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THE LORD'S SUPPER AS COVENANT SEAL
FROM THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY THROUGH PRINCETON SEMINARY

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Foreword

I have observed of the Reformed landscape in North America that though the confessional language of the Lord's Supper as seal is often used, understanding of the biblical warrant for the tradition's employment of the term is lacking. As a pastor, I am concerned that there is significant lack of understanding and therefore confusion over the covenant nature of the Lord's Supper, to the hurt of believers. My hope with this project is not only to examine the Westminster Tradition's analysis of the biblical grounds for describing the Lord's Supper as covenant seal, but to expand upon those insights and suggest some ways in which they can be put into practice. I have used American spelling and punctuation throughout this project following the format of the Society of Biblical Literature's *Handbook of Style*.

Introduction

The Reformed Christian tradition has designated the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals. It has also distinguished between the designations and held these differences between them to be important.¹ The descriptor "seal" is present in the Reformed confessions and catechisms of the 16th and 17th century,² and is a distinct label of the Reformed theology of the sacraments.³ The specific term "seal"⁴ finds its biblical warrant as the description of a rite in Rom 4:11.

The employment of the term "seal" did not, however, begin with the Reformation, appearing as early as the 2nd century⁵ and continuing through at least the 13th century.⁶ The articulation of this perspective within the Reformed tradition acknowledges the biblical language and the historical theology of the church, while developing it more fully.

¹ WLC 163 states that the two parts of a sacrament are the outward, physical sign, and an inward and spiritual grace signified by the outward part. The sacraments as signs point to and represent something, which is a different function from their role as seals.

² The term seal is used of the sacraments in the French Confession of Faith (1559), the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Second Helvetic Confession (1562), the Heidelberg Catechism, (1563), the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion (1571), the *Irish Articles of Faith* (1615), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Shorter and Larger catechisms (1647), and the Savoy Declaration (1658) based upon the Westminster Standards.

³ The Anabaptist Schleithem Confession (1527), and Martin Luther's Catechisms (1529) and Augsburg Confession (1530) lack this label, and it is not present in the canons of the Roman Catholic Church or doctrines of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) was based on the Westminster Standards but deleted all reference to the sacraments as seals.

⁴ σφραγίς

⁵ The 2nd century epistle *The Shepherd of Hermas* refers to baptism as seal, "The seal [ἡ σφραγίς] then is the water: so they go down into the water dead, and they come up alive...thus to them also this seal [ἡ σφραγίς] was preached, and they availed themselves of it that they might enter into the kingdom of God." *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable 9, section 16, verse 4 in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 652-653. This is the earliest explicit connection of the sacraments and sealing in Christianity

⁶ Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* argues that the sacraments impart and imprint character and virtue upon the soul of their recipients, and that this is a kind of sealing. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.63.

Historically the relationship of the sacraments to the conveyance and dispensing of the grace they represent is something that has required continued development within the Reformed tradition.⁷ While it has generally emphasized the sealing nature of baptism as a sacrament, the specific manner in which the Lord's Supper is a seal of the covenant has not received as much attention. Therefore a significant void in the ability of Reformed churches, particularly in the United States, to articulate the biblical warrant and basis for describing the Lord's Supper as a seal has remained. As a consequence, the sacramental practice that reflects the truth of the Lord's Supper as seal is deficient. The Lord's Supper must be described not only as a sign, but as a seal, in order to communicate adequately its purpose and effect.⁸ But any label has the potential to be inadequate in its descriptions, and therefore function as an insufficient guide to sacramental practice. While the Reformed tradition has sought to address the biblical warrant for how the Lord's Supper is a seal, this effort has often been scattered and lost amidst debates about the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper.

This project will focus on the theological development of the Lord's Supper as seal in the tradition of the Westminster Assembly in American Reformed theology. Specifically, it will look first at the biblical warrant and logic used by the Assembly and its members in its articulation of the Lord's Supper as seal. From there it will trace the theme of the Lord's Supper as seal among the Post-Assembly Puritans, both in Britain and the American colonies. The theology of the faculty of

⁷ Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck notes the point, "Just how God employs the sacraments to distribute his grace does not become clear either in Calvin or in the works of the later Reformed. So there is room left for a wide assortment of questions. Is grace always bound up with the sign so that the sacrament always remains the same objectively?" Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics IV: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 470.

⁸ "That is why the Supper has not yet been described fully and sufficiently if it is understood as 'symbol.' On the one hand, there is no need to be distressed about the name 'symbol' just because there are many considerations and interpretations of 'symbol' that do not contribute to the understanding of the Lord's Supper. Any word used to designate the Supper can be misinterpreted, including 'sign,' 'seal,' 'symbol,' and 'sacrament.'" G.C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (trans. Hugo Bekker, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 216.

