**Foundations (50 of 60) The Sacraments of the Church - RC Sproul**

The sacraments are at the center of a heated debate in the global church. We'll hear some of the reasons for the controversy today on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to Renewing Your Mind, the radio outreach of Ligonier Ministries in Sanford, Florida, with the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul.

Today we continue the comprehensive series, Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. Few issues have provoked more controversy in the history of the church than the sacraments, yet many people don't understand the reason for the debate. Dr. Sproul explains that the sacraments are a serious matter, and it's the serious nature of this topic that engenders much of the conflict.

This message is titled, Sacraments of the Church. It was almost thirty-five years ago that I was ordained to the ministry, but in my case, in those days, as it still is in most churches, you could be ordained to one of two different capacities. One could be ordained to the pastoral ministry or to the teaching ministry, and since my call was not from a church but from a university to be a professor, I was ordained to the teaching ministry and not to the pastoral ministry.

However, in our church, when you were ordained, regardless of the specifics of the call, you received all of the authorizations and benefits there appertaining to an ordained person, which meant that in my denomination, I was now authorized to administer the sacraments of the church. But for the vast majority of the time that I've been in the ministry, I've not had the opportunity to exercise that privilege of administering the sacraments. But now I do have a little parish here in Florida, and in our little congregation, I've had the opportunity once a month to administer the Lord's Supper and also frequently to administer the sacrament of baptism.

And I can't tell you how delightful that is to me as a minister to be on that side of the celebration of the sacraments. Now, I recognize that if there is any area of our theology that has provoked endless controversy and about which there's very little agreement among Christians, it has to do with the sacraments. And on the one hand, that is a very painful thing to admit that Christians can't agree on the meaning and the efficacy and the number and a host of other issues regarding the sacraments.

But the other side of that coin is that there is one good thing about it. One of the reasons why Christians are engaged in so much controversy about the sacraments is that because they see the sacraments as being very, very serious matters. In fact, that's one of the reasons they're called sacraments, that we regard these things as sacred and holy gifts that Christ has given to His church.

I mentioned earlier in our study of the doctrine of the church that in the Reformation, one of the three marks that were considered as being the genuine marks of a valid church was the proper administration of the sacraments. And again, much of the controversy of the sixteenth century was waged on the basis of sacraments. Many people don't realize that lying underneath or behind the issues of the doctrine of justification was a debate on the function of the sacrament of penance in the Roman Catholic Church.

Now, as I said, there are many areas in which Christians are engaged in debate over the sacraments, over the mode in which they are given, who is allowed to participate, who can administer them. But one of the classic debates has been simply the number of sacraments. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, that church has seven sacraments, wherein the vast majority of Protestant churches, that number has been reduced to two.

Now, let's look for a minute at the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. First of all, to understand why there are seven, the Roman Church understands each of the sacraments to be a means of grace in a very significant sense. That is, that in these rites or ordinances that are observed in the church, in each one of them, sacramentally, grace is poured into or infused into the soul of the recipient.

And as Thomas Aquinas mentioned in his day, that the seven sacraments, as it were, prepares each person, or each communicate member, for the various distinctive stages along life's way. So, obviously, the first sacrament that a Roman Catholic communicant receives is the sacrament of baptism, which in the case of Catholic children is administered to infants. And the sacrament of baptism is understood by the Roman Catholic Church, again, as being the first sacrament in which grace is infused or poured into the soul, which is the grace of justification.

That if that person subsequently cooperates and ascends to that grace, they can be brought into a state of righteousness by which God will declare them just. And the grace that is given by the sacrament of baptism is a grace that is said to operate ex opera operata. Now this formula in the Roman Catholic Church applies to all of the sacraments.

All of the sacraments operate ex opera operata, which literally means through the working of the works. Now, Protestants sometimes, I think, incorrectly describe this function of the sacraments, of their working ex opera operata, as saying that the sacraments work automatically. Well, that's not quite accurate.

There is that idea of automatic efficacy, except that Rome makes it clear that they will work and they will communicate that grace which is given in the sacrament if there is no impediment or hindrance offered by the recipient. It's not like that the power of the sacrament resides in the person, and that the power is communicated virtually automatically unless there is some compelling hindrance that would block it by the recipient. But in any case, baptism is the beginning of the way, and in receiving that sacrament, the people receive not only the infusion of the grace, but they also receive what Rome calls the indelible mark that is made upon the soul.

