

Lesson 24 **THE SACRAMENTS**

24.1 The Meaning of the Term **Sacrament**

The word **sacrament** is not found in the Bible, but arose in the course of the early history of the church. It comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which signified an oath or pledge which a soldier took at enlisting, and was also used to denote the flag, ensign or badge of battle. The term shows affinity to the ideas of initiation and warfare.

The term came into use in the language of the Church as a translation of the term **mystery** in Ephesians 5:32. The sacraments of the Church were also termed mysteries, and were regarded by outsiders as a form of initiation rite into the Christian religion. The Scriptures also speak of circumcision as a sign and seal Romans, 4:11. Thus, we may see the term **sacrament** as a well-suited and accurate term describing what Christ actually instituted in His Church.

According to the Reformed view, the sacraments are “holy visible signs and seals”, exhibiting plainly and confirming the believers in the blessings of the covenant of grace in Christ.

24.2 **The Place of the Sacraments**

The sacraments can never stand alone or be used without reference to the Word of God. They are joined to the preaching of the Word, and function as aids to the message of salvation, in order to seal and confirm it. Through the sacraments we are all the more assured that God’s promises are true and unfulfilling. Also, the sacraments do not add anything to the message of salvation, but only exhibit and seal what God has revealed in His word. The sacraments

are holy, since their elements are set apart for a specific purpose; and visible, since they are meant to be seen by all.

The sacraments are added to the Word and its proclamation **not** because there is any defect in the Word itself, but because of our own weaknesses and infirmities. The LORD has added them because we need them. We easily falter in accepting and holding firm to God's promises, and these signs and seals are meant to help us.

24.3 The Use of the Sacraments

The sacraments were instituted for the purpose of strengthening our faith. However, they do not work automatically. In order to strengthen faith, they must be used in faith. One must continually see one's baptism as a reminder of God's promises, and see and taste the Lord's Supper as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice. Even if we do not believe, the sacraments will still have an effect, for God stands by His covenant Word. However, that effect will be our condemnation, since, having received them, our misuse of them will be counted against us, 1 Corinthians 11:29; Acts 18:14-25, 37. The sacraments are only effectual to salvation when they are used in true faith.

24.4 The Number of the Sacraments

The Church of Rome has seven sacraments, formulated and established through the course of time:

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| 1. | baptism | unrepeatable |
| 2. | confirmation | unrepeatable |
| 3. | mass | |
| 4. | penance | |

5. holy orders unrepeatable
6. matrimony
7. extreme unction

In contrast to this erroneous scheme, the Reformation returned to the two sacraments instituted by Christ, namely baptism and Lord's Supper. Both of these sacraments are obligatory for all believers. The sacraments of the New Testament are preceded by the Old Testament signs of circumcision and passover:

O.T.	N.T.
circumcision - Genesis 17:7, Joshua 5:3	baptism - Colossians 2:11,12
passover - Exodus 12:1-13, Numbers 9:1,2	Lord's Supper - 1 Corinthians 5:7,8; 11:23f

The Lord Jesus Christ instituted both sacraments in the Church, Matthew 28:18, 19; Matthew 26:26f. Both sacraments are meant to function, not as mere outward signs, but as visible signs with an invisible meaning, Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:28, 29; 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17. We may never separate the inward working of God's Spirit from the outward sign.

Exercises Lesson 24

I. **References Passages**

Study and Review: Belgic Confession, Article 33
Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25
Canons of Dort, III/IV. 17; V. 14.

II. **Review Questions**

1. What are the **means of grace**? In what way do the means convey the grace of God?
2. What does the word **sacrament** mean? Is it found in the Bible?
3. Explain how the sacraments work. Why are they necessary?
4. Do the sacraments become powerless if they are either not used or abused? What happens with them?
5. Which two Old Testament sacraments foreshadow the sacraments we have today? Explain how the Old Testament sacraments differ from the ones we have today.
6. Show that Rome's seven sacraments are unscriptural. On what passages of Scripture were these so-called sacraments based?

III. Extra Questions

1. At what point do falsely administered sacraments begin to lose their significance?
2. Prove from Scripture that the sacraments are signs and seals of God's covenant promises.
3. Can anyone be saved without the sacraments? How?