QUESTION 2

How Many Ordinances/Sacraments Are There?

The title of this book indicates that consideration is limited to two of the practices common among Christians, baptism and the Lord's Supper. But many readers may be aware that two major branches of Christendom (Roman Catholic and Orthodox) observe seven practices as sacraments, while Protestants have been almost universal in affirming only two. In addition to baptism and the Lord's Supper, these other groups recognize confirmation, penance and reconciliation, the anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony as sacraments.[1]

Scripture nowhere gives us a list of how many sacraments to observe, or even explicit criteria by which to discern them. How then can we resolve the question posed above? The answer to the question of the number of the sacraments is tied to one's understanding of the nature of the sacraments.[2] As the Roman Catholic definition of the nature of the sacraments developed, their recognition of certain practices as sacraments developed accordingly. The Reformers questioned both the definition of a sacrament developed in Catholicism and the basis upon which practices were recognized as sacraments.[3] As a result, they rejected all the Catholic sacraments except for

1. This is the wording used for these sacraments in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (vii–viii). The Eastern Orthodox Church refers to these five as chrismation, repentance, ordination, marriage, and holy unction. See John Karmiris, "Concerning the Sacraments," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel Clendenin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 22; and *The Living God: A Catechism for the Christian Faith*, trans. Ola Dunlop (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 2:xx–xxi.
2. G. C. Berkouwer says, "the question about the number of sacraments is not just a question about number, but about the nature of the sacraments" (*The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Bekker, Studies in Dogmatics [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], 38).
3. For Catholics, the question of a clear and explicit basis in Scripture for a sacrament is not as critical as it was for Protestants, operating under the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Richard McBrien gives primacy to the Church, not Scripture, in calling a practice a

baptism and the Lord's Supper. A survey of these developments illuminates this question.

A History of Sacramental Theology

As noted in the first question, a landmark was reached in the development of the doctrine of the sacraments with Augustine's definition of a sacrament as visible sign of an invisible grace. While widely followed, it was still imprecise. What exactly is the relationship between the sign and the grace? Does a sacrament cause the grace it signifies in and of itself? Is it a means of grace? Or is the sign just a sign, a symbol? Moreover, under Augustine's definition many things could be classified as sacraments that were never widely recognized as such, things such as the creed or the Lord's Prayer.[4] Thus, up to the Middle Ages, there was little agreement on the number of sacraments. Baptism and the Eucharist were generally accepted; some of the other rites that eventually were recognized as sacraments were being practiced, but their status was still uncertain, awaiting further thought and clarification.

Circumstances in the latter half of the medieval era stimulated the needed thought and clarification. Alister McGrath explains, "with the theological renaissance of the Middle Ages, the church was coming to play an increasingly important role in society. There was new pressure for the church to place its acts of public worship on a secure intellectual footing, and to consolidate the theoretical aspects of its worship. As a result, sacramental theology developed considerably during the period."[5] The key figure in this development was Peter Lombard. He distinguished genuine sacraments from other sacramental things by the causal power residing in the rite itself: "Something can properly be called a sacrament if it is a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and exists as its cause. Sacraments were therefore instituted for the sake of sanctifying, as well as signifying."[6] With the nature of a sacrament as efficaciously causing grace clarified, Lombard proceeded to be the first in Catholic thought to list the seven sacraments that became normative in Catholic and eventually in Orthodox life.[7]

---

sacrament: "It was and always is up to the Church to determine whether certain acts flowing from its nature as a sacrament of universal salvation are fundamentally and unconditionally a realization and expression of that nature" (*Catholicism*, new ed. [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994], 800).

4. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 496–97.
5. Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 120.
6. Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae* (Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventuri, 1981), 2:233.9–20, as translated in Alister McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 299.
7. Karmiris claims that all seven were known, believed in, and practiced "from antiquity" among the Orthodox, but the teaching concerning them was not written down, "as it was

The Other "Sacraments"

Confirmation

Catholic thought groups confirmation along with baptism and the Eucharist, as the sacraments of initiation. The link is especially strong with baptism. Indeed, baptism and confirmation were in the earliest days celebrated together, with the rite of laying on of hands and anointing seen as effecting the impartation of the Holy Spirit, thus completing the gift of grace begun in baptism.[8] In the East, the anointing and laying on of hands were kept as part of the celebration of baptism, while in the West, the two became separate rites, but in both cases, confirmation was seen as the completion of baptismal grace.[9] Peter Lombard distinguished the gift given at baptism (the grace of forgiveness) from that given at confirmation (the grace of strengthening, through the impartation of the Spirit). But since both baptism and confirmation are visible signs seen as efficaciously causing invisible gifts of grace,[10] both qualify as sacraments.

Many Protestant groups practice confirmation, but do not see it as a sacrament, because they do not see the rite effecting anything in and of itself. It does not work *ex opere operato*, but *ex opere operantis*; that is, confirmation has value only as the recipients confirm for themselves the baptismal vows made on their behalf as infants.[11] Moreover, confirmation lacks the biblical basis the Reformers saw as essential for a sacrament. The classic objection to confirmation as a sacrament is given by Calvin, who says, "A sacrament is a

---

considered to be secret" ("Concerning the Sacraments," 23). The Orthodox Church largely is in agreement with Roman Catholicism concerning the number and nature of sacraments, but since Protestant theology developed in dialogue with Catholicism, and since Roman Catholics produced more written sources, the development of sacramental theology here will be traced through Roman Catholicism.

8. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* ("Confirmation," 330) and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (325–33) cite Acts 8:14–17 as a basis for the Spirit being imparted through the laying on of the apostles' hands and see this as the origin of confirmation. The rite of anointing with oil was another way to signify the gift of the Spirit.
9. *CCC*, 326–27.
10. "It is evident from its celebration that the effect of the sacrament of Confirmation is the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost" (ibid., 330).
11. In most of these Protestant groups, confirmation happens around the age of twelve, and often involves a preparatory class. See C. G. Singer, "Confirmation," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 289; for Methodists, see "Confirmation: Overview," at http://www.umc.org/site/Confirmation_Overview.htm (accessed 4/8/13); for Presbyterians, see the confirmation curriculum online at http://www.pcusa.org (accessed 4/8/13). Interestingly, even one prominent Baptist confession (the Philadelphia Confession) initially included an article affirming laying on of hands with prayer as "an ordinance of Christ" for baptized believers for "a farther reception of the Holy Spirit of promise, or for the addition of the graces of the Spirit, and the influences thereof," but this article was omitted by some who otherwise followed this confession and it never was widely accepted in Baptist life (see William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969], 351).

seal by which God's covenant, or promise, is sealed." With reference to the ceremony of confirmation, at which the Spirit is supposedly given, Calvin asks, "But where is the Word of God, which promises the presence of the Holy Spirit here?"[12] Luther says confirmation may be practiced, but only as a ceremony, not a sacrament, because it cannot be proved from the Scriptures.[13]

Penance and Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick

These two rites are considered together as the sacraments of healing—penance dealing with those whose bond with the Church and God has been weakened through sin and anointing of the sick helping those whose bond is weakened through physical illness or weakness. What grace is caused or effected by these sacraments? While the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives numerous effects for each of these ceremonies, a common element in both is the grace of forgiveness of sins. In the case of penance, some of the effects are "reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace" (which would seem to imply forgiveness), and "remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins" and "remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin." For anointing of the sick, one of the effects is "the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of penance,"[14] confirming that one of the effects of penance is, or at least should be, forgiveness of sins.

One biblical basis claimed for penance is John 20:22–23, but the early church saw the power of forgiveness exercised by them through the preaching of the gospel. For those who received forgiveness through the gospel but sinned after baptism, the remedy was church discipline, not penance. But church discipline was difficult to maintain, especially with the influx of members after the conversion of Constantine. Gradually it began to wither away, and was replaced by "a system of private confession and individual penance."[15] As the sacrament developed, it required contrition of heart, oral confession of sin to a priest, and performing acts of satisfaction ("penance") required by the priest. The efficacy of the sacrament is guaranteed by the power of the priest to grant absolution.[16] The grace thus granted by the rite is forgiveness of sins, and is dependent on the church's priestly mediation. Not surprisingly, the Reformers saw severe problems with penance, at least with penance as a sacrament.

