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Ordinance, Not Sacrament

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Baptists prefer to call observance of the Lord's Supper an ordinance and avoid using the term sacrament. There seems to be adequate reason for observing this distinction.

Surveys of theological positions commonly recognize four different views regarding the Lord's Supper, usually identified as characteristically the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Reformed, and the Anabaptist.

Two of these have distinct descriptive labels regularly employed. The Roman view is labeled transubstantiation; the Lutheran and High Church view is labeled consubstantiation. These two views have much in common.

The other two views also seem to some to have much in common. It is the purpose of this article to point out that the differences between the two are greater than the similarities. This is particularly evident in noting that Presbyterians and reformed theologians use terms in a fashion quite different from the usage of Baptists and independents.

It will be demonstrated (1) that the reformed writers assert that their view is different and (2) that Baptists generally recognize that theirs is a distinct difference.

The difference may be, for convenience and simplification, evident in using the labels "means of grace" in regard to the reformed view and "symbolic" concerning the Baptist view. Or the difference may be evident referring to the reformed view as "spiritually efficacious" and the Baptist as "solely symbolic."

The pattern of investigation will be first to survey statements by reformed writers declaring that their view is not the same as the

symbolic view and then to list words or phrases which seem inconsistent with a symbolic view.

It has seemed a human trait that dispensationalists misrepresent the reformed view and that reformed writers and speakers misrepresent the dispensational position. A conscious attempt is being made to analyze statements as intended by the authors.

Reformed Writers Reject the Symbolic View

That the reformed position is clearly different from the symbolic is most frequently expressed by reformed writers by contrasting their position with that of Zwingli. As recently observed, "Inasmuch as the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Supper was the key issue in the eucharistic debate, it is obvious that Luther and Calvin agreed more than did Calvin and Zwingli."¹

Whether the position or statements of Zwingli might correspond with the usual Baptist position of today is not under consideration. That in the minds of reformed writers their position is distinctly different from a symbolic view is the aspect being demonstrated.

Shedd points to two aspects that appear different. "Zwingli has been represented as denying that the sacrament of the Supper is a means of grace, and that Christ is present in it."²

Berkhof in three different books expresses the difference quite fully. In brief he says, "Calvin took an intermediate position. Instead of the physical and local, he taught the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. In distinction from Zwingli he stressed the deeper significance of the sacrament. He saw in it a seal and pledge."³ More fully he explains:

The Question of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper . . . The Church of Rome conceives of the presence of Christ in the sacrament in a physical sense . . . Luther rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and substituted for it the doctrine of consubstantiation. This avers that, while bread and the wine remain what they are, the whole person of Christ, body and blood, is present in, under, and along with the elements . . . Zwingli denied the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper . . . for him the Lord's Supper is mainly a mere sign or symbol, a memorial of the death of Christ, and an act of profession on the part of the believer. There is an evident tendency to exclude the mystical element from the sacrament altogether . . . Calvin took exception to Zwingli's view as well as to the Roman Catholic and Lutheran views. His conception represents a

mean between the two. Instead of the physical and local he taught the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.⁴

In his *Systematic Theology*, Berkhof has a similar development.

There is a very general impression, not altogether without foundation, that Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper was very defective. He is usually alleged to have taught that it is a bare sign or symbol, figuratively representing or signifying spiritual truths or blessings; and that its reception is a mere commemoration of what Christ did for sinners, and above all a badge of the Christian's profession. . . . He denied the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. . . . Calvin objects to Zwingli's doctrine. . . . He believes that Christ, though not bodily and locally present in the Supper, is yet present and enjoyed in His entire person, both body and blood. He emphasizes the mystical communion of believers with the entire person of the Redeemer. His representation is not entirely clear, but he seems to mean that the body and blood of Christ, though absent and locally present only in heaven, communicate a life-giving influence to the believer when he is in the act of receiving the elements.⁵

Quotations from early reformed writers as collected by Heppe seem to correspond.

