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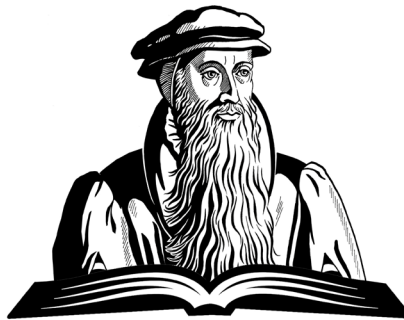
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #48

Means of Grace:

The Sacraments

Catechism Questions 91, 92 and 93



The John Knox Institute
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16. The Incarnation—*Question 22*
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26. Sanctification—*Question 35*
27. Blessings of Salvation in this Life—*Question 36*
28. Blessings of Salvation at Death—*Question 37*
29. Blessings of Salvation at the Resurrection—*Question 38*
30. The Duty Required of Man—*Questions 39–42*
31. The Ten Commandments: A Preface of Grace—*Questions 43 & 44*
32. The Ten Commandments: Love for God—*Questions 45–8*
33. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Worship—*Question 49–52*
34. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Name—*Questions 53–56*
35. The Ten Commandments: A Day for Holy Love—*Questions 57–59*
36. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Day—*Questions 60–62*
37. The Ten Commandments: Love within Our Relationships—*Questions 63–66*
38. The Ten Commandments: Love for Life—*Questions 67–69*
39. The Ten Commandments: Love for Purity—*Questions 70–72*
40. The Ten Commandments: Love for the Lord's Allotment—*QQ 73–75*

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42. The Ten Commandments - Love from Within—*Questions 79 thru 81*
43. Understanding Our Sin—*Questions 82 thru 84*
44. Escaping God’s Wrath and Curse: Saving Faith—*Questions 85 and 86*
45. Escaping God’s Wrath and Curse: Repentance unto Life—*Question 87*
46. Escaping God’s Wrath and Curse: Means of Grace—*Question 88*
47. Means of Grace: The Word of God—*Questions 89 and 90*
- 48. Means of Grace: The Sacraments—*Questions 91 thru 93***
49. Means of Grace: Christian Baptism—*Questions 94 and 95*
50. Means of Grace: The Lord’s Supper—*Question 96*
51. Means of Grace: Receiving the Lord’s Supper—*Question 97*
52. Means of Grace: Prayer—*Questions 98 and 99*
53. The Lord’s Prayer: The Preface—*Question 100*
54. The Lord’s Prayer: The First Petition—*Question 101*
55. The Lord’s Prayer: The Second Petition—*Question 102*
56. The Lord’s Prayer: The Third Petition—*Question 103*
57. The Lord’s Prayer: The Fourth Petition—*Question 104*
58. The Lord’s Prayer: The Fifth Petition—*Question 105*
59. The Lord’s Prayer: The Sixth Petition—*Question 106*
60. The Lord’s Prayer: The Conclusion—*Question 107*

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Lecture #48

Means of Grace: The Sacraments

Question 91: *How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?*

Answer: *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.*

Question 92: *What is a sacrament?*

Answer: *A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.*

Question 93: *Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?*

Answer: *The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.*

We now come to how God uses the sacraments as means of grace for saving his people. You may not be familiar with the word “sacrament” just yet. That’s okay, we’ll work through what is meant by this term, both in this lesson and in the following lessons. Right now, simply notice that we’re still considering the means of grace—those ordinances that Christ instituted to use in order to apply his salvation to us. So in other words, the sacraments are means that Christ uses to apply his salvation to us, just as the Word is used to apply salvation to us. Now, just as we don’t say, every time we hear God’s Word, or anyone who reads the Bible, they’re most necessarily saved; neither do we say, wherever the sacraments are used, whoever uses them, they’re certainly saved. Remember, just as the Word is made effective by the Spirit’s work, so the sacraments are only made effective by the Spirit’s work.

We have three Questions, as it introduces to us the sacraments.

Firstly, Question #91: “How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?”—“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 received them.”

Well, it may be interesting to us that the *Catechism* first deals with how the sacraments are made blessings, instead of first defining what a sacrament is. However, one reason for this may be

that there both was, and still is much confusion over how God uses the sacraments.

Notice the word “virtue.” This is a word meaning “strength” or “power.” So the blessing does not merely come to us by a strength within the sacrament. It comes from God using the sacrament, and blessing us to enjoy the saving benefits in Christ. The answer in mind is that the only way the sacraments are used for blessing us, is as the blessing of Christ and the working of the Spirit is so applied to us. So, we start with this Question, not only because the *Catechism* does, but because it’s useful to make the point that the sacraments are blessings to us for salvation, only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of the Spirit in those who receive these sacraments by faith. In other words, this answer reminds us that it is by grace alone through faith alone that anyone receives any blessing by them. We’ll look more at it in a moment.