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 21:1450, 53 (4.19.2, 5).
13. Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *LW* 36, 91–92.
14. *CCC*, 374, 382.
15. See the discussion by Gregory A. Wills, "A Historical Analysis of Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 140.
16. *CCC*, 367, says "bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'"

In the early part of *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther seems to accept penance as a valid sacrament, but by the end of the work, he concludes that it lacks the necessary criterion of a "divinely instituted visible sign," and as the Catholics practiced it, denied the need for faith.[17] Calvin affirms the early church practice of corporate discipline as "holy and wholesome for the church; and I would like to see it restored today." Even the more recent practice of private confession, he would leave "classed among the things indifferent and outward exercises," but he could not accept it as a sacrament for two reasons: "First, because no special promise of God to this effect—the only basis of a sacrament—exists. Secondly, because every ceremony displayed here is a mere invention of men, although we have already proved that the ceremonies of sacraments can be ordained only by God."[18]

There is a biblical basis claimed for the anointing of the sick, James 5:14–15, that does seem initially to meet the criteria for a sacrament laid down by Calvin. There is a promise (v. 15: "he will be forgiven") and there is a sign to seal the promise (v. 14: the anointing with oil). Over the centuries, the rite began to be used alongside penance and the Eucharist as preparation for the dying, and by the twelfth century the rite began to be called "extreme unction" because it was used almost exclusively for those at the point of death ("*in extremis*"),[19] and was recognized as one of the seven sacraments.

Calvin and Luther both objected to it on multiple grounds.[20] Calvin thought the promise of healing was obviously limited, and so the ceremony should be limited to those who had the gift of healing. Moreover, the promise of forgiveness of sins is not linked to the anointing with oil, but to the prayers of believers. Finally, he notes that even if James 5 does prescribe anointing as a rite for this age, it refers to all sick persons, not just those at the point of death, and so extreme unction, as practiced in Calvin's day, would seem an inconsistent application of the text.[21] With reference to this last point, it is interesting to note that one of the reforms promulgated by Vatican II was to recommend that the anointing not be limited to those at the point of death. It encouraged anyone who began to be in danger of death from sickness or old age to receive the sacrament.[22] This is closer to the pattern of James 5, but

17. Luther, *LW* 36, 124, 82–83. He says near the outset, "To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread" (18). The phrase "for the present" was prescient, for by the end of the work Luther concludes, "Hence there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church—baptism and the bread. . . . The sacrament of penance, which I added to these two, lacks the divinely instituted visible sign" (124).
18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 21:1462–65 (4.19.14, 17).
19. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 844–45; *CCC*, 378.
20. Calvin, *Institutes*, 21:1465–69 (4.19.18–21); Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *LW* 36, 117–123.
21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 21:1468–69 (4.19.20–21).
22. *CCC*, 379; McBrien, *Catholicism*, 847.

still does not apply to all who are sick. At any rate, the lack of a clear biblical basis (a divine promise sealed by a sign with clear divine ordination of it as an ongoing rite for the church) has prevented anointing of the sick from being seriously considered as a sacrament by Protestants.

Holy Orders

All branches of Christians acknowledge the propriety of ordination of leaders in the church to their positions; in Catholic thought ordination is the sacrament of holy orders. What grace is conferred by this sacrament? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the effect of the sacrament in these words: "This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit so that he may serve as Christ's instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king."[23] For example, it is ordination that gives the priests the power to forgive the sins confessed in the sacrament of penance.[24]

Protestants rejected the Catholic view of ordination and the sacrament of holy orders for various reasons. Luther is famous for rejecting the order of the priesthood in favor of the universal priesthood of all believers. He particularly objected to the idea that it is priestly power that makes the Eucharist convey grace *ex opere operato*:

> [I]t is not the priest alone who offers the sacrifice of the mass; it is this faith which each one has for himself. This is the true priestly office, through which Christ is offered as a sacrifice to God, an office which the priest, with the outward ceremonies of the mass, simply represents. Each and all are, therefore, equally spiritual priests before God.[25]

