

Part Four:
The Sacraments

Sign and Seal

The word combination “sign and seal” is a well-known expression in the doctrine of the sacraments. It is used in both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The Belgic Confession presents a kind of definition in Article 33 and speaks of “visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible.”¹ The Catechism begins the answer to the question as to what the sacraments are, with: “The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals” (LD 25, Q&A 66).²

What is actually meant by “sign and seal”? Dr. L. Wierenga has treated this subject in the framework of a linguistic investigation of word pairs (*binomen*).³ Wierenga concludes that it is most likely that “sign and seal” should be viewed as a synonymous word pair. In his view, the original didactic intention of this word combination has been lost. Theology has mistakenly attributed a separate meaning to each of these two words, according to Wierenga.⁴

It is true that Reformed theologians have explained the words “sign” and “seal” as having two different meanings. I will give two examples. The first, H. Bavinck, says:

* Originally published as “Teken en zegel,” *Radix* 24 (1998) 2–20. Translated by J. M. (Kim) Batteau, minister of the Reformed Church (Liberated) of Gravenhage-Centrum/Scheveningen, The Netherlands. Used with permission.

¹ *Book of Praise* (rev. ed.; Winnipeg: Premier, 1998) 466.

² *Book of Praise*, 500.

³ L. Wierenga, “Wijn en drank, teken en zegel, loven en prijzen: Een stijlstudie over binomen in religieuze en liturgische taal, met name die van de eeuw van de Reformatie,” *Radix* 22 (1996) 2–56. “Teken en zegel” (“sign and seal”) gets the most attention among various word combinations (45–52).

⁴ Wierenga, “Wijn en drank,” 49.

Now sacraments are among the instituted extraordinary signs that God has taken—not arbitrarily but according to an analogy preformed by him—from among visible things and uses for the designation and clarification of invisible and eternal goods.

Aside from being signs, the sacraments are also seals that serve to confirm and strengthen. Seals, after all, are distinguished from signs by the fact that they do not just bring the invisible matter to mind but also validate and confirm it.⁵

The second, G. C. Berkouwer, writes in connection with baptism as sign and seal:

It is probably clear by now that the formula “sign and seal” is of great importance for Reformed sacramental doctrine. Moreover, the addition of “seal” to “sign” is the really significant aspect of this doctrine, for it indicates that the symbol has been taken up into the whole of baptism and that it is undetachably connected with the acts of God.⁶

On what basis is the two-fold meaning of the word combination “sign and seal” denied? Wierenga gives many examples in order to show that the typical liturgical language of the 16th century made use of many word pairs. Against this background, the use of the words in the confessions and in Calvin is collected and extensively investigated. The textual data lead to Wierenga’s conclusion that “sign and seal” must be understood as one synonymous expression.

Wierenga’s interpretation seems to be supported by a subsequent sentence in the same Article 33 of the Belgic Confession: “Therefore the signs are not void and meaningless...” Not only is only one word used here (i.e. “sign”), but the original words for “void and meaningless” strongly give the impression that they too are synonyms.⁷ It can even be argued that the text of the first edition of the Confession supports this interpretation: “they are thus visible symbols and signs.”⁸ It was only at the Synod of Dordt

⁵ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4th ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1928) 4.454. English translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008) 4.476.

⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 136.

⁷ The original French text shows this more clearly: “et ne sont pas des signs vains en vuides,” J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 130.

⁸ See Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 130 (footnote): “Ils sont donc symbole en signes visibles,” where there does not appear to be any difference between symbol and sign. See also the original Dutch text: “Sy zijn dan

(1618–1619) that this was changed into the expression which we know, “visible signs and seals,” possibly conforming to the usage in the Heidelberg Catechism.⁹

But hereby we have left the field of linguistics, and we are faced with a methodological problem. The issue of the meaning of “sign and seal” was approached linguistically by Wierenga, but it is questionable whether the problem of the meaning of “sign and seal” can be solved in this way. Another issue which deserves attention is how the theologians at that time understood the expression. Linguistic investigation can indicate that there is a good possibility that “sign and seal” is a synonymous word pair, making something more explicit, but there are more possibilities. Theological investigation will have to take place in order to see which of the linguistic possibilities obtain here.

We do not want to narrow our field of investigation too much, and wish to look at three things:

1. How was the expression “sign and seal” explained by Reformed theologians who wrote close to the time of the confessional writings?
2. What is the dogma-historical background to the expression “sign and seal”?
3. What is the scriptural foundation for this expression?

Reformed Theologians

Calvin

Calvin gave a short description of the sacraments in his Geneva Catechism (1545). In his view, a sacrament is

an outward attestation of the divine benevolence towards us, which represents spiritual grace symbolically, to seal the promises of God in our hearts, by which the truth of them is better confirmed.¹⁰

waerteecken ende sienlicke mercken,” 131 (footnote). The printing error “symbole” was corrected in the revision of 1566 to the plural “symboles.” The Synod of Dordt 1618–1619 changed the text into “signs and seals” (“signes et seaux”).

