

# Baptism as a Sacrament

## Covenantal Baptism – Jason Helopoulos

### 1. Sacrament Definition: Westminster Confession, Chapter 27

"Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word."

### 2. Helopoulos Summary

"Fundamental to baptism is the kindness of our covenant-making God. This is the most important thing I want to impress on you in this book. Baptism is a gift from a kind Father who lavishes good things upon His children. Baptism serves as a sign and seal of the promises God makes to us in His covenant. He did not have to make a covenant, yet He did. He did not have to provide promises, yet He did. He did not have to give signs and seals to reassure us of His promises, yet He did. Kindness upon kindness.

### 3. Covenants Defined

#### 4. The First Promise of the Gospel

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

#### 5. The Promise Takes Shape

'I will be your God, and ye shall be my people' (cf. Gen 17:7; Exod. 19:5,6; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; Jer. 31:33)

"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" (Gal. 3:8; also Gen 12:3)

#### 6. Abraham's Desire for a Sign

"God, you promised to make me a great nation and bless all the nations of the earth through me, but I am childless still." (Genesis 15:2)

"How am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Genesis 15:8)

#### 7. God Makes a Covenant with Abraham.

By cutting this covenant, he says to Abraham, I want your faith to be as solid as possible.

## **8. The Sacrament of Circumcision**

He gives Abraham a sacrament to serve as a “sign” and “seal” of their covenant – namely, circumcision (Romans 4:11).

## **9. God’s Kindness Shown in Sacraments**

God grants these tangible, physical signs and seals to engage our senses and reassure our faith.

John Calvin has said it better than any: “As our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here, our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.”

## **10. Sacraments as Signs**

When we turn to the New Testament, we no longer find circumcision mandated. Why? Because it has been fulfilled.

Colossians 2:11-12: In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

As the sacrament of circumcision signified the promises of God to a person who entered into the covenant community in the old covenant, so baptism is the sacrament of initiation that signifies the promises of God to individuals who are under the new covenant.

## **11. Sacraments as Seals**

As we consider the sacraments, we see as well that they are more than signs.

## **12. Conclusion**

It can be easy for us to abstract the sacraments from their connection with the covenant of God. But, when we do so, we abstract the sacraments from the God of the covenant. The great tragedy is a lost vision of who our God is. But when we begin to see the sacraments as first and foremost signs and seals of his covenant promises, the kindness of God appropriately thunders in our ears, shines before our souls, and grips our hearts.

Our gracious and good heavenly Father provides these signs and seals to bless us and encourage us in the faith. We couldn't even imagine or dream of a god who exercises his sovereign power toward his people more kindly than our covenant-keeping God.

## **WORD WATER AND SPIRIT – J.V.FESKO**

### **1. Sacrament Definition:** Westminster Confession, Chapter 27.1

"Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace."

### **2. Fesko Summary**

The covenantal context of the sacraments dictates that they are not merely human pledges or oaths. The sacraments do not bring regeneration automatically to the recipient.

The sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace that point to Christ and the Holy Spirit and their respective works. They do not work faith, but instead reinforce it, as a wedding ring reinforces love. They are visible words that function in the same manner as the invisible words of God. Just as the Word of God is double-edged, so too are the sacraments – they hold out covenant blessing and sanction. The difference between the reception of blessing or sanction depends on the presence or absence of faith in the recipient.

### **3. Critique of Views Regarding Use of the Word "Sacrament"**

- a) Pannenberg, Moltmann - if a term does not occur in Scripture, it should be rejected.
- b) It's classical usage as a pledge or oath.
- c) Roman Catholic overtones.

### **4. Holy Signs of the Covenant: Blessing and Sanction**

Noah: "This is the sign of the covenant which I made between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth" (Gen. 9:12-13).

Abraham: "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Gen. 17:11).

Moses: “Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: “Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (Ex. 31:13).

## **5. Sacramental Union**

a) Roman Catholic View: equates the sign and the thing signified.

b) Other side of the spectrum (Zwingli influenced) sees the sacrament primarily as memorials.

c) Lutheran and Reformed churches hold positions between these two extremes.

d) The Reformed Understanding

Peter Van Mastricht (1630-1706) “...baptism is not a mere naked, useless sign, but a most efficacious sealing of the covenant of grace and of regeneration to those who receive it agreeably to its institution, and also to the elect infants of believers.”

## **6. Conclusion**

Our author concludes his chapter on Baptism as a Sacrament by saying that the covenantal context of the sacraments dictates that they are not merely human pledges or oaths. The sacraments do not bring regeneration automatically to the recipient.

The sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace that point to Christ and the Holy Spirit and their respective works. They do not work faith, but instead reinforce it, as a wedding ring reinforces love. They are visible words that function in the same manner as the invisible words of God. Just as the Word of God is double-edged, so too are the sacraments – they hold out covenant blessing and sanction. The difference between the reception of blessing or sanction depends on the presence or absence of faith in the recipient.