But now, Question #92: “What is a sacrament?”—“A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.”

By “sensible signs,” is meant something that appeals to our senses—sight, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling—these are our senses. And so something that’s sensible appeals to, and is observed by, and discerned by our senses. Well, notice, they are a “sensible signs.” It points to something else. A sign doesn’t point to itself, it’s pointing to something else. And the Answer tells us that the sacraments point to Christ, and the benefits or the blessings of the new covenant.

Well, Question #93: “Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?”—“The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.”

Well, this helpfully tells us how many sacraments there are under the New Testament, how many sacred signs appointed by Christ to represent himself and his benefits. There are two—baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, both of which we’ll look at more fully in the coming lessons.

For our lesson now, we look at two main points: first, *The Meaning of the Sacraments*; and secondly, *The Grace Brought by the Sacraments*.

So first then, *The Meaning of the Sacraments*. The word “sacrament” itself is a word that was used in the Latin Bible to translate the word “mystery.” So Paul speaks of the mysteries, the revelations that God has given. But it was also used in another context to speak of a sacred oath. And so, a sacred oath was a holy thing, and it was a pledge, a testimony of something that was solemnly taken up. And so it signified importance. And when one took a sacred pledge, they were giving a sign, as it were, that what they were saying would be what would be done. Now this is important for understanding why we use the term “sacrament.” The sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are things that God has instituted, which, as we’ll see, are pledges to us of what he promises to do.

Now notice, a sacrament is an ordinance directly instituted by Christ. This is merely by observing the Bible. We find baptism and the Lord’s Supper both directly instituted by Christ. And so, for instance, in Matthew 28, Christ testifies that all power in heaven and earth is given to him. And as he’s commissioning the apostles, he said that they are to go and do what? They are to teach all the nations, to observe whatsoever things that he commanded them. He also said, “baptizing them, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. So it’s no surprise to us, when we read through the Book of Acts, that as those who are outside of God’s covenant are brought into God’s covenant, this sign of baptism in the name of the Triune God is applied to them, because Christ directly instituted it.

Notice, it’s an ordinance of Christ. It’s not just a church ordinance. It’s Christ’s ordinance. He’s the one who’s King, and he has appointed it to be done. So we can’t invent sacraments today. We

have to observe the ones Christ gave to the church. Remember the Lord's Supper. On the last night of Christ's earthly ministry before his death, he partook of the passover, and then he instituted the Lord's Supper. And we see him doing it. It's not the apostles doing it, he's instituting it. And so a sacrament is an ordinance that's directly instituted by Christ.

And second, a sacrament is an ordinance that uses sensible signs. And so, when the *Catechism* is helping us with this, it's pointing out that both baptism and the Lord's Supper are not just words. But rather, they are things, material things that Christ has set apart to point to something else. And so you think for a moment with reference to both baptism and the Lord's Supper—indeed, we will look more fully at this in the coming lessons—but both of them, they use signs, sensible signs. So baptism uses water. Water is something you can touch, you can feel, you can hear it when it's poured, or when it's moving around; you can see it, and so on. And so our senses observe it. They are sensible signs. The Lord's Supper, you have bread and wine. Bread you can touch, you can eat, you can feel; and so with wine, you can smell it, you can taste it, you can see it, and so on. They are signs that appeal to our senses—not just one, but multiple. And so, we'll look at this in greater depth. But then think, baptism is using water to wash. So there's a sign being given to us. Washing is cleansing. Just like when you and I get dirty, what do we need to do? We need to be washed. And baptism is a sign of cleansing. Well, the Lord's Supper is bread and wine, but it's bread that's broken, and it's shared, and we eat it. And the cup is passed around, and we drink it, at least those who are at the table of the Lord's Supper.

And so there's action with the elements. There's bread, there's wine, there's water, but then there are actions that are being done. And what are these actions doing? They're pointing to something, and so it's a sensible sign—then third—which Christ instituted to direct us to Christ and his saving work. And so the *Catechism* speaks of “Christ and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.”

Now, the word “represented” is probably familiar to you. Well, you can think for a moment that to represent something is to picture something to us. It is to present it to us in another way. And so, Christ is representing to us himself. You can see this clearly, for instance, in the Lord's Supper. Christ takes bread, he blesses it, he breaks it, and he says, “This is my body, which is broken for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24). And so it's a sign that we can see, and we can hear the words, and even hear the breaking of the bread, and we can touch the bread and taste the bread. It's a sign, but it's pointing us to what he did for us as sinners. And likewise, the cup of wine is taken. He says, “This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed...for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:23). And so it's pointing us to Christ. And particularly, it's pointing us to his work of saving sinners on the cross. Baptism is not just water. It's water applied, washing us, as it were, as a sign, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And so it's saying that, whereas we stand unclean, we need to be cleansed in order to enjoy the fellowship of the Triune God.