⁹ H. H. Kuyper, *De Post-Acta of Nabandelingen van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht in 1618 en 1619* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899) 383.

¹⁰ J. Calvin, “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (ed. J. K. S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 131. See for the

Here Calvin makes use of the terms “sign” and “seal,” but they have different functions. The word “sign” indicates what sacraments are, representing God’s grace. The word “seal” is used to make clearer the intention of the sacraments: they seal the promises of God. This definition appears to proceed from a use of these words which attaches different meanings to them.

Calvin formulates his words somewhat differently in the *Institutes*. He adopts Augustine’s definition that a sacrament is a visible sign of a holy matter, but he broadens the definition to make the intention clearer. He says that a sacrament is

an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men (4.14.1).¹¹

A comparison with Augustine demonstrates that Calvin takes over his central word, “sign,” from Augustine. But Calvin adds that God seals his promises through the sacraments. The word “seal” indicates the function of the sacraments.

This distinction is maintained when he works out this definition. Over against the Roman Catholic church, Calvin emphasizes that a sacrament is a sign (4.14.4). This is followed by an explanation that the promise is sealed by the sacraments (5.15.1). In the following paragraph, Calvin describes the two functions of “showing” (sign) and “confirming” (seal) by means of two comparisons in which they appear in reverse order. Calvin says that sacraments are pillars by which our faith stands firmer, and they are mirrors in which one can see the riches of God’s grace. He then ends this section with a summarizing description:

For by them he [God] manifests himself to us (as has already been said) as far as our dullness is given to perceive, and attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word.

Calvin places revelation and attestation next to each other, which agrees

original text, *Calvini Opera Selecta* (5 vols.; ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel; Munich: Kaiser, 1970) 2.130.

¹¹ Quotations from the *Institutes* are taken from J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Calvin adds to this that one can formulate the meaning of a sacrament more succinctly as “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him” (4.14.1).

with the terms sign and seal previously mentioned.¹²

The French Confession of faith forms a link between Calvin and the Belgic Confession. Calvin wrote, on request, a draft for the French Confession, which was accepted (with modifications) by the French Reformed churches in 1559, and which must have been the model for the Belgic Confession. Article 34 of this confession distinguishes between two functions of the sacraments. According to this article, God has added them to the Word, with the aim of:

- establishing our faith more firmly, in order to provide us with pledges and proofs¹³ of God's grace, and thereby to assist our faith and give us support due to the weakness and coarseness which is in us
- being external signs which God may use by the power of his Spirit in order to show us something effectively through them, and not in vain¹⁴

Although the order is reversed, the two-fold division of "sign" and "seal" is clearly recognizable.

It is striking that the same words, "weakness and coarseness," are to be found in Article 33 of the Belgic Confession. Would that mean that this article speaks here of "sealing"? That is seen indeed to be the case. Article 33 of the Belgic Confession begins with:

We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments to seal his promises to us and to be pledges of his good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and sustain our faith.¹⁵

The article goes on to speak of a "sign":

He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our

¹² In his commentaries, too, the two-fold meaning of the sacraments is to be found. Calvin writes in his exposition of Gen. 17:9: "...and we embrace the *sign* as a *testimony* and *pledge* of grace" (emphasis, NHG). Calvin says in his commentary on Rom. 4:11 that the holy symbols are *witnesses* whereby God *seals* his grace to our hearts. See further on "sign" and "seal," R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 137–141.

¹³ French: "marreaux"; see for the meaning of this word, Wierenga, "Wijn en drank," 46 (footnote 53).

¹⁴ For the French text, see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 130.

¹⁵ *Book of Praise*, 466. For the original Dutch text, see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 131.

external senses both what he declares to us in his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts. Thus he confirms to us the salvation which he imparts to us.¹⁶

Read against the background of the French Confession, it is clear that the functions of “sign and seal” have already been distinguished before the words are used.

Guido de Brès

It is more difficult to discover Guido de Brès’ understanding about the sacraments in general. According to C. Vonk, De Brès never published a summarizing view of the sacraments.¹⁷ Some information can be found in a letter which De Brès wrote to the congregation in Valenciennes. Here he explained the meaning of the sacraments against the background of God’s dealings in general. When God grants a human being one or more extremely important promises, it is his custom to add either an oath or a visible sign to it with the intention of making people even more certain of his promise.¹⁸ It is clear that sacraments are understood by De Brès as signs, as well, for after having given many examples of signs, he concludes:

Since our Lord saw that the people were drawn to him only with much difficulty, unbelieving by nature as they were, he wanted to give visible signs, in order to help them in their weakness, so that he, as it were, by means of the visible sign would make visible that which he promised them.¹⁹

A sacrament is thus seen by De Brès to be a sign. At the same time, he indicates that the function of this sign is “to make certain.” This combination of sign and seal agrees with Calvin and Article 33 of the Belgic Confession.

