

SESSION 20: The Means of Grace

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 132-147

WCF	WLC	WSC
27-29	153-177	85, 88-97

Introduction

Over the last two sessions, we have considered the three great *institutions* that God has placed in this world: the family, the church, and the state. In this session, we examine the *ordinances* of God – “the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption,” (WSC 85).

We refer to these ordinances as the *means of grace* – the tools through which God works in us. What are the “outward and ordinary” means of grace? “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation,” (WSC 88).

Prayer²³³

We speak to God in prayer. Prayer is *trust vocalized* (Ps 62.8). It is “an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies,” (WSC 98). To this definition, two points must be added.

The first point is an explanation of what it means to pray “in the name of Christ.” Here our standards are most helpful: “To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation,” (WLC 180). This explains to us why, in the model prayer given to us by the Lord himself (Mt 6.9-13), his name is not explicitly present. Calvin explains:

First, at the very threshold we meet what I previously mentioned: we ought to offer all prayer to God only in Christ’s name, as it cannot be agreeable to him in any other name. For in calling God “Father,” we put forward the name “Christ.” With what confidence would anyone address God as “Father”? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him. By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father.²³⁴

The second point is a caution against *trifling with God*. We are to pray with “confidence as children to a father, able and ready to help us,” and yet always “with all holy reverence,” (WSC 100). In prayer we must respectful and sincere. Girardeau wrote that prayer is to be “the offering up of our real desires unto God – [otherwise] the professed suppliant tampers with the majesty of God, which is offended by his insincerity, or trifles with the omniscience of God, which he must all the while be conscious is able to detect the hypocrisy and to unmask the pretense.”²³⁵

²³³ Smith’s *Harmony*, 106-118, places the material on prayer in parallel with WCF 21 – “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day. Here we will offer but a brief summary of that material.

²³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

²³⁵ John L. Girardeau, *Life Work and Sermons*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Hess Pubns, 1998), 257-258.

The Word

God speaks to us in his Word. Tim Keller has said it well: “the Bible is in human words, but it’s not human opinion.”²³⁶ For this reason, every time the Word is read, it is actually “the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture,” (WCF 1.10). Likewise, it is the “Spirit of God [who] maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation,” (WSC 89). It is for this reason that we seek God’s illumination when we read Scripture: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law,” (Ps 119.18).

Because the Word carries implicit authority, we are to be very careful about how it is read and heard (WLC 156-157, 160). The Scriptures are to be read “with an high and reverent esteem... with a firm persuasion that they are the very word of God,” (WLC 157). We must read and hear the Word “with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives,” (WSC 90). As the Psalmist notes, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you,” (Ps 119.11).

For the same reason, we are to be very careful about the preaching of the Word. The Scriptures should only be preached “by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office,” (WLC 158). Those who thus preach must ever seek to have their preaching *correspond* to the text, *connect* to the congregation, and (by the Spirit’s agency) *create a definite spiritual impression* (159). “The first and primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is... to produce an impression... We should tell our people to read certain books themselves and get the information there. The business of preaching is to make such knowledge live.”²³⁷

The Sacraments

The sacraments are God’s *signs* and *seals*, his *pictures* and *promises*. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are pictures because they are “images... living and symbolical ones which the Lord has consecrated by his Word.”²³⁸ Likewise, they are promises because “as a seal unto a bond, or last will and testament, doth both signify the will of whom whose bond or last will and testament it is, and doth also exhibit and convey, confirm and apply, a right unto the things promised and engaged therein.” Consequently, “when the minister doth give forth the signs or outward elements, in the sacramental actions, the Lord doth give forth and convey the things signified unto the worthy receivers.”²³⁹

The sacraments are in some sense *mysterious*, yet in no sense are they *magic*. Though “there is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified” (WCF 27.2), “the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them,” (WSC 92).

Between baptism and the Lord’s Supper, our standards note both *similarities* and *differences*. The following chart summarizes both:

²³⁶ The present author remembers hearing Dr. Keller use this expression in an audio lecture or sermon. However, he does not remember the exact citation.

²³⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 360.

²³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.13.

²³⁹ Thomas Vincent, *Shorter Catechism Explained*, 244.

Similarities (WLC 176)	Differences (WLC 177)
God is the author	
Covenant of grace is sealed	
Convey Christ & his benefits	Which benefits depicted & sealed
Administered only by ordained ministers	Who may partake/receive
Continue until the world's end	How often administered

These similarities and differences of the New Testament sacraments comport well with those present in the Old Testament. Like circumcision, baptism is a sacrament of *initiation* and is given to all who join the covenant community – whether by conversion or birth. Likewise, like Passover, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of *memorial*.

