

What do the sacraments actually accomplish in their administration?

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I will answer this question Scripturally and Confessionally.

I. The Biblical Teaching on Sacramental Efficacy - what do covenant signs do and what are they for?

The administrations of the covenant of grace in the Bible, and their signs, are all about our assurance of God's promise. This is what every sacrament fundamentally sets forth. They do not effect or inaugurate God's promise to us or our reception of it, but rather confirm and assure us of our interest in God's promise.

Objectively, covenant signs do at least four things: (1) they display God's promise; (2) they are, by the Holy Spirit, God's means of confirming that promise to and in those who receive it by faith; (3) they openly manifest the church-world distinction; and (4) the visibly obligate us to respond, by grace, in faith to the promises, and in obedience to the obligations of the covenant of grace.

Subjectively, covenant signs do at least four things: (1) they enable the believer to apprehend God's promise tangibly; (2) they assure the elect of God's promise, and of its products for and in those who receive it by faith; (3) they impress upon the believer the particularity of the covenant of grace; and (4) they impel the disciple to a grace-based discipleship.

To elaborate: a sacrament, or ordinance, or covenant sign, is a rite or ritual action, designed and appointed by God, to sign and seal, that is to represent and confirm, a covenant promise that has already been made by the Word of God. The weakness or the frailty of human faith welcomes an act of reassurance. Understand again that the signs of the covenant all function to reassure believers of the promises that God has made to them in the covenant. Nowhere in the Bible will you find a covenant sign which effects a relationship. A covenant sign always reflects a relationship. Covenant signs do not effect a relationship, they reflect a relationship.

What do I mean by that? I mean that God, by giving Abraham this covenant sign of circumcision, did not enter into covenant with Abraham by virtue of that covenant sign. No, it is the other way around. God was in relationship with Abraham and in order to reassure Abraham of the promises that He had made to him, He gave him the covenant sign to confirm that promise. Now, right there you automatically see a polemic against a Catholic view of sacraments. The idea that the mere application of the covenant sign actually saved somebody would have boggled the mind of any self-respecting Hebrew, because that is never how a covenant sign ever functioned. That is a concept utterly alien to the thought-world of the Old or the New Testament. Now, our Roman Catholic friends are really defenseless in this particular area. The covenant signs do not effect a relationship, they reflect a relationship. Their function is to reassure us in the weakness of our faith.

Let me just mention in passing, there is a wonderful passage in Calvin's commentary on Isaiah

7:14. You remember that glorious passage—it is the passage about Immanuel. It is the promise of Immanuel, that Isaiah gives to the King, despite the fact that the King refuses to ask for a sign. Turn with me briefly to Isaiah chapter 7. Ahaz had been preparing to go to war against the Assyrians and everyone in Judah was fearful that Judah was going to get wiped out. God sends Isaiah to Ahaz to assure this wicked King that the Assyrians were not going to wipe out Judah. And as an added bonus, God says to Isaiah, “Tell him to ask Me for a sign, I will give him a sign to assure him.” So Isaiah goes in and he says, “Ask a sign.” Look at verse 11 –

“Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.’ But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!’”

Calvin, on this passage, gives a beautiful discussion of why what Ahaz did was not in fact pious, but rebellious. It might initially sound to you like Ahaz is saying, “I won’t test the Lord. I mean I am not going to ask for a sign from the Lord.” As if that is pious when the prophet has come to him and says, “You ask for a sign.” And the King says I am not going to ask for a sign. And Calvin comments that God had determined that Ahaz and Judah needed a sign, and by golly, when God tells you, “You need a sign,” you need a sign. So there is nothing pious about saying, “Well, Lord, I am not going to ask for a sign,” when the Lord says you need a sign. And Calvin applies that to baptism. Many people say, “Why do we need to do baptism or why do we need to observe the Lord’s Supper? Why can’t we just dispense with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper and just do the preaching of the Word?” And Calvin says, because when God tells you, you need a sign, you need a sign. Because that sign is there to buttress the weakness of faith. Okay. So again, read that passage, it is a good treatment by Calvin. Pick up his commentary on Isaiah, look at the area right around Isaiah 7 say roughly from verse 10 on down past verse 14. It is a good treatment.

