

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

That may sound like a strange question!

Many would simply answer that question by saying, “They don’t!”

But the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3, tells us about how God saved Noah through the Ark,
and how “baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you...”

And Ananias told Paul in Acts 22:16

“Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

So if we are going to be faithful to the scriptures,
then we need to say that the sacraments *do* become effectual means of salvation.

The question is not *whether* God uses the sacraments to save us –
but *how* does God use the sacraments to save us.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way:

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 does administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

Notice how we say it:

it’s not that there is any special virtue in the element itself –

Peter will say in 1 Peter 3 that baptism saves –

but *how* does baptism save?

It “saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body

but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (3:21)

In other words, the sacraments are not *magical*.

Just getting wet doesn’t save you –

(if just getting wet saved you,

I’d drive through South Bend with a bunch of water balloons!)

The sacraments become effectual means of salvation,
not from any virtue in them, *or in him that does administer them* –
in other words, the validity of the sacraments
does not depend on the piety of the minister –
*but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them that by faith receive them.*

Or to use Peter’s way of saying it:

baptism “saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body
but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (3:21)

So that naturally brings us to question 92:

Q. 92. What is a sacrament?

A. A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.

A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ.

There are lots of holy ordinances.

Marriage, civil government, OT sacrifices, and so on.

But in order to be a sacrament of the NT, it must have been instituted by Christ.

And there are only two that meet those criteria.

Q. 93. Which are the sacraments of the New Testament?

A. The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul talks about how the sacraments work.

And he starts with some OT sacraments.

He points out that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

Paul wants you to see a parallel here.

We have been baptized into Christ in water and the Spirit.

They had been baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

The catechism uses the language of “sensible sign.”

In other words, they are signs that reveal Christ through tangible means.

“Sensible” then, means that they are revealed to our senses.

God uses ordinary, everyday things to communicate to us
the benefits of our redemption.

The “cloud” refers to the glory-cloud

(which was the presence of the Holy Spirit with Israel in the wilderness!)

and the “sea” refers to the Red Sea –

the waters of judgment that swallowed up Pharaoh’s army.

These are all *sensible* signs.

And Paul says that Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They ate the same spiritual food (the manna) –

and they drank the same spiritual drink (the water from the Rock) –

and *that Rock was Christ*

(in other words, the OT saints partook of Christ in *their* sacraments,
just like we do in ours).

Paul says that the fathers in the wilderness partook of Christ.

But with most of them, God was not pleased – and they died in the wilderness.

Paul makes it clear that outward participation in the sacraments does not guarantee anything.
Israel in the wilderness partook of Christ – but they didn't believe –
and so they were destroyed.

Indeed, Paul warns in verse 11
that “these things happened to them as an example,
but they were written down for our instruction,
on whom the end of the ages has come.”

Just because you've been baptized doesn't mean you can grumble and complain.
If you turn to idolatry, then you too will perish!

In 1 Corinthians 8-11 Paul is dealing with the theme of “food sacrificed to idols.”

In chapters 8-9, Paul says that idolatry is all about questions of basic loyalties –
identity – community – who are you, and who are your people?

In Corinth, if your patron invited you to the celebration of his son's coming-of-age,
the party would be held at a dining room connected with a pagan temple.
It's essentially the “temple restaurant.”
The feast would be a social gathering with a few religious ceremonies.
What's the harm in that?

The question for Paul is not just the technical question of “was the food offered to idols?”
The question is “what does your participation in this meal mean?”
Not just to you, personally, individually –
but to your *Christian* community –
as well as to your *former* community!

Questions of “identity” and “community” are at the heart of what Paul is talking about.
The Corinthians wanted to engage outwardly in the worship of Roman gods
and still worship Jesus.

Now Paul says that *in one sense*, it's true that you could eat meat sacrificed to idols –
because an idol is *nothing* in the world;
God made all things, and so all things are good.
But on the other hand, Paul recognizes that food has symbolic meaning as well.
If eating this meal will identify me with *that group* and its deity,
then I must not eat this meal.

Partaking in a communal meal identifies you with that community.
Now in chapter 10, Paul uses OT Israel as an example
of how to think about idolatry and our new community in Christ.

Pay attention to the parts of the story that Paul tells.

Because you can see that Paul wants to show the Corinthians
how the OT speaks to their situation.

Paul's first point verses 1-5 is to show the similarity between "then" and "now."

1. "The Rock Was Christ" – Baptism and Spiritual Eating in the Old Testament (v1-5)

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers,^[a] that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³ and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

Paul speaks in verse 1 of "our fathers" in the wilderness.