Baptism

Beyond initiation into the visible church, baptism pours gospel promises onto its recipients:

Benefits (WCF 28.1, WLC 165, WSC 94)	Scripture
The Covenant of Grace	Rom 4.11
Regeneration	Titus 3.5
Union with Christ in Death, Resurrection, & Eternal Life	Rom 6.5, Col 3.1-4
Forgiveness of Sins	Acts 2.38, 22.16
Adoption	Gal 3.26-27
Engagement to Christ (Newness of Life)	Rom 6.4

In examining these benefits, note carefully the language of our standards. We do not confess that all of these things are *given* to those who receive baptism. Rather, we confess that all of these things are *signed* and *sealed*. Baptism is a *legal promise*. As such, it represents the will of the giver (God) to give all these things to the proper recipients – those who actually believe. Notice how Peter puts it: “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, *not as a removal of dirt from the body* but as an *appeal to God for a good conscience*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” (1Pet 3.21).

Thus baptism is *not a badge of conversion*, but a *tangible outpouring of the gospel*. We give it to the children of believers (WCF 28.4, WLC 166, WSC 95) because we don't ever want them to doubt whether they belong there. God gives the legal promise of the gospel to all who are joined to the community of promise – no matter how they got there. No member of the visible church, adult or child, should ever doubt that Jesus will save them. They already have God's promise of that. It was poured out on them. All they have to do is believe the promise – to trust Jesus.

For this same reason, *because* baptism is an outpouring of the gospel, it is never to be a mere spectator sport. Every time we witness a baptism, we should seek to improve our own (WLC 167).

Regarding the *method* of baptism, our standards tell us what is essential and what is flexible. A minister, lawfully ordained, must use water while invoking the triune name of God (WCF 28.2). Moreover, baptism should not be repeated (28.7). Yet in the *mode* of baptism, our standards allow some flexibility: “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person,” (WCF 28.3). In the proof text cited from Mark 7.4, the verb ‘wash’ is *baptizō* and the noun ‘washing’ is *baptismos*.

The last things to note in this section are our standards' teachings on the *importance* and *efficacy* of baptism. Regarding the former, we can summarize in a sentence: though we don't believe in automatic²⁴⁰ baptismal regeneration, neither do we believe in baptismal rejection (WCF 28.5). Regarding the latter (WCF 28.6), Hodge writes:

²⁴⁰ Roman Catholicism teaches that the sacraments function *ex opere operato* (“from the work done”) – that is, automatically.

The ground taken here is intermediate between two opposite extremes... The extreme held by Papists and Ritualists of baptismal regeneration... Baptism cannot be the only or ordinary means of regeneration, because faith and repentance are the fruits of regeneration, but the prerequisites of [adult] Baptism... Our Standards oppose the other extreme, that Baptism is a mere sign of grace and badge of Christian profession....

Baptism does not only signify, but really and truly seal and convey, grace to those to whom it belongs according to the covenant – that is, to the elect... But that this actual conveyance of the grace sealed is not tied to the moment in which the sacrament is administered, but is made according to the precise provisions as to time and circumstance predetermined in the eternal covenant of grace. So property may be sealed and conveyed in a deed to a minor, but the minor may not actually enter into the fruition of it until such time and upon such conditions as are predetermined in his Father's will.²⁴¹

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is given to the church for *remembrance, nourishment, and communion*. "The Lord's supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace, have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body," (WLC 168). Calvin describes it "as a mirror, in which we may contemplate Jesus Christ crucified to deliver us from damnation, and risen again to procure righteousness and eternal life for us"²⁴²

Having stated the purpose of the Lord's Supper, our confession goes on to *disavow several errors* (WCF 29.2-6). The Lord's Supper is not a *real sacrifice*, nor is it a *re-sacrificing* of Christ (29.2). The Lord's Supper is not to be receive *privately* or only *in part*, nor are the elements to be worshiped (29.3-4). Likewise, though the sacramental union is acknowledged, the elements "in substance and nature... still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before," (29.5). "That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation)... is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries," (29.6). Though offensive to some modern sensibilities, this polemical language was well-warranted in its Reformation context. How so? The proto-reformed John Wyclif saw transubstantiation as a sort of "gateway" sin:

It is as if the devil had been scheming to this effect saying, If I can by my vicar Antichrist so far seduce the believers in the Church, as to bring them to deny that this sacrament is bread, and to believe it a contemptible quality without a substance, I may after that, and in the same manner, lead them to believe whatever I may wish, inasmuch as the opposite of such a doctrine is plainly taught, both by the language of Scripture, and by the very senses of mankind.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 350-351.

²⁴² John Calvin, "Treatise on the Lord's Supper" in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), 145.