Now, let’s pick up in Genesis 15 to give a little context. Let me begin by talking with you a little bit about the context of the institution of the sign of circumcision. As you remember, God has covenanted with Abram in Genesis 12 and 15. And in Genesis 16, what has happened? What happened in Genesis 16? Abraham grew weak in faith. And what did he do? I mean Abraham basically attempted to bring about the promises of God through human designs. He said, “Well, you know Lord, I have been waiting for a long time, and I don’t see any children. My wife came to me and suggested that I sleep with her maid, Hagar, and that we have children through her.” It was a common custom of the day, and perfectly socially acceptable. This is Abram’s strategy. He had attempted to bring about the realization of God’s promises through sinful human designs and it, of course, resulted in disaster in his family life, and would continue to be a disaster in his family life for many years to come.

And so in the context of that failure of Abraham, that deed reflecting a lack of faith, God institutes an abiding mark for Abraham and his descendants: Circumcision. He gives it to remind Abram of His covenantal promises and to remind Abram that He Himself will bring them about. God renews the previous promises that He has made to Abram and He reiterates them.

Let’s look at those promises. There are at least five of them, and we will look at them as they appear in the passage. In Genesis 17:2, (1) He tells him again that He will establish or He will

make firm His covenant. In Genesis 17:7, He says that He will include Abram's descendants in the covenant. So He has reaffirmed His covenant commitment. (2) He has reconfirmed that Abraham's descendants will be entailed in this covenant. (3) He reiterates the Immanuel principle in Genesis 17:7-8, when He says, "I will be a God to you, and to your seed, and to your descendants." So He reiterates, I will be your God, you will be My people. (4) In Genesis 17:8, He says that He will give that land to Abraham and his descendants. So the land promise is renewed. And (5) then He reiterates this: that Abram's seed will be multiplied so that he is the father of many nations and kings. And He does that several times. He does it in verse 2, verse 4, verse 5, verse 6.

Now in that context the sign is instituted. The promises have been reiterated. Now as I have said before, notice also that along with these promises, there is an emphasis on Abraham's obligation. And that is seen in at least two ways. First of all, it is seen in God's Word to him in verse 1. "I am God Almighty, walk before Me and be blameless." Now think again, how significant that statement is in light of his failure in Genesis 16. Again, that is not a call to perfection. It is not that He is saying, "Okay, Abraham, you sinned in chapter 16, don't do that again," although that might be implied. The point is not that you sinned then, be sinless from now on. The point is, "Abram, what you have just done, is showing Me that your heart is struggling, so be wholehearted, be a man of integrity. Continue to walk with Me. Continue to trust Me. Continue to believe in Me." This is a command, it is an exhortation. It is an imperative for Abraham to respond to God's covenant promises in faith. So that is the first part of the responsibility you see here.

But the second part is that Abram is to be faithful in having the covenant sign applied to himself and to his descendants. So Abram is to show his responsibility in the covenant, both by believing God's promises and by obeying Him about applying the sign that God gives, and we see this in verse 9. Look with me there. "And God said to Abraham, 'My covenant you shall keep, you and your seed after you and their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and between you and your seed after you to be circumcised every male among you.'"

Now that is interesting language. The covenant (by metonymy) stands for the special kind of relationship which exists between Abraham and the Lord and it has existed since Genesis 12. And yet now, in Genesis 17, God is saying, look at the words again, you can look in your Hebrew text there, especially in verse 10, this is the covenant. "This is My covenant, which you shall keep between Me and between you and your seed after you. To be circumcised every male among you." Isn't that an interesting way to define the covenant. God says first in verse 9, you must keep My covenant. And then He defines the covenant, not in terms of the relationship that He has with Abram, but in terms of the sign of circumcision. Isn't that an interesting way of speaking? In this context, the closest possible identification is made between the sign of the covenant and the covenant itself. The closest possible identification is made between the covenant sign, which is circumcision, and the covenant relationship. In fact, they are so closely related that the sign is said to be the covenant and the covenant is said to be the sign. This is My covenant that every male among you shall be circumcised.

The literal language is, "This is My covenant, that you be circumcised." So what we have here is

a relationship between a covenant and the covenant sign in which God is stressing the closeness between those two things. To be in the covenant is to be in the covenant sign. To reject the covenant sign is to reject the covenant.