¹⁶ *Book of Praise*, 466. For the original Dutch, see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 131. The text cited was authorized in Dordrecht (1618–1619). The changes which were made do not affect the usage of the terms “sign” and “seal.”

¹⁷ C. Vonk, *De Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis* (2 vols.; Voorzeide Leer IIIA–B; Barendrecht: Drukkerij “Barendrecht,” 1955–1956) 2.188. Vonk says here, mistakenly, that the French Confession does not have any summarizing treatment of the sacraments. However, as we have seen, Art. 34 of this confession treats the sacraments.

¹⁸ See Vonk, *De Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, 2.192.

¹⁹ Vonk, *De Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, 2.193. Vonk cites the French text in note e.

Ursinus

Wierenga supports his interpretation of “sign and seal” by means of a short treatment of the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 79, where we read of visible signs and pledges.²⁰ This is a part of Lord’s Day 29 about the Lord’s Supper. It is striking that Lord’s Day 25 is not referred to, where the sacraments are treated in general. The catechism gives a double description of the sacraments (signs and seals) and a double function (to cause to understand and to seal). The conclusion seems obvious that “sign” is explained as “to cause to understand,” and seal as “sealing.”

Ursinus, the theologian who contributed the most to writing this catechism, gives a further explanation of these words in his commentary on question and answer 66.²¹ He begins by adopting Augustine’s description of a sign: a sign causes one to think of something other than the external thing which is seen by the senses. This definition is more technically formulated than that which is cited by Calvin, but is in fact the same. Ursinus then establishes the relation between sign and seal by using a scholastic distinction: sign and seal differ in the way a *genus* differs from a *species*. Signs present something. But seals are signs which make certain and confirm. Ursinus clearly sees a difference in meaning between “sign” and “seal.”

When we now go back to Lord’s Day 29, question and answer 79, we see Ursinus’ explanation of the two sides of sign and seal present there.²² He contrasts two reasons why Christ speaks in this way about the Lord’s Supper: first, because of the agreement or analogy which exists between bread and the body of Christ; and second, because of how the Lord’s Supper gives certainty and confirmation. Next, he discusses this analogy and this confirmation individually in more detail. There are five points of agreement. We mention the first here as an example. Just as bread and wine feed the body for this life, so Christ’s body and blood feed the soul for eternal life. Next, he explains the aspect of “making certain” in the Lord’s Supper: the signs witness to the fact that the offering of Christ is complete, and indeed for our salvation, just as surely as we truly have the signs.

²⁰ Wierenga, “Wijn en drank,” 50.

²¹ See the original Latin treatment of the sacraments in Z. Ursinus, *Zachariae Ursini...Opera Theologica* (3 vols.; ed. Q. Reuter; Heidelberg: Lancelot, 1612) 1.241–242.

²² Ursinus, *Zachariae Ursini...Opera Theologica*, 1.283.

Olevianus

Because Olevianus was involved in framing the Heidelberg Catechism, we want to look briefly at his role. He never wrote a commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, but he speaks about the sacraments in his study on the covenant of grace.

Olevianus has a strong tendency to bring the sign and the seal in the sacraments close to each other. He continually uses the expression “the sealing-sign.”²³ And he emphasizes that sealing activity of the sacraments. “As seals they seal the promises which are attached to the Covenant and are recommended to us” (§ 49). But he makes clear that he distinguishes the functions of sign and seal. “The signs seal in a visible way that which believers are promised with respect to their seed” (§ 48). And “just as he himself works out this promise in the elect, so he desires as well that it be openly seen for his glory and that his Covenant, which is offered in the Word, at the same time be sealed” (§ 52).²⁴

The conclusion can now be drawn that the theologians who lived the closest to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism clearly distinguished between “sign” and “seal.” These terms each have their own meaning, just as is indicated in Article 33 of the Belgic Confession and Lord’s Day 25 of the Catechism. At the same time, it has become clear that “sign” and “seal” may not be seen as being two unrelated concepts next to each other. “Sign” indicates the character of the sacraments, and “seal” their goal. A sacrament is a sign which seals.

Theological Background

Middle Ages

In the previous section, we have seen repeatedly that Augustine is the starting point for the description of the sacrament as a sign. Augustine saw

²³ Z. Olevianus, *De getuigenissen van het genadeverbond*, in his *Geschriften van Caspar Olevianus* (Den Haag: Het Reformatorische Boek, 1963) 333–334.

²⁴ Because L. D. Bierma’s new study of Olevianus deals especially with Olevianus’ doctrine of the covenant, he does not notice this in his treatment of the signs of the covenant. See his *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenantal Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 84ff. But the footnotes in this section show clearly that the difference between sign and seal is maintained by Olevianus.

a sacrament as a visible sign of something invisible. It is possible that this statement originally only referred to the ceremony in which catechumens received salt, but it is used by him as a general statement about the sacraments.²⁵ Just as we saw with Ursinus, Augustine had given still other descriptions of the sacraments,²⁶ but he does not use the word “seal.”