But wait – we know that many Corinthian Christians were Gentiles!

True.

But Paul says that the Gentiles have been "grafted in" to Israel.

Abraham is the father of all who believe – both Jew and Gentile.

Therefore, all Christians should see OT Israel as "our fathers."

And, what is more, OT Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

When Israel left Egypt they were brought out of death into life.

The crossing of the Red Sea was a sort of baptism.

The pillar of cloud and fire was the presence of the Holy Spirit with his people.

Israel was baptized by one Spirit into one body.

When God brought his people out of bondage to Egypt,

he baptized them in the cloud and in the sea –

just as he has now baptized us in water and the Spirit.

And all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink –

for they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

I want you to think about this.

When we think about pictures of the Lord's Supper in the OT,
we often think of the sacrifices – like Passover.

But Paul points to the manna in the wilderness – the "spiritual food" –
and the water from the Rock – their "spiritual drink."

Paul does this for a reason.

He doesn't want you to think about Israel in the land.

We're not talking about David and Solomon here.

We're talking about the wilderness generation –

the generation that saw God's mighty deeds in Egypt –

the generation that was called to go from Egypt to the Promised Land.

God started by baptizing them into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.
God claimed Israel as his own treasured possession – his son, his Firstborn.

And then God fed them in the wilderness with bread from heaven and water from the Rock.
God provided for them remarkable sacraments –
indeed, miraculous sacraments!

Paul wants us to understand that the wilderness generation received some remarkable benefits.
And it's not just that they witnessed remarkable miracles.
They drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them –
and that Rock was Christ.

Since there are two different episodes with the Rock (Exodus 17 and Numbers 20),
some rabbis taught that the Rock actually followed them through the wilderness.
There is a question, after all, how they managed to find water in the wilderness.
It's a dry region – so they would have needed water pretty regularly!
If God provided manna six days a week for 40 years,
it's no more difficult to imagine a rock following them around!

But whatever Paul means by saying that the Rock followed them,
his point is plainly that the Rock was Christ.

The manna in the wilderness – and the water from the Rock –
was true spiritual food and drink.
The sacraments of the Old Testament provided the *same* spiritual benefit
as the sacraments of the NT.

And if Israel had partaken of their sacraments by faith,
they would have entered their inheritance (the Promised Land).
In other words, the sacraments become effectual means of salvation,
not from any virtue in them (Israel rebelled in spite of eating manna every day!)
or in him that does administer them (Moses was the best pastor in history!),
but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit
in them that by faith receive them.

But...

⁵ *Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown^[b] in the wilderness.*

So the people of Israel were initiated into the visible community of the people of God.
They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.
Thus, they had a new identity – a new community –
they were set apart as belonging to God.

And Israel partook of the same spiritual food – food provided by the Holy Spirit!
They partook of *Christ*.

Five times in verses 1-4, Paul emphasizes the fact that *all* partook.

But now in verse 5, Paul says that with *most* God was not pleased,
and their corpses were strewn in the wilderness.

Paul has highlighted the similarity between “our fathers” and us –
and not surprisingly, he presses that comparison home in verses 6-13.

2. “Examples for Us...on Whom the End of the Ages Has Come” – Idolatry and Temptation in the New Testament (v6-13)

⁶ *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.*

The same temptations still exist.

And so God has given us the wilderness generation as an example –
so that we might not desire evil as they did.

Paul uses four examples in verses 7-10

Idolatry,
sexual immorality,
putting Christ to the test,
grumbling.

⁷ *Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”*

Paul starts with idolatry for two reasons:

- 1) that was the first sin at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 32
- 2) this is the sin that he is dealing with at this point in 1 Corinthians!

And particularly, he focuses on how “the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”
In other words, food sacrificed to idols is at the heart of Israel’s first rebellion.

Think about how this works.

Aaron made a golden calf and said,
“behold your god, O Israel, who brought you up from Egypt.”
In other words, the religious event
was the offering of burnt offerings and peace offerings to the calf.
Then came the “covenant meal” – partaking of the food offered to the idol.

It would have been easy for the faithful to say,
“We believe in the true God – the one who really did bring us out of Egypt.
We won’t participate in the religious event,
we’ll just have some meat afterwards.”

In fact, that’s precisely what the Corinthians want to say!
The Corinthians want to say that since an idol is nothing in the world,
therefore we can eat food sacrificed to idols.