Princeton Seminary in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the American descendants of the Westminster Tradition, will be examined to understand how the development of the Lord's Supper continued in the Reformed churches of the United States. Finally, areas of the Westminster Tradition in which insufficient attention has been given to the understanding of the Lord's Supper as seal will be discussed, with recommendations for pastoral and ecclesial practice guided by the sealing nature of the Lord's Supper. This historical avenue has been selected in order to provide a distinctive guide for the tracing of this theme, based not only on individual theologians, but flowing from the Westminster Assembly and the development of that theme within that same theological and ecclesial tradition that developed from it, particularly in the United States.

1

The Westminster Assembly and Its Approach

Within Reformed theology the sacraments have been specifically described as covenant signs and seals. This covenant focus was justified by pointing to Christ's words of institution, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."⁹ The connection between sacrament and covenant was not incidental, but fundamental and definitive. The new covenant instituted by Christ was ratified by the pouring out of his blood on the cross for his people, and The Lord's Supper functions as the sacrament of that covenant. Jesus explicitly connected the Lord's Supper to the covenant work he performed on the cross. Here he was followed by Paul's use of a covenant-Eucharist connection in 1 Cor 11. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark record Jesus identifying the cup with the blood of the covenant, while Luke records him describing the eucharistic cup itself as the new covenant, which Paul echoes. The Lord's Supper is thus described in terms of the thing that it seals, namely the covenant established in Christ's blood for the remission of sins. The covenant work that Christ performed on the cross is the basis for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The church's participation in the sacrament is participation in covenant renewal, where the confirmation of a believer's union with Christ and his promises are sealed to them. This summarizes the arguments laid out in the section of the Reformed tradition currently in focus.

The Westminster Assembly¹⁰ employed the *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615) as one of the theological guides for its Confession and catechisms.¹¹ These articles were primarily written by

⁹ Matt 28:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, and quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 11:23-25.

¹⁰ The Westminster Assembly of Divines was called upon by Parliament to reorganize the Church of England and was in session from 1643-1653. It created a directory of worship to replace the Book of Common Prayer in 1644 and produced a confession of faith to replace the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion in 1646, with edits completed by the spring of 1648. Between 1643-1647 it created two catechisms for use in the church. After

James Ussher.¹² Ussher made the case that the Lord's Supper was a seal by which Christ and his benefits are impressed upon and confirmed to his people.¹³ His articulation of the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal is helpful for understanding the theological framework within which the Westminster divines were working; as a contemporary precursor to the Westminster Assembly, his theological perspective can be seen reflected in the articulations of the divines.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) employ proof-texts that validate its theological positions, though unfortunately most of the notes regarding the Assembly's debates over them are lacking details.¹⁴ Nevertheless these proof-texts can

completing the work of reorganizing the theological and liturgical structure of the church by 1648, it continued to meet until 1653 primarily for the theological examination of ministers.

¹¹ Article 92 of the *Irish Articles of Religion* says that the Lord's Supper is, "sealing unto us our spiritual nourishment and continual growth in Christ" and again references the Lord's Supper as a sealing sacrament in Article 94. James Ussher, *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, (Dublin: Hodge and Smith, 1847), Vol 1, xlix.

¹² James Ussher (1581-1656) was the Irish Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland from 1625-1656. He was invited to the Westminster Assembly, but never attended. J.V. Fesko and Guy M. Richard, "Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, (ed. J. Ligon Duncan. Vol. 3., Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 249.

¹³ Ussher states in his sermon on 1 Cor 11:29, "These signs [bread and wine] are for the strengthening of our faith, and therefore it is considered as a seal. 'Abraham received the sign of circumcision, as a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had, yet being uncircumcised.' It helps our understanding by being a sign, and is a confirmation, a seal, by virtue whereof Christ is passed, and made over to us, so that we have as true an interest and right to him, as to our meat and drink: yea, he comes as effectually ours, for every purpose in our spiritual life, as our meat and drink doth for our corporal. To which end these elements are changed spiritually in their natures; not in substance, but in use, so that which was but now a common bread, becomes as far different as heaven is from earth, being altered in its use. For instance, the wax whereby the king passes over an inheritance to us, and by which conveyance of our estates are made, that wax is but as another piece of wax differing nothing from that which is in the shop, till the king hath stamped it with his seal: but being once seal, one would not give it for all the wax in the kingdom, for now it serves to another use; so is it here in these elements: but still know, the difference is not in the matter, or substance, but in the use. And this is the reason why this blessed bread and wine is termed a communion, namely, because it is an instrument whereby Christ instates me into himself, and whereby I have fellowship, and communion with him." Ussher, *Works*, Vol 13, 193-194.