Two developments lead to a further description of the sacraments in the Middle Ages. In the first place, a doctrine of the sacraments arose in which the possibility of granting grace was attributed to the sacraments.²⁷ In this development, the conflict around Berengar of Tours led to the canonizing of this idea. Berengar denied that at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper bread and wine changed into the body and blood of Christ and thereby opposed the growing teaching of transubstantiation. He had to defend himself before the Pope in Rome and was forced to sign a declaration that bread and wine on the altar change substantially into the actual flesh and blood of Christ (in the year 1079). This eventually led to the establishing of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).²⁸

The sign character of the sacraments was a central moment in this struggle. Berengar defended his viewpoint by appealing to Augustine, who saw a sacrament as a sign. According to Berengar, the nature of the bread and the wine are not changed by its consecration. These are sacraments or signs of Christ’s body and blood. Berengar was, however, forced to declare that the body and blood of Christ are present, not just as a sign and power of the sacrament, but retaining the properties of the nature and reality of the substance of Christ’s body and blood.²⁹ In this debate it became clear that the word “sign” was no longer regarded as sufficient as a definition of

²⁵ In his *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, § 50; see concerning this the comment with the translation of this book in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (14 vols.; ed. P. Schaff; orig. ed. 1886; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 3.312 (note 2); and in *Ancient Christian Writers* (ed. J. Quasten and P. C. Plumpe; New York: Newman, n.d.) 2.146 (note 315).

²⁶ *De Civitate Dei*, 10.5; *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.1; and *Epistula*, 138.7. See further F. Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium des Dogmengeschichte* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1906) 373–374.

²⁷ See for a treatment of this issue, H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4.445, 528ff. (ET 4.467, 552ff.)

²⁸ See the decisions in H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (33rd ed.; Barcelona: Herder, 1965) 690, 700 (about Berengar), and 802 (Lateran Council).

²⁹ Jean de Montclos, “Berengar von Tours,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (36 vols.; ed. G. Krause and G. Müller; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1977–2004) 5.600.

the character of the sacraments. It was therefore supplemented and in fact overshadowed by the words “nature” and “substance.”

The second development was the specification of the concept of sacrament. Augustine used the word “sign” not specifically for the sacraments, but more in general for symbols. Slowly but surely a number of sacraments were set apart from the other symbols.³⁰ Peter Lombard begins by adopting Augustine’s definition of a sacrament as a sign of a holy matter. In order to make clear the special place which sacraments have, he makes various distinctions. There are natural signs; smoke, for example, means that there is fire somewhere. Other things have been given the role of signs. Two categories are here distinguished: signs which have been given the role of signs without further definition, and signs which are sacraments. As an example of the first category, the offering of animals and the ceremonial rules of the Old Testament are mentioned, for Hebrews 9 says about this that the sprinkling with the blood of goats and bulls sanctifies only with respect to the cleansing of the flesh, but not of the soul. The sacraments, in contrast, have been instituted not just to represent, but also to sanctify. In his definition of sacraments, Peter then also qualifies the definition of Augustine: properly speaking, a sacrament is thus in a special sense a sign of God’s grace and a form of invisible grace in that it represents that grace and is the cause of it.³¹ In fact, he is not supplementing Augustine’s definition, but fundamentally changing the definition.

This development is continued with Thomas Aquinas, when he treats the question as to what a sacrament is. He determines first that a sacrament is a kind of sign. This leads to the question of whether each sign of a holy matter is a sacrament. In discussing this question, it becomes clear that he cannot accept Augustine’s definition as it stands, for he describes a sacrament as a sign of a holy matter inasmuch as it sanctifies human beings.³² Sacraments do more than signify; they convey holiness.

This development was canonized by the Council of Trent in 1547. An anathema was pronounced on those who say that the sacraments of the New Covenant do not contain the grace which they represent, and that they

³⁰ See R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (5 vols.; 4th ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959) 3.282ff.; and M. L. Colish, *Peter Lombard* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 2.518–527.

³¹ P. Lombard, *Sententiarum Libri Quattuor* (4 vols.; Paris: Migne, 1841) 4.1–2.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* (3rd ed.; Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1964) 3.60.2.c, elaborated in 62.

do not convey grace to those who do not put any hindrances in the way.³³ This position determined for centuries the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, for the Roman Catechism taught that the sacrament is a visible sign, instituted by Christ, which points to grace and makes it effective.³⁴

Lutheranism

We also want to look at Lutheranism to see the development on this issue, particularly in the official pronouncements.³⁵ In the Confession of Augsburg (1530) the words “sign” and “witness” are used. This confession denies that the sacraments are only signs by which people can be outwardly known as Christians. They are signs and witnesses of God’s will for us whose purpose is to awaken our faith and to strengthen it (Art. 13). Explicitly rejected is the view that the sacraments are not more than an oath of faithfulness towards God. The reigning scholastic understanding that sacraments justify by themselves, without faith being necessary, is rejected. This confession remains in the tradition of Augustine by calling the sacrament a sign.