This raises many questions, I am quite sure, but we'll get to open those meanings more fully in the coming lessons. All of these things are directing us to Christ and his saving work. And so it's representing, it's re-picturing these things for us.

But they're also sealing. Now, this is a word that perhaps you use in a different way. Sometimes there are certain bags that we seal. So there's a way of bringing the opening closed, and that way, whatever is in the bag is now sealed and secured in it. Well that word “seal” as we use it, comes from the use of that word in a different sense. And so, for instance, we use the word “seal” still in this way, when we talk about, on a certificate, there's an authority that has given its seal of approval to that document. So, for instance, in some nations, when someone is married, the government, or

the church will set its seal. And so this is a sign that says, “We authorize, and we confirm that this marriage took place.” Some places have birth certificates, and on the birth certificate, there’s a seal that’s been applied that says, “This surely took place.” Well, in ancient days, kings and queens and other great rulers would have a certain sign, perhaps on a ring, and they would have a document that was set before them. And if it was their document, and they’re telling what they would have all of their people hear, and they would have it written out, and then they would pour wax over it, and they’d take their sign—their ring that had a special sign on it—and they’d press it on the wax before it cooled. And now, the sign of their royalty is applied to that wax, that showed everyone it bears the authority of the king. What did that do? It gave assurance to the people, “This really is the king who has said these things.”

What’s the point of all of this? A seal is showing the authority behind it. It’s telling us by whose authority this is done, who verifies that this is true, who’s saying that this is real. It’s a good thing of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They are showing us God is the one who is giving us these promises, if there’s *his* seal, if there’s *his* authority. And so, what a blessing the sacraments are, that God has not only promised us with his Word, but then he gives us these signs and seals, the sacraments, which are meant to assure us that the promises are true, and we are to believe him as he has indeed has promised.

But then they also apply, that is, they take what is far from us and place it upon us. It shares these blessings with us. Now, we’ll note that these blessings are enjoyed by faith. So it’s not just by the water applied in the name of the Triune God; it’s not just by the bread taken and eaten, or the wine as we drink it that these things are done, but rather as the Spirit blesses, and we eat and drink in faith, or as we believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ as he has promised himself to us in our baptisms. You see, then it is that the riches of his salvation are applied to us.

Well, there’s a lot that we can say, but let’s look at one example from an Old Testament sacrament. Notice how Paul speaks of this in Abraham’s life. Abraham, of course, was a believer. He was a believer before the earthly ministry of the incarnate Savior, Jesus Christ. So he’s a believer in the Old Testament. He did not have baptism, he did not have the Lord’s Supper. Those are sacraments of the New Testament. However, he did have circumcision, and other Old Testament sacraments. And notice how Paul speaks of circumcision in Romans 4, verse 11. He writes, “And he”—that’s Abraham—“received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also.” Now notice this very important passage. It’s telling us that Abraham first believed and he was justified, so it was that as it says, “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.” This is important, because it’s reminding us that one may be a believer, one may be converted and saved without the sacraments. But this shouldn’t make us say, “Well, the sacraments aren’t important,” because though Abraham was a believer, God then gave him circumcision, which was a sign, thus pointing to something else—namely, the cleansing of filth from him. But it was also a seal, that which says, as an assurance from God, “This is real”—“A seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.”

And so we see that the sacrament of circumcision, as all sacraments, both Old and New Testaments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, they’re given as a help to us. They don’t tell us something different than the Word of God—they confirm the Word of God. It’s as if God is saying to us, “Yes, here is my promise. Yes, here is my assurance. And, in order to strengthen your assurance, I give you this sign, this sacrament.” What a blessing it is to us that God so cares for us

to give us these helps to our faith.

Well, just note, as the *Catechism* indicates, that there are two sacraments under the New Testament—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are the two sacraments which Christ has immediately ordained as ordinances to represent, to seal, and to apply his grace to those who receive him by faith, by the blessing of Christ and the working of the Spirit.

Well now, second, *The Grace Brought by the Sacraments*. How is it that God uses the sacraments to give blessings to his people? Well, first, we can say how he does it, and second, we can say how he does not do it. We can note four truths about how he blesses by the sacraments. It will be quick, because we have more to say in other lessons.

One thing we should notice—he does it by his grace. It’s not by our works. Notice the Question again: it’s “by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit.” It’s not by our own worthiness. It’s freely conferred to us by his grace, as any blessing we ever receive is a blessing to us by grace. All of salvation is ever given by grace, by the Word of God, by the sacraments of God, by prayer.

