

Sacraments

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 14.20-24, 15.21-22, 17.42-46, English updated and emphasis added.

Circumcision was ended by the new covenant of Christ. Circumcision was a sign and seal of faith, just as baptism is under the new covenant.

20. Now these have been different at different times, according to the dispensation which the Lord has seen fitting to employ in manifesting Himself to men. Circumcision was enjoined on Abraham and his posterity, and to it were afterwards added purifications and sacrifices, and other rites of the Mosaic Law. These were the sacraments of the Jews even until the advent [appearance] of Christ.

After these were abrogated, the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which the Christian Church now employs, were instituted. I speak of those which were instituted for the use of the whole Church. For the laying on of hands, by which the ministers of the Church are initiated into their office, though I have no objection to its being called a sacrament, I do not number among ordinary sacraments. The place to be assigned to the other commonly reputed sacraments we shall see by-and-by.

Still the ancient sacraments had the same end in view as our own — namely, to direct and almost lead us by the hand to Christ, or rather, were like images to represent Him and hold Him forth to our knowledge.

But as we have already shown that **sacraments are a kind of seals of the promises of God**, so let us hold it as a most certain truth, that no divine promise has ever been offered to man except in Christ, and that hence when they remind us of any divine promise, they must of necessity exhibit Christ. Hence that heavenly pattern of the tabernacle and legal worship which was shown to Moses in the mount.

There is only this difference, that **while the former [i.e., circumcision and the Passover] shadowed forth a promised Christ while He was still expected, the latter [i.e., baptism and the Lord's Supper] bear testimony to Him as already come and manifested.**

21. When these things are explained singly and separately, they will be much clearer. **Circumcision was a sign** by which the Jews were reminded that whatever comes of the seed of man — in other words, the whole nature of man — is corrupt, and requires to be cut off; moreover, it was a proof and memorial to confirm them in the promise made to Abraham, of a seed in whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed, and from whom they themselves were to look for a blessing. That saving seed, as we are taught by Paul (Galatians 5:16), was Christ, in whom alone they trusted to recover what they had lost in Adam.

Wherefore **circumcision was to them what Paul says it was to Abraham — namely, a sign of the righteousness of faith** (Romans 4:11): — that is, **a seal by which they were more certainly assured that their faith in waiting for the Lord would be accepted by God for righteousness.** But we shall have a better opportunity elsewhere (chap. 16. sec. 3, 4) of following out the comparison between circumcision and baptism.

Their washings and purifications placed under their eye the uncleanness, defilement, and pollution with which they were naturally contaminated, and promised another laver in which all their impurities might be wiped and washed away. **This laver was Christ, washed by whose blood we bring His purity into the sight of God, that He may cover all our defilements.**

The sacrifices convicted them of their unrighteousness, and at the same time taught that there was a necessity for paying some satisfaction to the justice of God; and that, therefore, there must be some high priest, some mediator between God and man, to satisfy God by the shedding of blood, and the immolation of a victim which might suffice for the remission of sins.

The high priest was Christ: He shed His own blood, He was Himself the victim: for in obedience to the Father He offered Himself to death, and by this obedience abolished the disobedience by which man had provoked the indignation of God (Philippians 2:8; Romans 5:19).

22. In regard to our sacraments, they present Christ the more clearly to us, the more familiarly He has been manifested to man, ever since He was exhibited by the Father, truly as He had been promised. For **Baptism** testifies that we are washed and purified; **the Supper** of the Eucharist that we are redeemed. Ablution is figured by water, satisfaction by blood.

Both are found in Christ, who, as John says, “came by water and blood,” that is, to purify and redeem. Of this the Spirit of God also is a witness. No, there are three witnesses in one—water, Spirit, and blood. In the water and blood we have an evidence of purification and redemption, but the Spirit is the primary witness who gives us a full assurance of this testimony.

This sublime mystery was illustriously displayed on the cross of Christ, when water and blood flowed from His sacred side (John 19:34); which, for this reason, Augustine justly termed the fountain of our sacraments (Augustine, *In Johann.* 26). Of these we shall shortly treat at greater length.

There is no doubt that, if you compare time with time, the grace of the Spirit is now more abundantly displayed. For this forms part of the glory of the kingdom of Christ, as we gather from several passages, and especially from the seventh chapter of John. In this sense are we to understand the words of Paul, that the Law was “a shadow of good things to come, but the body is of Christ” (Colossians 2:17). His purpose is not to declare the inefficacy of those manifestations of grace in which God was pleased to prove His truth to the patriarchs, just as He proves it to us in the present day in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but to contrast the two, and show the great value of what is given to us, that no one may think it strange that by the advent of Christ the ceremonies of the law have been abolished.

