* faith, Rom 10.17; 1Cor 3.5; but the sacraments are the means of *confirming and sealing* faith, Rom 4.11; 8.30-38; Acts 10.47; 11.15-18.

- c) The sacraments, then, are *signs which represent* Christ and the benefits of redemption to our senses and also *means of grace which apply* Christ and the benefits of redemption to our soul, Rom 4.11; 1Cor 12.13; 1Pet 3.21.

### **Wherein lies the efficacy of the sacraments?**

- I. The sacraments are *efficacious*, then, when they *accomplish the end for which God appointed them*.
  - A. *When*, by sensible signs and actions, they *seal and confirm* the spiritual realities of our salvation to our faith in Christ for that salvation, they *serve their purpose as means of grace*, 1Th 2.13; Acts 2.41; 8.30-38; 10.47; 11.15-18.
  - B. Boston, the efficacy of the sacraments “lies in effectual oblation and application of Christ and His benefits.”
- II. That’s why there are necessarily two parts to a sacrament:
  - A. The *outward, visible, sensible sign* and the *inward, spiritual grace* signified by it, 1Cor 10.16.
  - B. And these two parts are *in sacramental union to one another*. Which is to say, by God, they’re *effectually related to one another sacramentally* so that the one who receives *the sign* by faith, also, by the same faith, receives *the grace* signified by it, 1Cor 10.16; Acts 2.38, 41.
    - 1. The relationship in which the sign and the thing signified stand to one another serves to explain how and why their names and attributes can be interchanged without risk of *sacerdotalism*, Mt 26.26-28; Acts 2.38; cf. Jn 10.7, 11; 15.1.

### **For whom are they effectual?**

- I. The sacraments *are not* effectual upon all who partake of them, Gen 25.29-34; 17.20-21; Jn 13.21-30; Acts 8.13, 21-23; Rom 9.6-8; 10.1-3; 1Cor 10.3-5; 11.27.
- II. But, upon God’s promise, they *are* effectual to all of God’s elect, Rom 6.1-4; 9.11-13; 10.4; 1Th 1.4-5.

### **Why are they not effectual upon all who partake of them?**

- I. They’re not effectual upon every participant *because* their efficacy doesn’t lie in themselves (Acts 8.21-23), nor in the minister administering them (1Cor 3.5), but in God alone (1Cor 3.6-7), who ever works by sovereign, free grace, Rom 9.18.
  - A. *Since* the sacraments don’t *contain* grace, but *signify* grace to the believer, and don’t *contain* Christ, but *signify* Christ to the believer, they have no power in themselves to seal or confirm faith, nor can the minister himself effect the seal or confirmation which they are designed to effect.
    - 1. Boston, “God has put a power of nourishing in our meat, and of warming in our clothes; but no power of working grace either in the water of baptism or in the bread and wine of the supper. So the work wrought will never confer grace.” In fact, Scripture itself denies this power to the sacraments in 1Pet 3.21.
  - B. God Himself, working by His Spirit in the hearts of the elect through faith, can alone make His appointed means effectual to the mind and heart of the believer, 1Cor 3.7, 9; 12.13.

### **How, then, do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?**

- I. The efficacy and benefit of the sacraments arises from the gracious conjunction of three things:
  - 1. The blessing of Christ upon the ordinance, Mt 26.26; 28.19-20; 1Cor 3.7.
  - 2. The working of the Spirit by the ordinance, 1Cor 12.13; Acts 16.30-34.
  - 3. The receiving of the ordinance by faith, Acts 16.34.

### **Inferences**

- I. Prize the sacraments as you do the Word and see the sin of neglecting either, Lk 7.30.
- II. Don’t rest on the sacraments as an end in themselves. They are means. It’s not your receiving them, but receiving benefit by them, that you must look for, Lk 13.26-27.
- III. Look to Christ’s institution and promise accompanying the sacraments when you partake of them. Neither despise nor idolize the man. The efficacy of God’s means is not in him, 1Cor 3.5-6.
- IV. Look to the blessing of the Spirit in all the means of grace. Don’t expect the mere administration to be enough.
- V. Study the Word of God to learn the truths which the sacraments represent so that you may receive them by faith looking for the spiritual realities they signify to be brought home to your mind, heart, and conscience.