It's called the character indelibus, so that this spiritual mark marks the child who receives the sacrament to the extent that even if the person should subsequently lose all of the grace that they had gained from the sacrament and lose their salvation, lose their justification, they are still not rebaptized because they already had been baptized once and once for all, and that original baptism had marked their soul as a child who had received that initial grace, and so it is never again to be repeated. Well, we also see in the Roman Catholic system the sacrament of confirmation, where at confirmation the grace that was received at baptism is confirmed, and again it's a time where there's the transition between childhood and adulthood that is taking place, and at that point of transition which mirrors and reflects the concept of bar mitzvah in Old Testament Israel, new grace is given to prepare that child for this transition to the new stage of life. The sacrament of penance is what is defined by the church as the second plank of justification for those who make shipwreck of their souls.

I mentioned a moment ago that a person receives saving grace at baptism. That grace can be lost through the committing of mortal sin, but a person can be restored again to a state of grace by means of penance. The sacrament of penance, which is properly called confession, the sacrament of penance is that second sacramental source of receiving justifying grace, where once again the grace of Christ is infused into the soul, and the person is given the opportunity to be restored to a state of justification.

Then there is the sacrament of matrimony. Of course, not everyone in the church receives the sacrament of matrimony because not everyone gets married. But as the Roman church has understood, marriage requires extra grace.

And so when two people enter into that sacred union, that union is not only blessed by the church, but also new grace is administered sacramentally to the couple who are being married so that they will have the strength necessary to grow in that mutual relationship of marriage. Now there are three more sacraments that we find in the list of seven in the Roman Catholic church. One is the sacrament of holy orders, which again is not given to everyone, but that corresponds to what we would call ordination in other churches or other denominations, where when a person is elevated to the priesthood, they receive the sacrament of holy orders or of ordination by which now they are empowered as priests of the church to be able to administer grace to others through the same channels and vessels of the sacraments.

For example, without having received the grace of holy orders, one would not have the power to offer the prayer of consecration by which in the Lord's Supper the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. And we'll look at that in another lecture as we examine the meaning of the Lord's Supper. But holy orders again has to do with ones being consecrated to the priesthood.

Then there is the sacrament that is commonly called the sacrament of extreme unction or last rites. And you know when a person is severely injured and is on their deathbed, the priest is called and he comes in and prays over that person. Well here again, that person is receiving grace at the end of his or her life to prepare them for coming before the judgment seat of God.

But originally, the sacrament of extreme unction was not considered last rites. It was originally based upon James' instructions in chapter 5 of the book of James, if anyone is sick, let him call the elders, and the elders will come and the prayer of faith will save the sick and so on. And so it was originally based upon the principle of having the ministers come to those who were sick and to anoint them with oil.

And so that's what the unction is, it is the anointing with oil, and it was originally a healing rite in the church. But as time progressed over church history, it developed into the final healing rite, as it were, to heal the soul as it was leaving this world. Well I've mentioned six of the seven.

The one I haven't mentioned yet is the one that is esteemed to be the most important and greatest of all the sacraments by the Roman church, and that is the sacrament of the Eucharist, or of the Lord's Supper, which again, the sanctifying grace and strengthening nurturing power of Christ is communicated to those who receive it. Now in terms of what the meaning of the Lord's Supper is and how it operates in the Roman Catholic system, we will look at in our next lecture, but for now I just want us to mention in passing that that is one of the seven sacraments. Now, as I said earlier, for the most part the Protestants have reduced the number of sacraments from seven to two.

One of the most inflammatory writings of the Protestant Reformation that came out shortly after it began was Luther's little booklet called The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, in which he lashed out against the whole Roman system of sacraments, whereby he saw that in this sacramental system, which has been called sacerdotalism, that the idea was that salvation was communicated to people not through faith, but through the sacraments, not through the Word and the Spirit, but chiefly and virtually exclusively through the administration of the sacraments, and so that the agency that communicated salvation was the church, and more specifically, the priesthood. And Luther objected vigorously to the way in which the Roman Catholic Church so developed her sacramental theory that it began to usurp the central importance of the Word of God, and the Reformers tried to reconstitute a proper balance between Word and sacrament, believing that the two must be distinguished from each other, but must never be separated. That is, that the sacraments should never be distributed or administered without the preaching of the Word.