Contrary to the teachings of Rome and Dispensationalism, there is great continuity and similarity between the sacraments of the old covenant and those of the new.

23. The Scholastic dogma (to glance at it in passing), by which the difference between the sacraments of the old and the new dispensation is made so great that the former did nothing but shadow forth the grace of God, while the latter actually confer that, must be altogether exploded. Since the apostle speaks in no higher terms of the one than of the other when he says that **the fathers ate of the same spiritual food, and explains that**

that food was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:3), who will presume to regard as an empty sign that which gave a manifestation to the Jews of true communion with Christ?

And the state of the case which the apostle is there treating militates strongly for our view. For to guard against confiding in a frigid knowledge of Christ, an empty title of Christianity and external observances, and thereby daring to contemn the judgment of God, he exhibits signal examples of divine severity in the Jews, to make us aware that if we indulge in the same vices, the same punishments which they suffered are impending over us.

Now, to make the comparison appropriate, it was necessary to show that there is no inequality between us and them in those blessings in which He forbade us to glory. Therefore, he first makes them equal to us in the sacraments, and leaves us not one iota of privilege which could give us hopes of impunity.

Nor can we justly attribute more to our baptism than he elsewhere attributes to circumcision, when he terms it a seal of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:11). Whatever, therefore, is now exhibited to us in the sacraments, the Jews formerly received in theirs — namely, Christ, with His spiritual riches. The same efficacy which ours possess they experienced in theirs — i.e., that they were seals of the divine favor toward them in regard to the hope of eternal salvation.

Had the objectors been sound expounders of the Epistle to the Hebrews, they would not have been so deluded, but reading therein that sins were not expiated by legal ceremonies, no, that the ancient shadows were of no importance to justification, they overlooked the contrast which is there drawn, and fastening on the single point, that the law in itself was of no avail to the worshipper, thought that they were mere figures, devoid of truth. The purpose of the apostle is to show that there is nothing in the ceremonial law until we arrive at Christ, on whom alone the whole efficacy depends.

24. But they will appeal to what Paul says of the circumcision of the letter, and object that it is in no esteem with God; that it confers nothing, is empty; that passages such as these seem to set it far beneath our baptism. But by no means. For the very same thing might justly be said of baptism. Indeed it is said; first by Paul himself, when he shows that God regards not the external ablution by which we are initiated into religion, unless the mind is purified inwardly and maintains its purity to the end; and, secondly, by Peter, when he declares that the reality of baptism consists not in external ablution, but in the testimony of a good conscience.

But it seems that in another passage he speaks with the greatest contempt of circumcision made with hands, when he contrasts it with the circumcision made by Christ. I answer, that not even in that passage is there anything derogatory to its dignity. **Paul is there disputing against those who insisted upon it [circumcision] as necessary, after it had been abrogated.** He therefore admonishes believers to lay aside ancient shadows, and cleave to truth. These teachers, he says, insist that your bodies shall be circumcised. But you have been spiritually circumcised both in soul and body. You have, therefore, a manifestation of the reality, and this is far better than the shadow.

Still anyone might have answered, that the figure was not to be despised because they had the reality, since among the fathers also was exemplified that putting off of the old man of which he was speaking, and yet to them external circumcision was not superfluous. This objection he anticipates, when he immediately adds, that the

Colossians were buried together with Christ by baptism, thereby intimating that baptism is now to Christians what circumcision was to those of ancient times; and that the latter [circumcision], therefore, could not be imposed on Christians without injury to the former [baptism].

Should women baptize in the Church?

21. What the custom was before Augustine's day is gathered, first, from **Tertullian**, who says, that a woman is not permitted to speak in the Church, nor yet to teach, or baptize, or offer, that she may not claim to herself any office of the man, not to say of the priest (Tertullian, *Against Heresies*, book 1).

Of the same thing we have a sufficient witness in **Epiphanius**, when he upbraids Marcian with giving permission to women to baptize. I am not unaware of the answer given by those who take an opposite view — namely, that common use is very different from an extraordinary remedy used under the pressure of extreme necessity — but since he declares it mockery to allow women to baptize, and makes no exception, it is sufficiently plain that the corruption is condemned as inexcusable on any pretext. In his Third Book, also, when he says that it was not even permitted to the holy mother of Christ, he makes no reservation.