The closeness of the identification of the covenant and the covenant sign is evidenced in the strange story of Moses in Exodus 4:24-26, when the Lord comes and meets Moses on the way and seeks to kill him. Okay, here is Moses, the herald of the covenant, the lawgiver of Israel, he is on his way to meet and challenge Pharaoh as the representative of God, but Moses himself has disobeyed the injunctions of Genesis chapter 17. And the Lord meets him on the way and seeks to kill him. And we are told that the moment that his wife throws the foreskin of their son at his feet, the Lord relents. Now Moses is giving you a hint as to what the nature of that altercation was about in that passage. And apparently the Midianite wife didn't want her little boy being circumcised. But immediately when the Lord seeks out Moses, she knows what is going on and the circumcision is performed hastily, the foreskin thrown at his feet and the covenant herald is spared. So the seriousness of this injunction is seen there.

The Function of Covenant Signs

The sign provides an outward sign of entrance into the external covenant community. To receive circumcision, God makes clear in Genesis 17, is to be considered part of the covenant community. Now again, notice, receiving the sign of circumcision does not in and of itself make you even part of the visible covenant community. It confirms the fact that you are already part of the covenant community, whether you are an adult or child.

So, when someone converts to Israel as they did in Esther chapter 8, it is not the receiving of the sign of circumcision that affects their entrance into the covenant community. No. That seals their entrance into the covenant community. You make your entrance into the covenant community as an adult by faith in the Old Testament just like in the New Testament. And, of course, under the Old Covenant, not only adults were seen as part of the covenant community, but their children were seen as part of the covenant community.

But again, it is not the applying of the sign to the child that makes that child part of the covenant community. No, the sign seals that child as part of the covenant community. In other words, it confirms; its purpose is to assure. Now, that having been said, the reverse is also true: that to refuse to receive the sign of the covenant, was what? It was a repudiation of the covenant community. Not because the sign is a magical thing, but because repudiation of the sign represents rejection of the Lordship of the Lord. If the Lord says, "Circumcise," and you say, "Well, I don't want to be circumcised," you have just repudiated His Lordship. And so the idea of being part of His community and repudiating His Lordship are mutually exclusive. By the way, there you have a wonderful argument against anti-lordship salvationists. There are people who say you can have God as Savior, but not as Lord. Well, try that on somebody in Genesis 17. I want to be part of Israel, but none of this circumcision stuff. No. The Lord is Lord, and when He says "Be circumcised," repudiation of the sign gets you cut off from the covenant, not because there is something magical about the sign, but because in repudiating the sign, you are repudiating the rule of God. Is that clear as mud?

Secondly, what does the sign do? It signifies the need for cleansing from sin and the availability of that cleansing. Blood is obviously used throughout the Pentateuch in the process of atonement rituals, propitiation rituals, expiation rituals, and the bloody nature of the sacrifice reminds of the necessity of cleansing in the covenant relationship and the provision of that by the Lord as you enter into relationship with Him.

What else does the sign do? The sign also has the significance of sealing the elect for the possession of eternal life. The elect are sealed into the certainty of ultimate possession of the promises. Now immediately, by introducing the word elect, I have raised a question that will really only become apparent as the story of Isaac and Ishmael plays out, and as the story of Jacob and Esau plays out later in Genesis. There is a sense in which I am speaking anachronistically here about Genesis 17, but let me point that the family line has already been introduced in Genesis, in Genesis 3 and 4 particularly. Eve is the mother of Cain and Abel and Seth and they are two different types of boys amongst those three boys. Cain is one type of boy. Abel and Seth are another type of boy. And they are of entirely different lines. And Moses makes that crystal clear, not only in Genesis 4, but in Genesis 5 and then again in Genesis 10 and 11. So the idea of having a godly line and an ungodly line out of the same family is not unheard of in the book of Genesis. And that theme is going to be developed in the life of Esau and Jacob. It is going to be developed in the lives of Ishmael and Isaac to a lesser extent. So though this may not be being highlighted in this specific passage here in Genesis 17, Ishmael is circumcised. Isaac will only later be circumcised. Okay. Though this theme is not highlighted here, it is very important.