The signs are not "bare signs" or signs of absent things, so not merely memorial signs, since rather as "significant, exhibiting, applying and sealing signs" they not only portray and seal the promised gracious benefit but also mediate it. . . . "Although the sacraments are signs they are not empty signs, but exhibit of the thing signified, to wit spiritual grace, as being related to them (the signs)." . . . "The orthodox do not deny that sacraments are signs distinctive of Christians and the tickets or labels (*tesserae*) of their profession. But against the *Socinians* they deny that they are confined to that. But apart from this less fundamental use they are of opinion that it is primary that they are seals of God's grace, which He willed to join to the word of the promise, as the seals of princes are attached to documents to certify them."⁶

The same distinction appears in a recent writer, J O Buswell.

We reject therefore on the one side both the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran view that in the sacraments we have materials and actions which are of themselves efficacious. We reject the view that either by transubstantiation (Romanism) or by consubstantiation

(Lutheranism) the literal body and blood of Christ are present. We also reject the Romanist and Lutheran view that the physical act of baptism is in itself efficacious for the washing away of sin.

On the other hand, we reject the Zwinglian view that in the sacraments we have nothing but metaphorical pageantry. The sacraments are more than merely the acting out or the dramatizing of a truth. The sacraments stand throughout all generations in the church as ordinances instituted by Christ for the edification of His people. The efficacy of these ordinances, the aspect of them because of which we call them sacraments rather than merely ordinances, is wholly in the institution of them by Christ Himself.⁷

It thus seems fair and accurate to surmise that those who hold to the reformed view assert that their view is definitely different from a purely symbolic view. The nature of such differences can next be considered.

Reformed Writers Insist on Actual Efficacy

In thus asserting that their view is not merely that of symbolism, reformed writers use several words or phrases that Baptists find hard to accept. Buswell suggested that Baptists and independents ascribe Romanist and Lutheran views to reformed theologians.⁸ Even when that error is avoided, terms employed by the reformed convey distinctly non-symbolical concepts.

Words or phrases indicative of a genuine difference include real presence, truly received, efficacy, means of grace, seal, and sacrament.

Real Presence

Shedd says the *Westminster Confession* (XXIX vii) teaches that the "worthy receiver spiritually receives and feeds upon Christ crucified" and denies that he "carnally and corporally receives or feeds upon Him." It also denies that "the body and blood of Christ are corporally or carnally in, with, or under, the bread and wine," and asserts that they are "really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses."⁹

This is not spoken of as a recognition of the omnipresence of deity but a special spiritual presence.

Christ is really present to His people in this sacrament, not bodily, but in the spirit; not in the sense of local nearness, but of efficacious operation. They receive Him, not with the mouth but by faith; they receive His flesh and blood, not as flesh, not as material

particles, not its human life, not the supernatural influence of His glorified body in heaven; but His body as broken and His blood as shed.¹⁰

And another, "the virtues and effects of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross are present and actually conveyed to believers by the power of the Holy Spirit."¹¹ These reformed writers insist on a real spiritual presence, an efficacious operation of His body as broken and His blood as shed, virtues of His work on the cross as present and of spiritual benefit to believing partakers.

Those who hold to mere symbolism may justly ask what is meant by this real presence. It is not omnipresent deity. It is not the resurrected incarnate body. If it is not eternal nor incarnate Jesus, what can it possibly be and still be "real presence"?

A distinction frequently made regarding hell seems pertinent. God will be omnipresently throughout that abode where His great wrath will mete out unending punishment. Condemned sinners will not be away from the presence of God (Ps 139:8) but "they will be totally deprived of the divine favor."¹² A Baptist asserts that at the Lord's table it is not the person of Jesus especially present to His people but the work of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit using the truths symbolically enacted for spiritual benefit. There is no "real presence" except as God is present as an active agent, honoring and using Gospel truth.

