

Signs: Good and Better

People very rightly key on what people they trust “sign” as right and most important. Whether leaders of churches intend to or not, for people attending many (maybe most) churches these are the Sacraments. They can check them off and feel good about themselves because apparently their “mentors” in the field of religion are seemingly pleased with them.

And if only subconsciously and unknowingly people, in their minds, are fulfilling the *Bible's* important directive to:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? ^{2Co 13:5}

Yes, most (certainly the least knowledgeable about what the *Bible* says) are likely going to feel “Check Check – I am good!” if they have completed the Sacraments; not such bad logic.

And while we take cues from others as to our possible shortcomings, in the end the great examination is to “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.” And in doing this we need to examine to ensure we are completing, by Grace, the greater Sacraments as defined by an objective measure (the *Bible*) rather than a subjective one (any confirmation of man).

Some Common and General Thoughts about Sacraments

Sacrament – A visible sign of an inward grace, especially one of the solemn Christian rites considered to have been instituted by Jesus Christ to symbolize or confer grace: the sacraments of the Protestant churches are baptism and the Lord's Supper; the sacraments of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches are baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, matrimony, penance, holy orders, and extreme unction. Dictionary.com

A religious ceremony recognized by the Christian church, or a rite of passage that infers some blessing or grace on people who receive it. Baptism is an example of a sacrament in the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

Yourdictionary.com

The Westminster Confession reads: Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

Why Then?

Could (should) we not rightly ask ourselves why doing the “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” ^{Eph 2:10} *Bible* reading and Prayer are not commonly recognized as great and important Sacraments? Are not both the Catholic and Protestant listings of Sacraments deficient in failing to provide a truer and fuller Gospel of Grace by highlighting these “activities” meeting the definition of Sacraments?

For certainly the “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” ^{Eph 2:10} *Bible* reading and Prayer are Holy Spirit “administered” (all Sacraments, to be operative, must be Holy Spirit effected) Sacraments on par with the “traditional” priest administered, Holy Spirit effected, ones – who would want to meet God in judgement without them? And how many preachers and priests will want, someday, to try to explain to God their neglect of teaching and highlighting these great and very visible and sure signs of Christ’s inward grace for believers?

Yes, signs are important with some signs being more reliable and trustworthy than others. There are signs that can be completed very easily and those involving greater cost and effort (and Grace) – the very common error surrounding the traditional signs is that they are the easy signs too many depend on while ignoring the more telling and much more significant signs judging by obvious *Bible* emphasis. In this regard, the tangible, costly, signs of doing the “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” ^{Eph 2:10} *Bible* reading and Prayer make examining ourselves more reliable and trustworthy than fulfilling the occasional priest-administered Sacraments.

Good Works

We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ^{Eph 2:10}

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ^{2 Co9:8}

Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. ^{John 3:20-21}

And these good works surely include all aspects of the Christian's life: our family life responsibilities, vocation (as a servant of God, placed where He wills us to work) and all other daily activities, rest and recreations – in all we are doing as the good works God planned in advance, personally, for each Christian.

Good works, the stated “for” of God's salvation. And as further confirmed by James' rhetorical question:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? . . . faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Jas 2:14-17

Without the sign of God's inward Grace-faith demonstrating completion of the good works planned in advance for them to do, a person is not a Christian.

Bible reading

They [Christians] are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. Jn 17:16-17

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Heb 4:12-13

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2Pe3:18

No one can understand, much less do, what God tells us in His Word without His inward Grace, the indwelling Holy Spirit of God.

This is confirmed, as Jesus tells us, as a key sign of His inward Grace:

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth John 14:15-17

And this love rightly presumes we will want to know (a wanting that will only be by Grace) what He says as found in His Word. What greater sign can there be of an inward Grace than God's imputed love of Jesus in a life?

Prayer

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Ro 8:26-27

Here again is the sign and evidence of an inner Grace, the God-given Holy Spirit to ALL believers.

The Common Denominator?

It should be evident that what is common to all true Sacraments is that they are God effected through His indwelling Holy Spirit; anything done apart from this is by our works and is thus considered illegitimate by God. And this leads to maybe the most foundational and heartening verses in the entire *Bible* (as we would expect, coming from the mouth of Jesus):

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Mt 12:30-31

Making it clear that “blasphemy against the Spirit” very “simply” means “not with” Jesus for this is the great defining Grace offered all men on which eternal salvation rests.

Completing the good works God prepared in advance for us to do, Prayer and *Bible* reading are certainly necessary and “natural” to the Christian faith – signs of a legitimate and vibrant inward Grace spiritual life “on par” with the traditionally recognized Sacraments. But why take a narrow view of our faith when God takes a wide and full view in filling His children with inward Grace after inward Grace as sure signs of their salvation?

The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 1Co 4:20

Many people in prison confess themselves to be innocent while their deeds testify to their guilt. It is much more comforting and convincing (especially to ourselves) that our actions testify to (are proper signs of our) true faith, not simply what we confess in single or continuing rituals. For the indwelling Holy Spirit (God’s power in the Christian) is the ultimate Sacrament and sign of His great inner Graces given us!