22. The example of Zipporah (Exodus 4:25) is irrelevantly quoted. Because the angel of God was appeased after she took a stone and circumcised her son, it is erroneously inferred that her act was approved by God. Were it so, we must say that God was pleased with a worship which Gentiles brought from Assyria, and set up in Samaria.

But other valid reasons prove, that what a foolish woman did is ignorantly drawn into a precedent. Were I to say that there was something special in the case, making it unfit for a precedent — and especially as we nowhere read that the command to circumcise was specially given to priests, the cases of baptism and circumcision are different — I should give a sufficient refutation. For the words of Christ are plain: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them" (Matthew 28:19). Since He appointed the same persons to be preachers of the Gospel, and dispensers of baptism — and in the Church., "no man takes this honor unto himself," as the apostle declares (Hebrews 5:4), "but he who is called of God, as was Aaron" — anyone who baptizes without a lawful call usurps another's office.

Paul declares, that whatever we attempt with a dubious conscience, even in the minutest matters, as in meat and drink, is sin (Romans 14:23). Therefore, in baptism by women, the sin is the greater, when it is plain that the rule delivered by Christ is violated, seeing we know it to be unlawful to put asunder what God has joined.

But all this I pass; only I would have my readers to observe, that the last thing intended by Zipporah was to perform a service to God. Seeing her son in danger, she frets and murmurs, and, not without indignation, throws down the foreskin on the ground; thus upbraiding her husband, and taking offense at God. In short, it is plain that her whole procedure is dictated by passion: she complains both against her husband and against God, because she is forced to spill the blood of her son. We may add, that however well she might have conducted herself in all other respects, yet her presumption is inexcusable in this, in circumcising her son while her husband is present, and that husband not a mere private individual, but Moses, the chief prophet of God, than whom no greater ever arose in Israel. This was no more allowable in her, than it would be for women in the present day under the eye of a bishop.

But this controversy will at once be disposed of when we maintain, that children who happen to depart this life before an opportunity of immersing them in water [infant baptism by immersion was commonplace during the time of Calvin and prior], are not excluded from the kingdom of heaven. Now, it has been seen, that unless we admit this position, great injury is done to the covenant of God, as if in itself it were weak, whereas its effect depends not either on baptism, or on any accessories.

The sacrament is afterwards added as a kind of seal, not to give efficacy to the promise, as if in itself invalid, but merely to confirm it to us. Hence it follows, that the children of believers are not baptized, in order that though formerly aliens from the Church, they may then, for the first time, become children of God, but rather are received into the Church by a formal sign, because, in virtue of the promise, they previously belonged to the body of Christ.

Hence if, in omitting the sign, there is neither sloth, nor contempt, nor negligence, we are safe from all danger. By far the better course, therefore, is to pay such respect to the ordinance of God as not to seek the sacraments in any other quarter than where the Lord has deposited them. When we cannot receive them from the Church, the grace of God is not so inseparably annexed to them that we cannot obtain it by faith, according to His word.

Are only the sinless and perfectly righteous to partake of the Lord's Supper?

17.42. It is now easy to judge what is the nature, and who is the author, of that doctrine which prevails in the Papacy, and which, by its inhuman austerity, deprives and robs wretched sinners, oppressed with sorrow and trembling, of the consolation of this sacrament, a sacrament in which all that is delightful in the gospel was set before them. Certainly the devil could have no shorter method of destroying men than by thus infatuating them, and so excluding them from the taste and savor of this food with which their most merciful Father in heaven had been pleased to feed them.

Therefore, lest we should rush over such a precipice, let us remember that this sacred feast [i.e., the Lord's Supper] is medicine to the sick, comfort to the sinner, and bounty to the poor; while to the healthy, the righteous, and the rich, if any such could be found, it would be of no value. For while Christ is therein given us for food, we perceive that without Him we fail, pine, and waste away, just as hunger destroys the vigor of the body. Next, as He is given for life, we perceive that without Him we are certainly dead. Wherefore, the best and only worthiness which we can bring to God, is to offer Him our own vileness, and, if I may so speak, unworthiness, that His mercy may make us worthy; to despond in ourselves, that we may be consoled in Him; to humble ourselves, that we may be elevated by Him; to accuse ourselves, that we may be justified by Him; to aspire, moreover, to the unity which He recommends in the Supper; and, as He makes us all one in Himself to desire to have all one soul, one heart, one tongue.