Calvin, as in the cases above, pointed to the lack of a divine promise confirmed by a sign: "In this rite one finds not even one syllable of any definite promise; hence, it would be fruitless to seek a ceremony to confirm the promise. . . . Therefore, there cannot be any sacrament."[26]

Matrimony

Marriage is certainly ordained by God and is an honorable estate, but so may be singleness and widow/widower, yet none are claimed as a sacrament except marriage. What is the grace caused by the sacrament of marriage? It

23. *CCC*, 395.
24. Ibid., 367.
25. Martin Luther, "A Treatise on the New Testament," *LW* 35, 100–01.
26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 21:1480 (4.19.33).

first of all "signifies the union of Christ and the Church" and "gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved the church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life."[27]

The divorce rate, shamefully high among both Catholics and Protestants, may be enough alone to raise a question as to whether such grace is given to spouses in marriage, but we are not left to such evidence. There is no hint of any promise given by God to spouses in marriage in Scripture.[28] Rather, husbands are commanded to love their wives with Christ-like love. Perhaps marriage came to be regarded as a sacrament due to the language of Paul in Ephesians 5:32, concerning the "mystery" of Christ and the church. As explained in question 1 above, the Greek term *mustērion* (in Eph. 5:32 and elsewhere) was translated by *sacramentum* in the Latin Vulgate.[29] But the reference is to Christ and the church, not marriage, and in any event, the Greek term *mustērion* in the New Testament does not at all signify what the Latin *sacramentum* came to signify. Of all the seven supposed sacraments, marriage may have the weakest claim to being one.

Summary

Beyond baptism and the Lord's Supper, Catholic and Orthodox Christians recognize five additional practices as sacraments. Protestants differ remarkably among themselves on many aspects of the meaning and practice of the sacraments (or ordinances), but they show an equally remarkable near unanimity on recognizing only two such rites. The reasons why they rejected the Catholic claim of seven sacraments seem to be basically two. First, they rejected the Catholic view that the sacraments efficaciously cause grace. They eventually differed among themselves as to what the sacraments did cause, if anything, but there was agreement that the Catholic view attributed too much efficacy to the sacraments in themselves, especially apart from faith. Luther said the following of the Catholic view that the sacraments are "'effective signs' of grace": "All such things are said to the detriment of faith, and out of ignorance of the divine promise. Unless you should call them 'effective' in the sense that they certainly and effectively impart grace where faith is unmistakably present."[30]

27. *CCC*, 414.
28. Luther says that marriage is regarded as a sacrament "without the least warrant of Scripture" ("The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *LW* 36, 92).
29. Ibid. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites Ephesians 5:32 prominently in their explanation of matrimony as a sacrament. Calvin argues that the Catholic Church misapplied Ephesians 5:32 and says, "The term 'sacrament' deceived them" (*Institutes*, 21:1482 [4.19.35–36]).
30. Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *LW* 36, 66–67.

Beyond that, a second and deeper reason for Protestant rejection of five of the seven Catholic sacraments is the lack of clear biblical authorization. The very fact that many of them were not officially recognized as sacraments for the first thousand years of the church's life raised a question for some. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were never questioned; they were obviously deeply rooted in biblical teaching. But the others were dubious at best. Calvin repeatedly raised the question of a divine promise or a divine command authorizing a practice to be considered a sacrament. Lacking such divine ordination, they refused to recognize confirmation, penance and reconciliation, the anointing of the sick, holy orders, or matrimony as sacraments.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. According to Catholic thought, what criteria qualify a practice to be called a sacrament? Who determines if a practice meets the criteria?

2. How do Protestants differ in their view of what qualifies something to be called a sacrament (or ordinance)?

3. How do Protestants who practice confirmation differ from Catholics in their understanding of it? What is its value? Why do some Protestant groups not practice confirmation?

4. If practices such as ordination and marriage are not sacraments, should they still be viewed as church practices? Why or why not? What do churches do when they ordain leaders, or pronounce men and women husbands and wives?

5. If James 5:14–16 does not authorize anointing of the sick and confession of sins as sacraments, should we still anoint the sick and confess our sins? If so, why? If not, why not?