²⁴³ John Wyclif. Quoted in Rudolf Buddensieg, *John Wyclif: Patriot & Reformer* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), 130. Buddensieg's work draws extracts from Wyclif's *De Veritate Scriptura Sacra*, the *Triologus*, and the *Wykett*, and from Vaughan's *Tracts and Treatises of John Wyckliffe*. However, it does not provide individual citations.

Yet if we are to reject transubstantiation, the question yet remains: what is the true view of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper? Since the Reformation, there have been four general views:

View	Real?	How?	Outcome
Zwinglian	N	n/a	Eat just bread, drink just wine
Roman Catholic	Y	Transubstantiation	Eat body of Jesus, drink his blood
Lutheran	Y	Consubstantiation ("in, with, and under")	Eat bread and the body of Jesus, drink wine and the blood of Jesus
Reformed (WCF 29.7, WLC 170)	Y	Spiritual by Faith	Bread and wine in the mouth, Body and blood in the heart

What does it mean to say that Christ's body and blood are "spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses," and that therefore believers "feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but in a spiritual manner, yet truly and really"? Martin Bucer writes:

We confess that the spiritual life which Christ bestows upon us does not rest on the fact that he vivifies us with his Spirit, but that his Spirit makes us participants in the virtue of his vivifying body, by which participation we are fed on eternal life... For though we as pilgrims in mortality are neither included nor contained in the same space with him, yet the efficacy of his Spirit is limited by no bounds, but is able really to unite and bring together into one things that are disjoined in local space. Hence we acknowledge that his Spirit is the bond of our participation in him, but in such manner that he really feeds us with the substance of the body and blood of the Lord to everlasting life, and vivifies us by participation in them.²⁴⁴

Robert Letham summarizes Calvin's view as follows:

Calvin's most frequent imagery becomes that of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ through faith, and so the *life* of Christ – the risen and ascended Christ – is given to us to nourish us, particularly in the Lord's Supper. At the root of this is that Christ has become one with us in the incarnation, and consequently his flesh receives the life of the Godhead poured into it. From this we receive life in union with him.²⁴⁵

The Lord's Supper is to be taken seriously. To fail to do so is to invite death (1Cor 11.30). For this reason, our standards warn (WCF 29.8) and instruct us as to how to *prepare, partake, and reflect* upon our participation in the sacrament (WLC 171-175). Though this material can be overwhelming, the essence is quite simple – though not always easy:

We have to examine whether we have a true repentance in ourselves and a true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.... we must hold in firm and hearty confidence the Lord Jesus Christ as our sole righteousness, life and salvation, receiving and accepting the promises which are given us by him as certain and assured; renouncing on the other hand all other confidence, in order that, distrusting ourselves and all other creatures, we may rest fully in him and content ourselves with his grace alone... Moreover, it is to be noted that we cannot desire Jesus Christ without aspiring to the righteousness of God, which consists in self-denial and obedience to his will.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Martin Bucer, *Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist in Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 168. Penned by Bucer in 1537, this statement represents Calvin's view.

²⁴⁵ Letham, *Union with Christ*, 114-115.

²⁴⁶ Calvin, "Treatise," 150-151.

Important Questions

1. One of the current mottos of the mainline United Church Christ is that “God is still speaking.”²⁴⁷ Many charismatic evangelicals would agree, though in a different sense. Is there any sense in which confessional Presbyterians can agree with this statement?
2. With reference to ministerial calling, Reformed theology typically speaks of both an *internal* and *external* call. How do these elements correspond with what the catechism says about who should preach?
3. How many sacraments exist under the New Testament?
4. How do our standards’ teaching on the “sacramental union” keep us from falling into the error of automatic baptismal regeneration when we read a text like Acts 2.38?
5. In your own words, explain what it means to “improve your baptism.”
6. Consider the following teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the Lord’s Supper:

In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. As often as the sacrifice of the Cross... is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out.²⁴⁸

The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*... only the manner of offering is difference... the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner... this sacrifice is truly propitiatory.²⁴⁹

- a. Why is such teaching “abominably injurious to Christ’s one, only sacrifice, the only propitiation for the all the sins of His elect,” (WCF 29.2; cf. Jn 19.30)?
7. If an unbeliever takes the Lord’s Supper, do they actually feed on Christ (WCF 29.8)? Nevertheless, are they innocent (1Cor 11.27)?
 8. Can a person who struggles with assurance come to the Lord’s Table (WLC 172)?
 9. Who should be warned to stay away from the Lord’s Table (WLC 173)?

Additional Resources

John Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20 (This section contains Calvin’s discussion of prayer.)

John Calvin, “Treatise on the Lord’s Supper”

Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 151-154, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
32-33	84-90	37-38

²⁴⁷ “The Stillspeaking Ministry.” <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/> (accessed August 28, 2013).

²⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1364.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, #1367.