If we ponder and meditate on these things, we may be shaken, but will never be overwhelmed by such considerations as these, how shall we, who are devoid of all good, polluted by the defilements of sin, and half dead, worthily eat the body of the Lord? We shall rather consider that we, who are poor, are coming to a benevolent giver, sick to a physician, sinful to the author of righteousness, in short, dead to Him who gives life; that worthiness which is commanded by God, consists especially in faith, which places all

things in Christ, nothing in ourselves, and in charity, charity which, though imperfect, it may be sufficient to offer to God, that He may increase it, since it cannot be fully rendered.

Some, concurring with us in holding that worthiness consists in faith and charity, have widely erred in regard to the measure of worthiness, demanding a perfection of faith to which nothing can be added, and a charity equivalent to that which Christ manifested towards us. And in this way, just as the other class, they debar all men from access to this sacred feast. For, were their view well founded, everyone who receives must receive unworthily, since all, without exception, are guilty, and chargeable with imperfection. And certainly it were too stupid, not to say idiotical, to require to the receiving of the sacrament a perfection which would render the sacrament vain and superfluous, because **it was not instituted for the perfect, but for the infirm and weak**, to stir up, excite, stimulate, exercise the feeling of faith and charity, and at the same time correct the deficiency of both.

Indifferent aspects of the Lord's Supper

43. In regard to the external form of the ordinance, whether or not believers are to take into their hands and divide among themselves, or each is to eat what is given to him: whether they are to return the cup to the deacon or hand it to their neighbor; whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened, and the wine to be red or white, is of no consequence. These things are indifferent, and left free to the Church, though it is certain that it was the custom of the ancient Church for all to receive into their hand.

And Christ said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves" (Luke 22:17). History relates that leavened and ordinary bread was used before the time of Alexander the Bishop of Rome, who was the first that was delighted with unleavened bread: for what reason I see not, unless it was to draw the wondering eyes of the populace by the novelty of the spectacle, more than to train them in sound religion. I appeal to all who have the least zeal for piety, whether they do not evidently perceive both how much more brightly the glory of God is here displayed, and how much more abundant spiritual consolation is felt by believers than in these rigid and histrionic [theatrical] follies, which have no other use than to impose on the gazing populace. They call it restraining the people by religion, when, stupid and infatuated they are drawn here and there by superstition. Should anyone choose to defend such inventions by antiquity, I am not unaware how ancient is the use of chrism and exorcism in baptism, and how, not long after the age of the apostles, the Supper was tainted with adulteration; such, indeed, is the forwardness of human confidence, which cannot restrain itself; but is always sporting and wantoning [playing around] in the mysteries of God.

Obedience to God's word is what matters. Calvin makes the case for observing communion at least once a week.

But let us remember that God sets so much value on obedience to His word, that, by it, He would have us to judge His angels and the whole world. All this mass of ceremonies being abandoned, **the sacrament might be celebrated in the most appropriate manner, if it were dispensed to the Church very frequently, at least once a week.**

How the Lord's Supper is to be observed.

The commencement should be with public prayer; next, a sermon should be delivered: then the minister, having placed bread and wine on the table, should read the institution

of the Supper. He should next explain the promises which are given in it; and, at the same time, keep back from communion all those who are debarred by the prohibition of the Lord. He should afterwards pray that the Lord, with the kindness with which He has bestowed this sacred food upon us, would also form and instruct us to receive it with faith and gratitude; and, as we are of ourselves unworthy, would make us worthy of the feast by His mercy. Here, either a psalm should be sung or something read, while the faithful, in order, communicate at the sacred feast, the minister breaking the bread, and giving it to the people. The Supper being ended, an exhortation should be given to sincere faith, and confession of faith, to charity, and lives becoming Christians. Lastly, thanks should be offered, and the praises of God should be sung. This being done, the Church should be dismissed in peace.

The Lord's Supper should be observed frequently, not just once a year. Calvin argues it should be observed "at least once a week."

44. What we have up until now said of the sacrament, abundantly shows that **it was not instituted to be received once a year** and that perfunctorily [showing little interest or care] (as is now commonly the custom); but **that all Christians might have it in frequent use, and frequently call to mind the sufferings of Christ**, thereby sustaining and confirming their faith: stirring themselves up to sing the praises of God, and proclaim His goodness; cherishing and testifying towards each other that mutual charity, the bond of which they see in the unity of the body of Christ.

As often as we communicate in the symbol of our Savior's body, as if a pledge were given and received, we mutually bind ourselves to all the offices of love, that none of us may do anything to offend his brother, or omit anything by which he can assist him when necessity demands, and opportunity occurs.