Well, two, he does it by the blessing of Christ. So it’s by his grace, as mediated through Jesus Christ, our great and high Priest. And what a blessing that is to us that as we seek the blessings, we’re seeking them in, by, and through the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s intimately with us, providing us the riches of his salvation.

Three, as the *Catechism* notes, he does it “by the working of his Spirit.” This is no different than the way the Word is made a blessing to us. We read the Word, we might understand the Word, but we aren’t blessed savingly except the Spirit blesses us by the Word. Well, similarly, it’s the same with baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We may be baptized, we may come to the Lord’s table, but it’s the Spirit who must work powerfully to convey to us the riches of Christ, and minister faith in us that we receive these things. And so, if ever we’re to enjoy the grace of salvation through this means, the Spirit must be graciously at work in us.

Four, as the *Catechism* notes, he does it in those who receive the blessings by faith. So it’s not just by attending baptism, or by being baptized, but one preeminent way the Spirit works is he forms faith in us, that we then look to Christ and receive the promise. Just as when we hear the Word preached, it’s by faith that we receive those promises. So, when we come to the Lord’s table, in due time by God’s blessing, it is as by faith we eat and drink; or as we’ve been baptized, it is by faith we trust in God who cleanses us. So it’s his grace given, giving us faith, by which we then receive these rich blessings.

Now second, we can clarify how he does not do it. One, he does not do it by some special strength or power in the sacrament itself. This is what the *Catechism* means when it says, “not by any virtue in them.” It’s not as if the sacraments are magical. It’s not something that in itself it has something special. Bread, as we’ll see, remains bread. But by the blessing of Christ and the grace of God, it becomes the means by which our faith feeds upon Jesus Christ. But the bread is still bread. It’s bread, yes, set apart, and ought to be used reverently, but it’s not by the sacrament itself. It’s by the blessing of Christ.

Another way that this blessing does not come to us is by some special strength or power in the minister—the virtue “in him that doth administer them.” So it’s not as if we get a special blessing if the minister is a special man, versus a more basic blessing if the minister is not as special. Rather, the sacrament comes to us as the Word comes to us. It blesses us by his grace. So we may not have the best pastor, the most informed pastor. We may not have the most studied pastor. And if a faithful pastor comes and administers the Lord’s Supper to us, we look not to the pastor, but rather, to the King, Jesus Christ, and it’s by him that we’re able to receive blessings through Christ. So it

is that we are ever brought to look to Jesus Christ.

Oh, what rich things the sacraments are, that by these signs and seals, Christ is represented, he's sealed, and applied to those who by faith receive him. Well, one thing that stands out as we close is how caring Christ is for his people. It would have been most gracious for him, simply to give us his Word. However, he also gave us these signs that confirm his Word to us. His Word comes to us, and says, "I will cleanse you. I will forgive your sins. Trust in me, and I will cleanse you of all your iniquity." That's a great blessing. But the sacrament of baptism is given to us, and by the outward applying of water in the name of the Triune God, we're given, as it were, this further confirmation. What a blessing that is! God doesn't just say, "I've said it, and that's it." He says it, and then he shows it to us.

Now notice, both of them, the Word preached, baptism administered, in this case, are directing us to look to him in faith. This is how we're to approach the sacraments. We hear the Bible read, of course. We see baptism administered, or we're baptized. But it's not that we're looking to baptism itself, or the Bible. We're listening ultimately to God, and believing God. We're looking through, as it were, the sacrament unto God's promise. And it's to him we ask then, "Oh, as you promised in your Word, and as you've given me this outward sign, please then, as you've promised, wash me from my sins.

How sweet it is that God should so care for us! All of this then should lead us to a right use of the sacraments. Perhaps you've been baptized, and if that's the case, praise the Lord for that. But it should lead you to remember that baptism is an outward display of that covenant promise. And so then we should reflect on that, and say, "Have I not only been baptized, but have I then trusted in God, who has both promised by his Word, and given this outward sign to me? Have I looked to him and said, 'Cleanse me'?" He's promised to do it, and so promises call for faith. You can think of it this way. The Word is a verbal, that is, it's a promise given in words, it's a verbal promise. It gives us promises: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). Well, baptism is an outwardly displayed confirmation of that promise. It's God showing us his promise. Whether it's the verbal promise, or the displayed promise, they're both calling us then to look to God and call upon him to do what he's promised. It's calling for faith.

And so I encourage you to remember these things—the displayed promise of the sacraments, the written and spoken promise of God's Word. And may they both lead you, as means of grace, to seek the grace of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Now, in the next couple of lessons, we get to look more carefully at baptism and then the Lord's Supper. And as we do, we'll see all this opened up all the more, how rich of God to give us these precious signs and seals, to confirm his promises, and to direct us to trust in him.