Truly Received

Berkhof said, "The virtues and effects of the sacrifice on the cross are present and actually conveyed to believers."¹³ With this claimed real presence, there is also declared to be a communication whereby Christ is truly received. Fisher summarizes, "Calvin differed from Luther, in holding that Christ is received only by the believer. He differed from Zwingli, in holding that Christ is truly, though spiritually, received."¹⁴ In contrast then to the symbolic view, reformed writers speak both of a real presence and a real reception. C Hodge:

In the Lord's Supper we are said to receive Christ and the benefits of his redemption to our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. As our natural food imparts life and strength to our bodies, so this sacrament is one of the divinely appointed means to strengthen the principle of life in the soul of the believer, and to confirm his faith in the promises of the gospel. The Apostle teaches that by partaking of the bread and wine, the symbols of Christ's body and blood given for us, we are thereby united to him as our head, and with all our fellow believers as joint members of his mystical body.¹⁵

This real reception is spoken of by Shedd as sanctification. "The sacrament of Baptism is the sign and seal of regeneration. It is emblematic and didactic of this doctrine. Baptism is not a means of regeneration, as the Lord's Supper is of sanctification."¹⁶ This seems consistent among reformed writers. They oppose baptismal regeneration but assert communion sanctification. They declare that the Lord's Supper is a means of sanctification and is not to be considered merely symbolic.

A A Hodge characterizes Zwingli as holding "that the sign simply represents by appropriate symbols, and symbolic actions, the grace to which it is related. Thus the sacraments are only effective means of the objective presentation of the truth symbolized."¹⁷ Hodge then asserts that the reformed confessions agree in teaching that the relation of the sign to the grace signified is real, "that is, when rightly administered, and when received by the recipient with knowledge and faith they do really, because of the promise of Christ, seal the grace signified, and convey it to the recipient, i e, the recipient does receive the grace with the sign."¹⁸ Enlarging on this, he stresses, "that as seals thus accompanying a divine promise by divine authority, they do actually convey the grace they signify to those for whom that grace is intended, and who are in a proper spiritual state to receive it, 'as a key conveys admission, a deed an estate, the ceremony of marriage the rights of marriage."¹⁹

Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper appears to be a mediate position between the views of Luther and Zwingli, but it is in fact an independent position. Rejecting both Zwingli's "memorialism" and Luther's monstrous notion of ubiquity" (*Inst* 4.17.30), he held that there is a real reception of the body and blood of Christ in the supper, only in a spiritual manner. The sacrament is a real means of grace, a channel by which Christ communicates himself to us.²⁰

A symbolic view rejects any reception, either of Christ or of grace. True Gospel is enacted; the Holy Spirit uses truth to convict and to teach. This is an activity of God, but in or with or by the elements themselves nor along with proper enactment is there nothing actually conveyed, either to believer or non-believer.

Efficacy

Under the heading "The Efficacy of the Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace" Berkhof writes, "The Lord's Supper was instituted for

believers only, and therefore does not serve the purpose of beginning the work of grace in the heart, but only of strengthening it."²¹

Dealing with efficacy, A A Hodge bemoans that "Low views as to the nature and efficacy of the sacraments have also (as among Zwingle's followers) prevailed in this century among all evangelical churches."²² He then sets forth the doctrine of reformed churches:

Hence as to the efficacy of the sacraments the Reformed 1st. Deny that they confer grace as an *opus operatum*. 2d. They affirm that they convey no grace to the unworthy recipient. 3d. That their efficacy is not of the mere moral power of the truth they symbolize. 4th. That they do really confer grace upon the worthy recipient. 5th. But they do this instrumentally, because the supernatural efficacy is not due to them, nor to him that administers them, but to the Holy Spirit who as a free personal agent uses them sovereignly as his instruments to do his will . . . 6th. That as seals of the covenant of grace they convey and confirm grace to those to whom it belongs, i e, that is to those who are within that covenant, and in the case of adults, only through a living faith.²³

Buswell to clarify efficacy cites question 91 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. "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 receive them."²⁴

Efficacy, the power to produce results or effects, does not in any way pertain either to baptism nor to the Lord's Supper according to Baptists. Nor is there any indication anywhere in the Bible that the merit of properly partaking of the elements is more than mere obedience, "this do in remembrance" (I Cor 11:24-25) in order to "show the Lord's death" (I Cor 11:26). Sacraments are not effectual means of salvation nor of sanctification.