At the same time, there are elements in the Augsburg Confession which point in another direction. That is so not so much in the pronouncements about baptism, for there it is emphasized that God’s grace is offered in it (Art. 9). But with respect to the Holy Lord’s Supper, it is said that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present in the form of bread and wine, and that at the Lord’s Supper these are distributed and received (Art. 10). How is this to be reconciled with the general description of sacraments as signs and witnesses?

In the Apology for this confession, written in the same year, 1530, the

³³ See Denzinger and Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion*, 1606. This condemnation was directed against Luther and the supporters of the Augsburg Confession. The text makes more clear than the translation that the actual issue is again whether the sacraments are more than signs. The word for “represent” is the Latin word *significans* ‘to make known by means of signs.’

³⁴ See M. Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik IV.1: Die Lehre von den Sakramenten* (5 vols. in 7 books; Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1952) 10.

³⁵ For the text of the Augsburg Confession, the edition of J. T. Müller was used: *Die symbolische Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Zurich: Theologische Buchhandlung, 1987). The English translation of T. G. Tappert contains footnotes with references to the contemporary discussion. *The Augsburg Confession: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (ed. and trans. T. G. Tappert; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1946). We follow the divisions of the confessions as given in these sources.

observation is made that “our opponents” approve the declaration which the Augsburg Confession made about the sacraments as signs and witnesses (Art. 13.1). Later in the same article, the word “sign” is used against the scholastic teaching that those participating in the sacraments receive God’s grace *ex opere operato*. With an appeal to Romans 4:9, the Apology states that circumcision was a sign with the purpose of awakening faith. There is added that faith must accompany the sign—a faith which believes the promises and accepts that which is promised (Art. 13.18–19).³⁶

When we next look at the Larger Catechism, we make a transition from Melancthon to Luther. In his discussion of baptism, Luther says that baptism is something completely different than water. It is not just natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy, blessed water. It contains the power and the might of God. With an appeal to Augustine, Luther says that when the Word accompanies the element, the element becomes a sacrament, that is, a holy, divine matter and sign (4.17.18). But the sign is overshadowed by the “matter.”³⁷

This same thought pattern is developed with respect to the Lord’s Supper. Luther says: he commands me to eat and to drink so that it belongs to me and is useful to me, as a certain pledge or sign, or better as the matter itself, which he has presented to me over against my sin, death and every evil (5.22).³⁸

In the *Formula of Concord* (1577) this line of thought is worked out further. The Lutheran understanding is no longer rendered by the words “sign and pledge,” but as “real presence”: “We believe, teach, and confess that, with bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ is not only spiritually

³⁶ This is repeated in the exposition about “the mass” (Art. 24.69–70).

³⁷ It is remarkable that in the Latin text the word “sign” can be omitted, and the words used are “res sancta atque divina”!

³⁸ Luther’s development with respect to the sacraments has been repeatedly described. See e.g. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4.446–447 (ET 4.468–469); see, for the difference between Luther and Melancthon, A. Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen* (5 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 4.59–60. R. W. Quere shows that Luther took more and more of a distance from Augustine’s description of the sacraments as signs; see his “Changes and Constants: Structure in Luther’s Understanding of the Real Presence in the 1520s,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985) 55: “Luther’s development from 1523 onward and especially after 1524 moves markedly away from the Augustinian *signum-res significata* structure. In effect, Luther ends by virtually equating sign, thing signified, and benefit—concepts which were once distinguished,” and the conclusion, 72–76.

received by faith, but also received by the mouth.” The words of institution of the Lord’s Supper are explained as follows: “Whoever eats this bread, eats the body of Christ” (*Epitome of the Formula of Concord*, 7.15).

That is why the idea is rejected that the bread and wine are not more than likenesses, images, and types of Christ’s absent body (*Epitome*, 7.28), these words probably being meant as a summary of Zwingli’s teaching. Further, the view is rejected that they are not more than memorials, seals, and pledges, whereby we are made certain that our faith, when it rises to heaven, participates as truly in the body and blood of Christ as when we eat the bread and drink the wine in the Holy Lord’s Supper (*Epitome*, 7.28–29). This is clearly a rejection of the Reformed teaching on the Lord’s Supper as expressed in, for example, the liturgical form for the Lord’s Supper used by the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands.³⁹

According to the Lutheran teaching on the Lord’s Supper, Christ’s body and blood are truly received by the mouth and eaten by all who eat the blessed bread and drink the wine. And the believers receive the body and blood of Christ as a certain pledge and confirmation that their sins are truly forgiven (*Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*, 7.63). But we must not ignore the fact that this confession does not say that the bread and wine are a certain pledge, but that Christ’s body and blood are themselves the pledge. In the Lutheran teaching on the sacraments, the Augustinian description of a sacrament cannot really function.