Paul says “remember your fathers!”
Since an idol is nothing in the world,
therefore we *should not* eat food sacrificed to idols!

In North Korea today, the government requires all who reside in the land
to bow before the images of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.
But a Christian cannot bow to graven images.
I can bow to a living man – for he is the image of God.
But I cannot bow to a graven image.
Many Christians in North Korea have compromised,
thinking that since the government is atheistic,
therefore this is just a political act, not a religious act.

But think of Daniel’s three friends,
who would not bow before the image of Nebuchadnezzar.
They could have said, “It’s just a political act,”
but they understood that when a political ruler claims absolute loyalty,
that *is* a religious act.

All throughout history people have tried to make ultimate loyalty to the state – or the party –
the touchstone of your identity.
Paul says – no, that’s idolatry.
If your participation in a communal event
will communicate to others that your ultimate allegiance
is to someone other than the Triune God,
then you should not participate.

And verses 8-10 then other aspects of the wilderness rebellion and apply them to us as well:

⁸ *We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.*

Paul has already dealt with sexual immorality at length in chapters 5-7,
so he refers to it here as a way of reminding us
that idolatry and adultery are connected.

This refers back to Israel’s last great rebellion – their idolatry with the Baal of Peor,
influenced by their desire for Moabite and Midianite women.

⁹ *We must not put Christ^[c] to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents,*
¹⁰ *nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.*

The cravings in the wilderness are “types” – or “formative models” (Thiselton, 732).
These things are *paradigmatic* –
they provide us with examples
that should shape and form our thought and practice.

The Corinthians have been craving meat – they desire the delicious food provided at the idol temples –
and Paul says, in effect, you are just being like your fathers in the wilderness.
God destroyed them,
and, if you do not reign in your cravings,
God will destroy you.

That's why Paul says in verse 11:

¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

The end of the ages has come upon us.
We live at the ends of the ages –
the place (or the time) where worlds intersect.
Outwardly, we still live in this age – the world as fallen in Adam.
But inwardly, by faith, we live in the age to come –
we live in the Kingdom of Christ.

Jesus has entered the age to come –
his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father
means that the end of history has happened to Jesus!
And so, by faith, we have passed through death into life.

In other words, we have crossed over the Red Sea – by faith.
The Spirit of God has been poured out upon us – by faith.
We now partake of Christ's body and blood – by faith.

Paul wants you to realize that you are in a place very much analogous to Israel in the wilderness.
The greater Exodus has happened – in Jesus.

And so:

¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

Don't be presumptuous!
Don't get cocky!

Think back to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 –
“Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral,
nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,
nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers
will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Here, Paul uses the example of Israel in the wilderness to apply this to the Corinthians.
Paul says that the Corinthians are in danger of becoming like the wilderness generation.
At the heart of all four temptations in verses 7-10 is the misdirected desire –

the cravings – of verse 6 (“that we might not desire evil”).

It’s important to see verses 12-13 together.

Verse 12 guards against presumption.

Verse 13 guards against despair.

You should not be cocky – but you should be confident!

¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Notice the difference:

in verse 12, Paul says that when you look at yourself,

look out – “take heed” lest you fall –

you should always have a healthy skepticism

regarding yourself and your own motives;

but in verse 13, Paul says when you look at God,

be assured that God is faithful –

you should always have great confidence

in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness toward you!

The word “temptation” can also mean “trial” or “testing.”

Certainly in the context of chapter 10,

“temptation” is a very good translation –

because Paul’s central concern is being led astray by “evil desires” or cravings.

But it’s worth noting that “temptation” can include any trial or testing

that pushes you away from trusting in Christ.

So cancer can be a “temptation” –

when you have cancer, you are tempted *not* to trust the Lord;

the trial – the testing that you endure – is a temptation.

Temptation is not sin.

We refer to chocolate cake as “tempting” –

but that does not make chocolate cake evil.

So temptations – trials – come our way.

And when they come, God promises that you will not be tempted beyond your ability.

It’s important to understand what this means.

This does *not* mean that God will never give you more than you can handle.

There are times when God gives you more than you can handle!

(Just ask Job’s wife!)

But when he gives you more than you can handle –

it is not more than you can bear –
because when he gives you more than you can handle,
he also provides the way of escape, so that you may be able to endure it.

Notice – it’s not that so that you can *escape it*.
The way of escape only promises that you can *endure it*.

The temptations you endure are common.
Don’t try to put yourself into a “special category.”
There are no special categories in the Christian life.