Means of Grace

Reformed theologians all speak of the sacraments as means of grace. Berkhof says,

The virtues and effects of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross are present and actually conveyed to the worthy received by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . According to the Roman Catholics, and also many Anglicans and Lutherans, all those who partake of the Lord's Supper by the very act also receive the grace signified, except when they put

an obstacle in the way. The gracious operation of the sacrament does not depend in any way on the faith of the recipient. According to the Reformed conception, however, only those who partake of the sacrament in faith receive the grace that is signified by the external elements.²⁵

"Strictly speaking" Berkhof says, "only the Word and the sacraments can be regarded as means of grace."²⁶ Others include prayer, listing sacraments, the Word and prayer as the "outward and ordinary means" for conveying the grace of God.²⁷

As explained by Buswell, it is God's message in the Bible, not the printed page, that is used by the Holy Spirit. Similarly it is the message of Christ's redemptive work as enacted that is used by the Holy Spirit, not the elements nor the enactment.²⁸ This instrumentality of the Word may be all that some have in mind, but others assert that "The virtues and effects of the sacrifice of the body of the Redeemer on the cross are made present and are actually conveyed in the sacrament to the worthy receiver by the power of the Holy Ghost, who uses the sacrament as His instrument according to His sovereign will."

Buswell contends that Baptists and independents understand the reformed view as a mechanical concept rather than channels "outward and ordinary."²⁹ Rather Baptists choose not to speak of any channels or any conveyance either in connection with the elements or the observance. Truth is portrayed, and the Holy Spirit uses truth. The ordinances are only two among many of God's teaching pictures.³⁰

Seal

The concept of a sealing activity in baptism and Lord's Supper seems particularly crucial to the scheme of reformed theology in the supposed fulfillment of covenant promises in this dispensation.

Berkhof declares that reformed churches "reject the view, generally ascribed to Zwingli, that the bread merely signified the body of Christ, and stress the fact that it also serves to seal the covenant mercies of God and to convey spiritual nourishment."³¹ "The Lord's Supper is more than a sign: it is also a seal, which is attached to the thing signified and is a pledge of its realization."³²

Buswell asserts that a seal is a visible or tangible indication of a firm testimony (John 3:33; 6:27; Matt 27:66; II Tim 2:19; I Cor 9:2; Rom 15:28; Eph 1:13; 4:30; II Cor 1:22).³³ He then illustrates by seals on school diplomas. He applies, "In no case does the seal accomplish that of which it is a sign."³⁴

Baptists see no scriptural reason to use the word seal in connection with the ordinances. The basis cited by reformed theologians is the statement in Romans 4:11 that Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith. "Nowhere in the Bible does it say that circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith to any other person than Abraham."³⁵ Nor does the Bible ever suggest that baptism took the place of circumcision.³⁶ That both are representative of spiritual realities is evident in Colossians 2:11-13. The work of regeneration (quicken, v 13) is "without hands" (v 11) though they are physically uncircumcised (v 13); their water immersion only pictured spiritual union with Christ in burial and resurrection (v 12). Circumcision and immersion are symbols but not seals. Baptists are consistent in refusing to refer to the Lord's Supper as a seal.

