

GCC Understanding of Signs and Seals

What does it mean that the Sacraments are signs and seals of the gospel? In their most basic sense, a sign points to some greater reality, and a seal marks off ownership and denotes a promise of fulfillment. These are the basic tenets, but there is more to it.

A sign is the visible, tangible reference to something invisible, intangible and greater than the sign itself. It points to what has been done. The sign of the Sacraments points in two directions.

First, it points from God to us (and by extension, the watching world). It points to what God has done; that Christ has died and risen, and that in his death and resurrection He includes the believer as a participant. The baptized believer dies to himself and is raised in newness of life to God. Christ has shed his body and blood for us who believe, and we become partakers of the divine nature and his death when we eat of the bread and drink of the vine.

Second, the sign points from the believer to God (and by extension, the watching world). It is a testimony of the faith that has been placed in God. It points to the reality of regenerated life, and thus tells God, "I am Yours," and tells the world "I am His." This is why Sacraments are only for believers or else it points to a non-reality, and is at best just a desire.

Signs symbolize what has been done. Seals symbolize what will be done. Although a sign works in two directions, pointing to the reality of what has been done, a seal is only in one direction: from God to us. One may make a case that the mark of ownership and promise to fulfill one's duty can be made from the believer to God – "I am His and He is mine." Only in this sense can the seal work from us to God.

It is clearer that God places His seal on us. The Holy Spirit is said to be our seal. Baptism, then, is the visible symbol of this invisible reality. The Spirit as seal first marks off ownership of us. God has created and redeemed us. We are not our own, but are bought with a price.

The Holy Spirit is also said to be an earnest payment of our full salvation. He is the down payment insuring completion of the redemption and life which He has begun in us. Thus in the Supper not only do we remember what Christ has done for us, but God is reminding us that those whom He justified, He is sanctifying, and He will glorify.

The Sacraments act as signs and seals in these ways.

- 1) They visibly point to the invisible reality of God's regenerating work in the believer based on Christ's atonement (what He has done).
- 2) They visibly point to the invisible reality of our faith in God (what we have done).¹
- 3) They visibly mark the believer as being owned by God (what He does).
- 4) They visibly display the coming reality of what is promised (what He will do).

¹ This should not be understood to indicate we are saved by works, nor by our faith. For we are saved by grace, and that grace is applied through faith. So that where there is no faith, there is no salvation. Even faith can be said to be a gift and one that simply receives grace. Thus, the sign points to the fact that the faith that receives grace is present and has been placed in Christ.