What is the function of a covenant sign? It is to confirm, right? It is to assure. It is, in short, to seal (if I can jump ahead), because the language of sealing in the Reformed tradition comes from Ephesians chapter 1, and what is said by Paul about the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

What is a seal, according to Paul? It is a deposit guaranteeing the full payment of that which is promised. It is a mark, a stamp, an official seal guaranteeing God's fulfillment of His promises. That language there in Ephesians apparently very much reflects what was done in Paul's time with regard to commercial seals and guarantees. It is like the seal that would have been on a document stamping and confirming that the person who had made the pledge in the document was going to carry out his obligation like we would do with a notary public today. I just got a thing in the mail, we just refinanced the house because the house rates are so low. But, the people who are refinancing the house want to make sure that termites don't eat my house up. And so we had to have a termite inspection and after the termite inspection came in, they said fine, there are no termite problems here but there are conditions which could allow for termites to eat up your house. And so, you must sign a sheet with a notary public acknowledging that, so that you take the rap if you don't do something about that. We own more of this house than you do, and so we want you to take care of this. I mean they are putting us over the barrel here. They are saying we want you to take care of those conditions that might lead to termites. And so we want a notary to sign that thing so that you are obligated to do your side.

Well, this is a little bit of the other way around. This is like a sign where someone says, "I have

promised you a million dollars, here is your down payment of \$100,000, and here is my seal, saying you can take me to court if I don't give you the rest of that million dollars." Or it might be, the seal may actually refer to the deposit itself. It was used both of those ways in Paul's day. So a covenant sign functions to seal the promises of the covenant. Are you with me so far?

Now, the minute you say that, you have the question, "What about those in the covenant community who turn out to be rotten eggs? What about the Esaus, what about the Ishmaels?" Actually, what you are asking about is, "What about the reprobate? What about those who do not believe? What about those who do not embrace the covenant?"

Well, by saying what we have just said about what the covenant sign does, when we say that the covenant sign has the significance of sealing the elect for possession of eternal life, we are emphasizing that because the covenant sign does not work just because you applied it to somebody; the covenant sign works in those who by grace believe. The covenant sign only brings with it condemnation for those who repudiate the covenant. But for those who believe, it is a means of grace whereby the elect are assured of their possession of eternal life.

By the way, at this point, we still haven't gotten to an issue that separates Reformed Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists—that is people in the Reformed community who don't believe that you baptize children and people in the Reformed community who do believe that you baptize children. In the visible covenant community, there are always going to be some who are elect and some who are non-elect. Or to put it in a less Calvinistic way, there are going to be some who believe and there are going to be some who merely profess to believe and yet do not in fact believe. There are going to be false professions, in other words. The people who appear to be part of God's people on the outside, but who are not, in fact, part of that covenant community.

Now, the sealing function of the covenant, in its beneficial aspect, only benefits the elect, only benefits those who believe. The Westminster Confession gets this so right. Isn't it interesting that the Confession talks about justification and sanctification and adoption and perseverance before it talks about assurance, because you can't be assured of what you don't have. So since covenant signs function in this area of confirmation, their beneficial effect is totally contingent upon the reality of faith in the one who has received it. Because you can't assure somebody of something that they don't have.

Fourth, because the sign signifies and seals inclusion into the external community of God's Covenant of Grace, circumcision does not lead to presumption but to personal responsibility. In other words, the sign does not make you passive, it leads to responsibility based on the principle of grace. The sign and the seal itself does not bring covenantal blessing. The sign evidences covenantal blessing and assures covenantal blessing. But the fact of a covenantal relationship always entails responsibility to the one who has covenanted. The covenantal relationship may be fulfilled in either blessing or curse. If the person who has received the sign of the covenant rejects the covenant, by not being a person who believes and repents, by refusing to truly embrace the covenant in the heart, then that person, by the sign of the covenant, by the sign of circumcision, is sealed to a double curse. Not only is that person cursed unto the Covenant of Works, they're cursed for a false application of the Covenant of Grace. And hence, Paul's words

in I Corinthians, don't eat or drink of the table of the Lord if you do not discern the Lord's body, lest you eat and drink unto yourself condemnation.

We have talked for a few moments about what the covenant sign does. We have talked about the context of the institution of the sign of circumcision. We have talked about the giving of the sign of circumcision. We have talked about what the sign does. Now, the reason that I raised this question of what the sign does is so that when you are talking with those who do believe that covenantal signs actually convey saving grace elementally, if you are talking to a Roman Catholic who believes that the application of water to a child actually washes away original sin and initiates them into a sacramental system whereby grace is conveyed, then you need to be aware that that bears no relation to how the Scripture views covenant signs.