That **such was the practice of the Apostolic Church**, we are informed by Luke in the Acts, when he says, that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Thus **we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms**. We may gather from Paul that this was the order observed by the Corinthians, and it is certain that this was the practice many ages after.

The importance of participating in the Lord's Supper.

Hence, by the ancient canons, which are attributed to Anacletus and Calixtus, after the consecration was made, all were to communicate who did not wish to be outside the pale of the Church. And in those ancient canons, which bear the name of Apostolical, it is said that those who continue not to the end, and partake not of the sacred communion, are to be corrected, as causing disquiet to the Church. In the Council of Antioch it was decreed, that those who enter the Church, hear the Scriptures, and abstain from communion, are to be removed from the Church until they amend their fault. And although, in the first Council of Tholouse, this was mitigated, or at least stated in milder terms, yet there also it was decreed, that those who, after hearing the sermon, never communicated, were to be admonished, and if they still abstained after admonition, were to be excluded.

By these enactments, holy men wished **to retain and ensure the use of frequent communion**, as handed down by the apostles themselves; and which, while it was most salutary [beneficial] to believers, they saw gradually falling into desuetude [a state of

disuse]. Commenting on the negligence of the people of his own age, Augustine testifies: "The sacrament of the unity of our Lord's body is, in some places, provided daily, and in others at certain intervals, at the Lord's table; and at that table some partake to life, and others to destruction" (Augustine, *In Johann*. Tract 26). And in the first Epistle to Januarius he says: "Some communicate daily in the body and blood of the Lord; others receive it on certain days: in some places, not a day intervenes on which it is not offered: in others, it is offered only on the Sabbath and the Lord's day: in others, on the Lord's day only."

But since, as we have said, the people were sometimes remiss, holy men urged them with severe rebukes, that they might not seem to connive at their sluggishness. Of this we have an example in Chrysostom, on the Epistle to the Ephesians (Homily 26). "It was not said to him who dishonored the feast, Why have you not taken your seat? 'But how camest thou in?' (Matthew 22:12). Whoever partakes not of the sacred rites is wicked and impudent in being present: should anyone who was invited to a feast come in, wash his hands, take his seat, and seem to prepare to eat, and thereafter taste nothing, would he not, I ask, insult both the feast and the entertainer? So you, standing among those who prepare themselves by prayer to take the sacred food, profess to be one of the number by the mere fact of your not going away, and yet you do not partake, — would it not have been better not to have made your appearance? I am unworthy, you say. Then neither were you worthy of the communion of prayer, which is the preparation for taking the sacred mystery."

Calvin condemns the early-American practice of yearly communion. Calvin repeats that the Lord's Supper should be observed at least once a week.

46. Most assuredly, the custom which prescribes communion once-a-year is an invention of the devil, by what instrumentality soever it may have been introduced. They say that Zephyrinus was the author of the decree, though it is not possible to believe that it was the same as we now have it. It may be, that as times then were, he did not, by his ordinance, consult ill for the Church. For **there cannot be a doubt that at that time the sacred Supper was dispensed to the faithful at every meeting**; nor can it be doubted that a great part of them communicated. But as it scarcely ever happened that all could communicate at the same time, and it was necessary that those who were mingled with the profane and idolaters, should testify their faith by some external symbol, this holy man, with a view to order and government, had appointed that day, that on it the whole of Christendom might give a confession of their faith by partaking of the Lord's Supper. The ordinance of Zephyrinus, which was otherwise good, posterity perverted, when they made a fixed law of one communion in the year. The consequence is, that almost all, when they have once communicated, as if they were discharged as to all the rest of the year, sleep on secure. It ought to have been far otherwise.

Each week, at least, the table of the Lord ought to have been spread for the company of Christians, and the promises declared on which we might then spiritually feed. No one, indeed, ought to be forced, but all ought to be exhorted and stimulated; the torpor of the sluggish, also, ought to be rebuked, that all, like persons famishing, should come to the feast. It was not without cause, therefore, I complained, at the outset, that this practice had been introduced by the wile of the devil; a practice which, in prescribing one day in the year, makes the whole year one of sloth.

We see, indeed, that this perverse abuse had already crept in the time of Chrysostom; but we, also, at the same time, see how much it displeased him. For he complains

in bitter terms, in the passage which I lately quoted, that there is so great an inequality in this matter, that they did not approach often, at other times of the year, even when prepared, but only at Easter, though unprepared. Then he exclaims: "O custom! O presumption! In vain, then, is the daily oblation made: in vain do we stand at the altar. There is none who partakes along with us." So far is he from having approved the practice by interposing his authority to it.