If the seal is only an indication of the validity of God's provision and promise, then all would agree that His promises are yea and amen. But if in the sacraments "Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers" it appears that something different is being said. A A Hodge says,

The sacraments were designed to "apply"--ie, actually to convey--to believers the benefits of the new covenant. If they are "seals" of the covenant, they must of course, as a legal form of investiture, actually convey the grace represented to those to whom it belongs. Thus a deed conveys an estate, or the key handed over in the presence of witnesses the possession of a house from the owner to the renter. Our Confession is explicit and emphatic on this subject.³⁷

Baptists do not see that any grace is "actually conveyed." They admit to no legal or spiritual "tangible indication" of sanctification. Observance includes proclamation of truth to the heart of the participant (remembrance, I Cor 11:24, 25) and to the observer (show, I Cor 11:26). There is no sealing in any sense.

Sacrament

Baptists are consistent in speaking of baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances. Reformed writers use the word sacrament as representing some conveyance of grace. The word ordinance has no such connotation. Buswell correctly says,

The word ordinance implies an established practice more or less fixed in its nature. Typically, our Baptist friends refuse to call baptism and the Lord's Supper "sacraments," on the ground that the

word implies something more than is sanctioned by the Scripture. It is not my purpose here to go into any elaborate discussion of the historical controversies involved. I should merely say that "sacrament," for Reformed theologians, means precisely what the definition quoted above, states. I do not know of a Baptist theologian who will deny that baptism and the Lord's Supper are "holy ordinances instituted by Christ wherein by sensory signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented . . . to believers." Baptist theologians deny that sacraments (ordinances) are in the nature of "seals" in the scriptural sense, and that they are means of "applying" grace to believers.³⁸

That is true. Baptists will not agree that the ordinances are in any sense effective seals which apply grace to believers. As Buswell says, historically "sacrament" to those who use the word includes concepts of real presence, truly received, efficacy, means of grace, seal, applying grace to believers. A biblicist must refuse to use the word sacrament.

The difference seems clear. Reformed writers unquestionably consider that their view is distinctly different from the solely symbolic view. Baptists react to many words and phrases which indicate that the reformed view is distinctly different. Most Baptists would agree with Osterhaven³⁹ that the reformed position is much closer to the Roman and Lutheran than to the symbolic view. It seems also clear that the symbolic view is the only one Scripture teaches.

Notes:

- 1 M E Osterhaven, "Lord's Supper, Views of" *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed Walter A Elwell, 655
- 2 William G T Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II:569
- 3 Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 176
- 4 Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 325-8
- 5 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 653-4
- 6 Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev Ernst Bizer, trans G T Thomson, 597
- 7 James Oliver Buswell, Jr, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:236
- 8 *Ibid*, 228-9
- 9 Shedd, II:545
- 10 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III:650
- 11 Berkhof, *Summary*, 176
- 12 Berkhof, *Manual*, 359
- 13 Berkhof, *Summary*, 176

- 14 Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 969, quoting G P Fisher, *Independent*, May 1, 1884
- 15 C Hodge, III:647
- 16 Shedd, II:574
- 17 A A Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 591
- 18 *Ibid*, 591-2
- 19 *Ibid*, 592
- 20 Osterhaven, 655
- 21 Berkhof, *Manual*, 328
- 22 A A Hodge, 596
- 23 *Ibid*, cf C Hodge, III:650
- 24 Buswell, II:236-7
- 25 Berkhof, *Manual*, 328
- 26 Berkhof, *Systematic*, 604
- 27 Buswell, II:227
- 28 *Ibid*, 227-9
- 29 *Ibid*, 228-9
- 30 Warren Vanhetloo, "God's Teaching Pictures" *Central C B Quarterly*, Spring 1960, 15
- 31 Berkhof, *Systematic*, 649
- 32 Berkhof, *Summary*, 174-5
- 33 Buswell, II:229-31
- 34 *Ibid*, II:231
- 35 William H Pardee, *Baptism*, 32
- 36 *Ibid*, 36ff
- 37 A A Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 331
- 38 Buswell, II:229
- 39 Osterhaven, "Lord's Supper," 655