For example, in my church, I'm not allowed to just celebrate the Lord's Supper without having some proclamation of the Word of God at the same time, and also that the Reformers understood against some of those who were more radically opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, who wanted to get rid of the sacraments altogether and say that really what the church should have is the Word only and not the sacraments, the sacraments are just magical rites and so on. It was that view. The Reformers had to say no to them, too, and say, wait a minute, there are certain sacraments that Christ our Lord has instituted and authorized in the church and ought never to be neglected.

And the difference at this point was the difference in the number, where according to most of the Reformers, that number was set at two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. And again, the primary difference for the number of seven or two was based on how something qualified to be called a sacrament. And for the Reformers, to be a sacrament, it had to be instituted directly and explicitly from Christ Himself.

Now, Christ certainly blessed marriage, and marriage is held in high esteem in the life of the Christian community at large, and so is ordination, and so are these other things that were important to the Reformers as special ordinances of the church. But in their judgment, they fell short of these covenantal signs and seals of grace, which were called sacraments because they were not directly instituted and commanded by Christ to be integral to the worship of the people of God. But Jesus clearly did institute in the upper room the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and in the Great Commission, commanded His disciples to be baptizing those who were brought into the Christian faith.

And so, for the Reformers, baptism and Lord's Supper were the only two sacraments, although these other aspects of the life of the church are still given special significance in the full worship of the church. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the Reformers rejected the mode of operation of ex opera operato, and in their place said that the sacraments function ex opera operantis. And the simple difference in the Latin is an indication that what they were saying here was this, that the efficacy or the benefits that flowed from the sacraments are efficacious only for those who receive them in and by faith.

Now that's something we have to be very careful of because, for example, this is what sparked so much of the controversy over baptism, particularly between those in the Baptist communities and others in Protestantism on the question of infant baptism because the question is raised, how can an infant have faith? And since the sacrament rests for its efficacy upon faith, it ought not to be given to people who don't have faith, and we'll explore that later. But what the Reformers were saying was that even though the infants that received the sign of the sacrament and the actual sacrament, which was the sign and seal of God's promise, the point was that the benefits promised by that sacrament do not occur to the person automatically. Just because you're baptized does not mean you're saved.

You have to be justified by faith. But when you have faith, then everything that was communicated through the sign and seal of baptism, all of the blessings that are described in that particular sign are then fully received, but not until faith is present. And likewise, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, if you come and eat and drink not in faith, then you run the risk of the judgment of Christ that Paul warns about in the Corinthian correspondence of eating and drinking unworthily and coming under the judgment of God because you didn't celebrate the sacrament in faith.

And so, again, the question not of validity, but the efficacy of the sacraments for the Reformers was tied to the presence of genuine faith. Now, in the life of the church, the sacraments are seen, as I mentioned a moment ago, as signs and seals. In a sense, the sign character of the sacrament is the word dramatized, which is something that God did frequently in the Old Testament.

Not only would He speak His Word, but He would also have the prophets at times act out the Word, sometimes in bizarre manners. And not only that, but He instituted ceremonies that had symbolic significance, such as circumcision, such as the Passover. And He would say, do these things as a memorial.

These are visible, outward signs of invisible, transcendent, real and powerful divine operations. And so, this is how we communicate in a normal way as human beings. As I'm standing up here talking to you, for example, I don't just move my lips and say words, but I'm gesticulating and my arms are flying and I'm moving around.

I am trying to enhance the words that I'm speaking with bodily actions, with outward, visible movements or dramatic signs. And that's what's going on here in the celebration of the sacraments, that God communicates to our eyes, to our ears, to our mouths and all of that, the truth of His Word through the dramatization of it by virtue of these visible signs. But not only signs, but we also understand the sacraments to be seals.

And a seal in the ancient world was something that guaranteed the authenticity of someone's Word. If a king were to issue a decree, he would use his signet ring, which had indentations in it, press it into wax, and put a seal on the edict, which identified the edict as having come from the one who was in the authority to issue the decree. And so, for us, the sacraments represent God's sealing of His promises of redemption to us.

They are His visible guarantees to all who believe that they will receive all the benefits that are offered to us in Christ. The sacraments represent God's unchanging promise to His people. That's why it's essential for us to understand them.

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