Zurich and Geneva

After looking at Lutheran Germany, we now want to look at the views on this subject in Reformed Switzerland. We have already been in touch with these views indirectly, because the Lutheran conceptions were formulated in conscious rejection of them. The word “sign” has a central place here. The first Helvetic Confession (1536) says in Article 21 (the German is Art. 20): “These symbols of hidden matters do not exist merely in signs alone, but in signs and matters.” For example, at baptism the water is the sign, and the matter is regeneration and adoption as a member of God’s people. The word “sign” comes back in the articles about baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁰

³⁹ The footnotes in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Tappert, supply important indications of the origin of the rejected views.

⁴⁰ See Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; 6th ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 3.223–225.

The first Catechism of Zurich (1534) presents two descriptions of a sacrament. First a general definition is given: “sacrament” means an oath or serious duty. Next the theological definition is given: it is a sign of a holy matter. The combination of these two definitions leads to the following description of sacraments: they represent to us high, holy matters and picture them, and hereby those who use them pledge and commit themselves to these holy matters.⁴¹ The emphasis laid on the obligatory side of the sacraments has been incorporated into the Reformed view of the sacraments.

The Latin Catechism of Zurich goes further and indicates three functions of the sacraments: “a sacrament is a holy symbol...which in the church reminds us of his highest benefits and renews this continually, whereby he seals and represents to us what he does for us, and what he, in turn, demands of us.”⁴² Remarkable is the second function, in which the sign and the seal are brought together.

A beginning of this development can be found with the early Zwingli. He adopts Augustine’s definition of a sacrament as a sign of a holy matter,⁴³ but he uses also the expression “sign or seal” and says that a sacrament gives certainty to weak believers of the forgiveness of sin.⁴⁴ Without developing this thought further, he writes the following statement about the Lord’s Supper in 1523:

Christ who offered himself on the cross once is into eternity a constant and reconciling offering for the sins of all believers. From this we conclude that the mass is not an offering, but the memorial to that offering, and the assurance of the redemption which Christ has demonstrated to us.⁴⁵

Both sign (memorial) as well as seal (assurance) are present here.

On this basis, the theologians of Zurich and Geneva were able to reach agreement about the sacraments. While the Lutheran teaching dis-

⁴¹ The texts of the three versions of the catechism of Zurich are printed in M. A. Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus: Textus receptus met toelichtende teksten* (Leiden: Brill, 1890) 129–130.

⁴² Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 131.

⁴³ See W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 181 (note 2).

⁴⁴ See Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 180.

⁴⁵ This is the 18th of the 67 articles. See Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3.200. Against this background it is possible to doubt whether we can speak of a Zwinglian symbolism, as Berkouwer does (*The Sacraments*, 136). There was certainly a shift of attention in Zwingli’s teaching about the sacraments; see Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 180ff.

tanced itself more and more from that of the other followers of the Reformation, it became clear that the Zwinglians and the Calvinists could come together on this issue. This happened during a conference in Zurich, in the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549). Article 7 speaks of the aims of the sacraments. Different aims are mentioned first: they are marks of Christian confession, and they stimulate us to a life of thankfulness. But the most important thing is that “through the sacraments God declares, presents, and seals to us his grace.” For while the sacraments do not mean anything other than what is proclaimed through the word, nevertheless it is important that living images, as it were, are brought before our eyes, and “...further that, as by seals, that which is spoken by God’s mouth is confirmed and ratified.”⁴⁶ It is clear that here the functions of sign and seal are distinguished from each other.

We can now try to summarize the development of the expression “sign and seal.” The starting point is Augustine’s description of a sign as a visible sign of an invisible matter. The word “sign” functions within the setting of a dilemma of either being visible or invisible. In the Middle Ages, the word “sign” is further described as a sign that does not represent grace, but contains it. The word functions now in a setting of another dilemma, that of either pointing to grace or being filled with grace. The Lutherans, under the pressure of their teaching about the Lord’s Supper, came to the view that grace is present in and under the sacrament. Because this could not be expressed well through the word “sign,” it disappeared into the background. The Reformed placed the word “seal” next to “sign.” Hereby they fixed boundaries between themselves and two separate views. On the one hand, they rejected the idea that the sign is filled with grace, against the Roman Catholic view, canonized at Trent, 1547. On the other hand, they rejected the criticism that the sign is not more than an empty picture. God uses the sign to guarantee something.