But I am also talking about it because all of us in the Protestant tradition who are in polemic against a view that says that giving of a covenant sign or the taking of a covenant sign in the Lord's Supper actually elementally conveys grace, all of us who are in polemic against that particular point of view have the question posed to us by our congregation members: "Well then, why do you do it? What does it do?" I mean, if say it doesn't do this, expect for someone to say, "Well, what does it do and why do we do it?" That is why I am taking so much time on this, because you will have the question asked to you if you haven't already, now I am just trying to get you ready for it.

Circumcision

Now, we have talked about what the sign itself does. But let me talk about what this sign of circumcision is not first. The sign of circumcision is not a sign of entrance into manhood. I mean it is true that, for instance, Ishmael was circumcised at 13. And it is also true that other cultures around Israel practiced circumcision, but that they tended to do it to their male children at the time that they would have been considered to have become men. But the covenant sign of circumcision instituted here in Genesis 17 is to be applied to those who are eight days old. So it is very clear that this sign, though it may be similar to some of the practices of other nations around Israel, was very different in the content of its meaning.

Secondly, let me go on to say, that the sign of circumcision was not merely a sign of Jewish ethnicity. This is made clear from Genesis 17. Who is to be circumcised? Everyone who is a male in the household is to be circumcised. And does that include even those who have been bought with money by the head of the household and who dwell within the tents? Oh, yes it does. If they're Midianites, yes. If they are Moabites, yes. No matter who they are. If they are under the headship of the covenant head of the household, they are to receive the sign of circumcision if they are male. That is very clear in Genesis 17. The sign is to be applied to Abraham, to his seed, to his descendants, and to those who dwell within his tent.

So the sign is not merely a sign of ethnicity and I want to remind you that this was understood even at the very end of Israel's national experience. When you go to the book of Esther, and you remember after Haman's plot has been exploded, and Mordecai wins in the end and even though the king cannot repeal the law that he had made allowing people to go plunder the Jews, he did make another law that said the Jews would be allowed to defend themselves against anyone who attacked them. And furthermore, if the Jews were attacked by somebody and the Jews defeated

those people, the Jews would have the right to plunder them of every thing in their family. They would be allowed to take it legally for themselves. And in Esther chapter 8, what are told? That because of that decree, there was a fear of the Jews in the hearts of the people and many of them became Jews. So, here you are under the rule of the Ahasuerus. Here you are under the rule of non-Jewish, blatantly idolatrous Gentiles. In the book of Esther, Israel is scattered amongst the nations. And yet, here are people becoming Jews. So the idea of circumcision only being applied to a pure bloodline was not the case in Genesis 17, and it wasn't the case at the end of Israel's national history in the book of Esther. So very clearly, this is neither a sign of entrance into manhood, nor is it a sign of ethnicity.

And finally, let's make it clear that the sign itself does not bring about salvation. The sign confirms the covenant promises. How are those covenant promises received? By faith. And so if you will flip quickly in your Bibles to Romans chapter 4, you will see this. Paul is talking about Abram's being reckoned as righteous by God. Romans 4, verse 10. And he says, "How then was Abram reckoned righteous? While he was circumcised or uncircumcised?" And his answer: "Not while he was circumcised, but while he was uncircumcised." Why is Paul saying that? Because Genesis 15:6 happened before Genesis 17. Abram was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6 by the Lord before circumcision was ever instituted. So this is part of Paul's polemic. So he goes on to say, he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of faith. So the sign of circumcision was for the purpose of confirming the promises which had been conveyed to Abraham and received by how? By faith.

It is important to see that that element of faith is a significant aspect of the Old Covenant too. Because oftentimes, when we get into an argument about whether you baptize babies, or whether you baptize covenant children or not, the argument is in the Old Testament, you know, faith wasn't the issue, it was just being part of the external covenant community. In the New Testament, faith is the big issue. Well, here is Paul in Romans 4 saying that the whole function of covenant signs is to seal the promises of God made to us in the covenant. Signs which are received by faith alone. Paul argues this adamantly in Romans 3 and 4 and elsewhere.

