

Instruction In The Westminster Standards

The Historic Standards of Presbyterian Denominations

STUDIES IN THE WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

Q. 91. How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

A. 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.

Scripture References: I Pet. 3:21. Matt. 3:11. I Cor. 3:6, 7. I Cor. 12:13.

Questions:

1. What is meant in this Question by the "effectual means of salvation?"

The "effectual means of salvation" are the appointments of God by which He accomplishes the end He has in view, that of saving our souls. (Rom. 1:16)

2. What is the meaning of the words "not from any virtue in them" in this Question?

The words "not from any virtue in them" simply mean the sacraments have no power in themselves, as expressed by the Larger Catechism. The sacraments are simply the outward and ordinary means of grace and have no efficacy of themselves to confer salvation.

3. Why is it so important to make this distinction?

It is important to make this distinction because of the position taken by the Roman Catholic Church. They hold that the sacraments of the New Testament are true, proper, and immediate causes of grace. They insist the power of them flows from the sacramental action of receiving the external element.

4. What is meant here by "the blessing of Christ?"

The "blessing of Christ" is His divine power and life. Calvin states, "The sacraments duly perform their office only when accompanied by the Spirit, the internal Master, whose energy alone penetrates the heart, stirs up the affections, and procures access for the sacraments into our souls. If He is wanting, the sacraments can avail us no more than the sun shining on the eyeballs of the blind, or sounds uttered in the "ears of the deaf."

5. How do we receive the sacraments by faith?

We receive them by faith by coming with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will do His work in our hearts, giving us the grace to believe in Christ and to apply His Word to our lives.

CHRIST AND THE SACRAMENTS

Many times the church of Jesus Christ has been led astray by those who insist they have some sort of power to convey in the administration of the sacraments. Primarily this has been done by the Roman Catholic Church who has insisted that the efficacy of the sacraments depends upon the "intention of the priest" administering it. Those who subscribe to the Reformed Faith would certainly be opposed to such a teaching. But so many times those adhering to the Westminster Standards are not too clear as to what the correct teaching might be.

As we think of the sacraments, we must recognize that the presence of Christ is really the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Reformed Faith has never taught that it is the presence of Christ as He was in His ministry on this earth. The Reformed Faith has always taught that Christ comes in this area through the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. It is the blessing of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore you can not divorce either of them from the sacraments.

The Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Christ in two ways in the sacraments. First, the Holy Spirit presents Christ to us. He makes Christ present to us on **that** day, at that very time we are partaking. Christ is not a far-off person who is too old-fashioned, too out-of-date for us today. The Holy Spirit makes Christ our contemporary.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Christ by enabling us to be lifted out of our woes, our troubles, our afflictions and be lifted up into the presence of Christ, spiritually speaking. We can see this teaching in Colossians 3. We are enabled to set our affection on things above and not on things on this earth.

All of this comes about by the blessing of Christ alone. It does not come about because of the particular church to which we belong. It does not come about because of the wonderful minister (to our eyes) who is administering the sacrament. It does not come about because we have worked ourselves into a certain mood for partaking. It is by, in and through God — for He is the One who "giveth the increase." When we come in faith there is indeed a blessing for us and it will lift us up out of the troubled world. Praise God for Christ and His work in the sacrament!

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