You can never say, “I couldn’t help it!”
When the temptation comes to abandon covenant faithfulness,
“God will ensure, as part of his own covenant faithfulness,
that he will not simply leave them to face impossible odds.”
(Thiselton, 749)

I think sometimes we move too quickly to “personal temptations” in verse 13.

Paul is still talking about food sacrificed to idols.
The Corinthians face social isolation – ostracism – and less meat in their diet!
But Paul says that this is precisely what Israel faced in the wilderness –
what Israel faced as they prepared to enter the land.
Following the LORD meant losing out in Canaanite society.
Following Jesus meant losing out in Corinthian society.

And following Jesus will mean that you lose out in American society.

Commitment to Christ may mean that you need to decline certain social engagements
that would further your career.

But God is faithful.
And verses 14-22 flesh out the faithfulness of God
in establishing a new community.

3. “A Participation in the Body of Christ” – Meals and Community-Formation (v14-22)

¹⁴ *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*

Not just “depart” – but *flee* –
run away!

The point is not just “you might hurt others” –
but you might destroy yourself! (and others)

God has provided a way of escape –
so book it!

¹⁵ *I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.*

In verse 15,

Paul is so confident of the “common sense” of what he is saying,
that he invites the Corinthians to “judge for themselves” his words.
If you think about this, he says,
this should be *obvious!*

¹⁶ *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

The cup of blessing is a term used in the Jewish celebration of the Passover.

But in Paul’s usage, the “cup of blessing” is plainly the cup of the Lord’s Supper.

Paul uses the same word “koinonia” that he used in chapter 1, verse 9 –
to speak of our communal participation in Christ.

“Participation” is a good translation – but nowadays the idea of “participation”
could be thought of in individual terms –

as though there is some “individual edification” that I receive
from my individual participation in Christ.

Paul’s point here is that our participation in Christ is *corporate* –
we all partake of the one bread – so we are one body, one bread.

The whole point that Paul is making is that our fellowship with one another
is rooted in our participation in Christ,

and that our participation in Christ
entails our fellowship with one another!

Hence “communal participation” in the body and blood of Christ
communicates well the point that Paul is making.

Communal participation in the body and blood of Christ

“signifies identification with Christ in his death as both the source of redemption
and the pattern for life and lifestyle” (AT 763)

And “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (v17)

Our corporate identity – our community –
is determined by this participation in the one bread.

The Didache speaks of how the various grains of wheat are brought together in one loaf.

Paul doesn’t use that exact image,
but his point about how “we who are many” are one body, one bread,
lends itself to that picture.

To partake of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper
is to be identified with Jesus – and with each other.

To put it simply,
just as Israel in the wilderness partook of Christ,
so now do we.

Notice how Paul uses this argument in verse 18:

¹⁸ *Consider the people of Israel:^[d] are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?*

We saw in chapter 9, that the sacrifices were a major part
of the finances of the temple in Jerusalem – as well as the temples of the Roman world.
But Paul's point in verse 18, is more pointed than that.

He says, "Consider Israel according to the flesh..." –
which is to say, "think about the examples I've just given" –
when Israel in the wilderness offered sacrifices to the golden calf at Sinai.
Who were the ones who got judged?
It wasn't just Aaron and the leaders.

It was all those who ate the sacrifices –
because "are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?"

If you are engaged in the sacrifice –
if you bring the sacrifice, if you offer the sacrifice – even if you just *eat* the sacrifice –
then you are a participant in the altar.

Paul knows that this may seem to contradict what he said earlier –
"we know that an idol is nothing in the world" (8:4)

¹⁹ *What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?*

Deuteronomy 32:17 speaks of how Israel sacrificed to demons that were no gods.
You cannot partake of the Table of the LORD and the Table of demons.
(Oh, sure, it is *physically* possible! –
Israel did!
But if you attempt to partake of both,
then you will provoke the Lord to jealousy.)

Because God does not respond well to those who try to serve two masters.

Deuteronomy 32:19 goes on to say,

“The LORD saw it and spurned them,
because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters....
They have made me jealous with what is no god;
they have provoked me to anger with their idols.” (32:19, 21)

The last line verse 22 is particularly ironic:
“Are we stronger than he?”

Paul has been rebuking the “strong” in Corinth.
Now he uses the same word to say –
are you really so strong?
Are you stronger than God?

Because if you want to go on with your idolatry –
your flagrant disregard of what it means to participate in Christ –
then you had better be stronger than Christ!

A Christ-centered, Christ-formed life cannot be formed by any other religious practices.