But Isaac when he was eight days old could not exercise saving faith. So, does that make null and void the command of Genesis 17? No, it doesn't. We will come back to that in a minute.

Now, what are the implications. My point for mentioning the Romans 4 passage is to make it clear that the sign itself having been applied does not bring salvation, because faith is the instrument used by the Spirit to convey saving benefits to God's people. And therefore, Ishmael can receive the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, but that doesn't mean that Ishmael is truly a member of God's elect. Esau can receive the sign of the covenant and yet Esau, by his failure to exercise faith, can repudiate the covenant. So just merely having the covenant sign applied doesn't save you—this idea that some people have that by giving people covenant signs, they are saved. And you know this is abroad in a lot of churches. It is not just the Roman church, but also the Mormon church. Not only do they think that the sign has a saving effect on you, they think that you can go back and be baptized for your dead ancestors and get them into heaven too. Baptism for the dead. This idea is alien, however to the context of Genesis 17.

Covenant baptism

Now, what are the implications of covenantal baptism then? We have said what the sign is not. And we have said a little about what the sign does, but what are the implications of the covenantal sign of circumcision? Let me mention at least three implications. First, it is apparent from the immediate history of circumcision in Genesis 17 through 25, that physical descent does not make children of God. So just being part of the physical lineage of Abraham and just having received the sign of the covenant, doesn't mean anything if the reality of faith is not there. That is clear from the story of Ishmael. It is clear from the story of Esau. It is clear from the story of Joseph's brothers. This is a theme in the book of Genesis. And it reappears throughout the Old Testament. People in the same family, godly parents, some righteous, some wicked. So, the covenant sign itself doesn't make you a child of God. It doesn't in the very applying of it effect its blessings universally.

Now, early on, in the Christian church, there was a similar issue with the Lord's Supper. There were people who began to think that by the very taking of the Lord's Supper, grace was conferred, universally, to all who took it. In fact, it was argued relatively early on by some, for instance, that in the Lord's Supper, Christ was actually physically, tangibly present in the elements of the Supper. And that because of that, everyone who fed upon the host, was in fact, feeding upon Christ by definition, and therefore, grace was conferred to everyone who fed upon that host. This was a view that said by the actual partaking of the Supper, one is ipso facto partaking of grace.

II. The Confession's Teaching on Sacramental Efficacy -

1. Sacraments are God-appointed means in which he sets forth both the promises and obligations of the covenant of grace, as such the sacraments do three kinds of things: (1) they represent Christ to us and confirm our participation in his benefits [thus, they are instruments of confirmation and assurance]; (2) they distinguish the church from the world [thus, they are display the particularity of God's grace]; and (3) they obligate us to discipleship [thus, they manifest blessing and responsibility].

WCF 27.1 Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

2. The Scripture sometimes identifies, by metonymy, the sign and the thing that it represents and confirms, but this does not mean that the sign is the thing signified, nor that the sign effects the thing signified, nor that the thing signified is contingent upon the sign.

WCF 27.2 There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

3. The sacraments are God-appointed means, to represent and confirm, or exhibit and confer, God's favor to us, in Christ, by the work of the Spirit, received by faith. What the sacraments do is not derved from anything inherent in the rite or sign, nor is their efficacy dependent upon the officiant, but the efficacy of the sacrament is dependent upon two things: God's Spirit and

God's word. God's Spirit makes the sign to be a means of grace by representing and confirming to the believer the promises signified. God's word does two things, it authorizes the sacrament itself, and supplies the promise which is to be signed and sealed, represented and confirmed, to the faith of the believer.

WCF 27.3 The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

4. Baptism signs and seals, represents and confirms, three things: (1) God's covenant of grace [an oath-bound divine promise], (2) our union with Christ, regeneration, forgiveness of sins [the products of that promise], and (3) our self-renunciation and self-dedication, by the grace of Christ, henceforth to live to God [the joyful obligations that flow from the promise and product of God's gracious covenant with us].

WCF 28.1 Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.

5. Baptism is efficacious, as a means of grace, just as are preaching and prayer. But, that efficacy of Baptism is not tied to the moment of administration. When rightly administered baptism is always efficacious for the elect, by the Spirit and by faith, but the grace exhibited and conferred, or represented and confirmed, comes to fruition according to God's decree and in his own time (in the case of both adults and infants).

WCF 28.6 The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.