Scriptural Foundation

A short exegetical reflection is appropriate. We must next seek an answer to the question as to whether the expression “sign and seal,” which is

⁴⁶ See the text in E. F. K. Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (orig. ed. 1903; repr. Zurich: Theologische Buchbehandlung, 1987) 160. See also for the teaching of the sacraments in the confessions, L. Doekes, *Credo: Handboek voor de gereformeerde symboliek* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1975) 327ff.

used by the confessions for the sacraments, is based on Scripture. The origin of the expression is to be found in Romans 4:11, where these two words occur: “And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”

Calvin uses this text in his commentary on Romans in order to give an exposition about the sacraments in general. He begins with an explanation of the aim of circumcision. Circumcision of itself does not justify but seals and, so to speak, gives validity to justification by faith. This leads to the general statement that sacraments, according to Paul’s witness, are seals whereby God’s promises are, in a certain way, imprinted in our hearts, and the certainty of grace is confirmed. Further, Calvin says concerning the sign of circumcision that in it a two-fold grace is represented: the promise of the blessed seed (Christ); and the promise, “I will be your God.” There existed an agreement between the sign and the matter which the sign pointed to in the fact that believers looked toward the promised seed. We see here that Calvin makes a distinction between sign and seal. A sign represents, a seal makes certain.⁴⁷

Is Calvin’s view that there is a difference between sign and seal exegetically responsible?⁴⁸ In order to answer that question, we will first of all have to go back to the Old Testament, for Paul has borrowed the expression “sign of circumcision” from Genesis 17:11: “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.” What is meant here with “sign”? A number of randomly chosen examples can give insight into the meaning of this word:

- “Then the LORD put a mark [sign] on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him” (Gen. 4:15).
- “And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you.... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’” (Gen. 9:12–13).
- “‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me

⁴⁷ See for the Latin text Calvin’s commentary: *Iohannis Calvini in omnes Pauli Apostoli Epistolas* (2 vols.; Berolini: G. Eichler, 1834) 1.49–50.

⁴⁸ John Owen, editor and translator of the English edition of Calvin’s commentary on Romans, apparently disagrees with Calvin’s explanation. In a footnote, he explains the expression “sign of the covenant” as “proof” of the covenant, J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (ed. and trans. J. Owen; 1849; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 166.

and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy” (Ex. 31:13; see also v. 17).

- “If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says ‘Let us follow other gods’ (gods you have not known) ‘and let us worship them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer...” (Deut. 13:1-3).
- The woman from Jericho says to the spies: “Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother...and that you will save us from death” (Josh. 2:12–13).
- Joshua says to the twelve men: “Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you...” (Josh. 4:5–6a).
- And to give another well-known example: “Hezekiah had asked Isaiah, ‘What will be the sign that the LORD will heal me and that I will go up to the temple of the LORD on the third day from now?’ Isaiah answered, ‘This is the LORD’s sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised: Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or shall it go back ten steps?’” (2 Kings 20:8–9).

Regarding our subject, it is striking that the word “sign” does not mean “image” in any of these examples. Let us look at the texts one by one. There is a debate about what the mark of Cain was; the text gives no clarity. Certainly its aim is mentioned. “It was a sign that guaranteed him that no one who met him would kill him.”⁴⁹ We do not know if the sign was an image of something, but we know that it gave certainty. The other examples are clearer:

- The rainbow in Genesis 9:12–13 is not an image of something, but is a divine sign, guaranteeing that no flood will ever again take place there.
- The Sabbath in Exodus 31 is certainly not an image of something. It is also not a sign guaranteeing something. It is rather a sign of com-

⁴⁹ W. H. Gispen, *Genesis* (3 vols.; Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1974) 1.181. The same view is to be found in the commentaries of Aalders, König, and others.

memoration. It is to remind the Israelites that God sanctifies them.⁵⁰

- The sign in Deuteronomy 13 is a guaranteeing sign, used by the false prophet to mislead Israel to believe his words and to serve other gods.⁵¹
- There is a difference of opinion about what exactly the “sure sign” which Rahab asks for is. It could be the oath (Josh. 2:14) or the scarlet cord (v. 18). But there can be no doubt about the meaning of “sign.” The sign must guarantee the promise that Rahab and her family will be saved.⁵²
- The stone sign set up at the Jordan is no image of something, but rather a commemorating sign that is to remind Israel that God had temporarily drained the Jordan in order to bring his people into the promised land (Josh. 4:7, 21–24).
- Hezekiah received a sign with the prophecy that he would be healthy again (2 Kings 20:10). The fact that the shadow went back ten steps was no image of something, but proved God’s power over nature.

Dictionaries confirm that the word used for “sign” does not mean “image,” but has a pointing function, referring to something. A useful overview of the use of this word distinguishes six ways in which the word is used:

- a (military) standard of the different tribes in Israel
- a memorial sign, commemorating something in the past
- an omen of a future matter
- a sign of confirmation, in relation to a word of a prophet
- a sign of protection
- a miracle, pointing to the presence of a higher power.⁵³

Against this background, the expression “sign and seal” in Romans 4 can

⁵⁰ See W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Korte Verklaring; Kampen: Kok, 1932) 180.

⁵¹ See E. König, *Das Deuteronomium* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1917).

⁵² See J. H. Kroeze, *Jozua* (Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1968) 44.

⁵³ W. Gesenius and F. Buhl, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das alte Testament* (17th ed.; Berlin: Springer, 1962) 19. The long article of F. J. Helfmeyer similarly emphasizes the referential meaning of the word: “A ‘sign’ by its very nature points to something beyond itself.” He does not, however, give a recognizable differentiation of the word’s use; see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; ed. G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Farby; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1874–2006) 1.169.

be understood. By means of the expression “the sign of circumcision,” Paul is referring back to what God says about circumcision: “‘You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you’ (Gen. 17:11). The “sign” is a sign of confirmation; circumcision guarantees that this covenant indeed exists between God and his people. That means for Romans 4:11 that the words “sign” and “seal” are virtually identical. A seal served as legal protection and certainty in all kinds of situations.⁵⁴ Paul uses the word “seal” not as a supplement to “sign,” but as the explanation of its meaning: it is a sign that seals. This means that the distinction between sign and seal, which is often made in the teaching about the sacraments, cannot be based on these words as they are used in the Bible. The words have the same meaning.

But we would be too hasty if we concluded from this that the sacraments do not image something, but only seal. The sacraments themselves show that they do not consist of randomly chosen acts; rather, they are rites which have been prescribed and which represent something.

Let us begin with circumcision. This guaranteeing sign was very specific. Genesis 17 describes the covenant which is guaranteed in circumcision. The covenant is here first and foremost the promise that Abraham would be the father of many peoples. This is worked out further in verses 6–8. Four matters are mentioned here: many descendants (v. 6a); kings as offspring (v. 6b); God is the God of Abraham and his offspring (vv. 7–8b); and the land of Canaan (v. 8a).⁵⁵

In that context, God commands Abraham and his offspring to keep his covenant. From their side, this covenant means that all males must be circumcised (v. 10). Circumcision is a symbolic opening up of the power of procreation.⁵⁶ Abraham and his descendants are reminded by circumcision that God opens up the way to the realization of his promises.⁵⁷ And whoever refuses to recognize this has no place among the people of God (v. 4). Circumcision is instituted as a guaranteeing sign between God and his people. At the same

⁵⁴ See the article of G. Fitzer about “seal” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976) 7:940. See also S. Greijdanus, *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de gemeente te Rome* (2 vols.; *Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*; Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1933) 1:229, with references to John 6:27 and Matt. 27:66.

⁵⁵ Gispén speaks of three promises, but he combines the first and the second: “many and prominent descendants,” *Genesis*, 2:138.

⁵⁶ See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (2 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 1:47–48.

⁵⁷ See C. Trimp, *Woord, water en wijn* (Kampen: Kok, 1985) 49.

time, the rite of circumcision is itself an image of something. Thus the word “sign” in Genesis 17:11 means a guaranteeing sign, but the fact that it is an image of something is unmistakable in the act prescribed.

With the rite of Passover, as prescribed in Exodus 12 at the time of exodus out of Egypt, we see something comparable. The elements of the meal—the lamb, the bread, and the herbs—speak their own language. The lamb had to be roasted whole (v. 9) in order to express the fact those who ate of it participated in the same redemption. The bread had to be unleavened, an image of eliminating sin. And the bitter herbs reminded Israel of the bitterness of their stay in Egypt in order to impress upon them the need not to look back with longing for the pots of meat of Egypt.⁵⁸

Baptism is a ceremonial washing and cleansing. Cups and pitchers were immersed in water as a sign of cleansing (Mark 7:4).⁵⁹ Starting with the baptism of John, baptism is used in connection with the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). The connecting thought between baptism and forgiveness is clearly seen to be the washing and cleansing: “Get up, be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16; see also Titus 3:5 and 1 Cor. 6:11).⁶⁰

And finally, the Lord’s Supper, uses the imagery of eating and drinking. It is also called the “meal of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:20). In this meal, each part has a meaning: the bread, the breaking of the bread, the wine, the cup, etc.⁶¹

The sacraments are, in accordance with their character, signs which make visible these essential matters for faith. Their intention is to guarantee the work that God does for us in Christ. Having this double meaning, the sacraments are of great importance for the life of faith of God’s people.

⁵⁸ See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (10 vols.; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 2.16; and Gispén, *Exodus*, 122–123.

⁵⁹ The words used for “(give their hands a ceremonial) washing” (*baptizontai*) (Mark 7:4a) and “washing (of cups, etc.)” (*baptismous*) in this verse are closely related to the word for “baptism” (*baptisma*).

⁶⁰ The symbol of baptism is also explained by some as a descending into and then coming up out of the water as an image of death. This explanation is based on Rom. 6:4. For our subject, it is not important which explanation is given of the symbolism, just so long as it is clear that baptism represents something.

⁶¹ See J. van Bruggen, *Marcus: Het evangelie volgens Petrus* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1988) 337ff., and more specifically his article, “Sago en thee voor brood en wijn?” in *De Reformatie* 52 (1976–1977) 581–583, 597–600.