¹⁴ Sessions 324ff of the Westminster Assembly are in a third volume of the original recordings and present a change in record keeping style, where "the assembly's decisions abruptly dominate the record while the voices of individual members are let [sic] in the crowd. Dozens of speeches are reduced to a couple of lines." None of the details of the debates on the sacraments, the Lord's Supper, or the criteria for the selected proof texts

provide an understanding of how the Assembly ensured that their theological articulation were grounded in the biblical texts and narrative, even if they cannot provide the full picture of how the Assembly understood their theological positions to be demonstrated biblically.¹⁵ That, however, can to a certain extent be accomplished by consulting individual works of the divines and locating parallel uses of the texts.

How, then, does WCF ground its assertions about the Lord's Supper being a seal in the covenantal terms of scripture?

First, the Confession makes a connection between the covenant nature of the Passover meal and the Lord's Supper. WCF and WLC argue that, after the fall of humanity into sin through Adam's actions, God made a covenant of grace with humanity. This covenant was administered in two different ways in history: through the Old Covenant, and its fulfillment in the New Covenant in Christ.¹⁶ Under the Old Covenant the covenant of grace was administered using a variety of divinely ordained practices, which are fulfilled and abrogated in the New Covenant. WLC 34 and WCF 7.5 identify the Passover as one of the abrogated ordinances of the Old Covenant, and both cite Paul's declaration of Christ as the church's paschal sacrifice in 1 Cor 5:7 as evidence of his fulfillment of its purpose. WLC 35 and WCF 7.6 then identify the Lord's Supper as one of the ways in which the

are preserved, only the outcomes., Chad Van Dixhoorn, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652* (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2012), Vol 1, 60. See B.B. Warfield on *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1931), 115.

¹⁵ Document 113 of Van Dixhoorn's papers on the Assembly, 'Letter to the House of commons regarding proof-texts of scripture 13 October 1646' states that listing the scriptural proofs for the Confession would require an entire volume, and requiring those texts immediately would require a debate in the Assembly where any man may offer up a proof text. The signatories of the letter, Charles Herle, Prolocutor; Cor. Burgess, Assessor; Herbert Palmer, Assessor; Henry Roborough, scribe; Adoniram Byfield, scribe, did not believe that simply citing proof-texts, as Parliament desired, would fully and properly capture the Assembly's understanding of how they biblically arrived at their theological conclusions. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes* Vol. 5, 310-311.

¹⁶ WLC 31-33 and WCF 7, particularly 7.5-6, outline the arguments for this.

covenant of grace is administered in the New Covenant.¹⁷ This is later affirmed by WLC 168, which cites Luke 22:20.

The WCF and WLC are arguing that the substance of the same spiritual reality, namely the sacrifice of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and establishment of the New, is exhibited by the different ordinances administered in the two covenants. The WCF points to the Passover meal, a covenant practice of the OT people of God, as one of the ordinances of the covenant of grace. The citation of 1 Cor 5:7 is significant in the WCF's argument. Paul there identifies Christ as the paschal lamb sacrificed for God's people and then in the next verse admonishes the Corinthians to reject the leaven of malice and evil and celebrate the festival of Christ's sacrifice with the new leaven of sincerity and truth. While Paul is addressing how the people of Christ are to respond to sin in their midst now that they are redeemed, he employs imagery associated with the covenant feasting of the Old Covenant. The Corinthians are instructed to "keep the [Passover] feast" in which Christ is the true sacrifice by not living in their old sinful ways. By citing 1 Cor 5:7 in arguing that the ordinances of the Old Covenant are fulfilled, but still point to the same substance as the New Covenant ordinances, the WCF is indicating that the command to continue celebrating the festival of Christ's sacrifice is fulfilled in the ordinances of the New Covenant.

WCF understands the Lord's Supper to be the New Testament counterpart to the Passover meal. By citing Luke 22:20 in WLC 168 as the evidence that the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of the NT,¹⁸ the Confession is saying that the Lord's Supper corresponds to the same spiritual reality as

¹⁷ WCF 27.5, while not identifying specifically what the Old Covenant sacraments were or which particular New Covenant sacraments they correspond to, also says that the sacraments under the two administrations correspond to the same spiritual thing.

¹⁸ In WCF 7.4 it is stated that often the covenants in scripture are called testaments, and then in 7.5-6 it labels the Old Covenant and New Covenant of grace the Old and New Testaments respectively. 'New Testament' is then used synonymously with 'New Covenant' throughout the Confession. So when WLC 168 calls the Lord's Supper a sacrament of the New Testament, it is not meaning simply the second portion of the Bible, but the New Covenant administration of the covenant of grace.

its Old Covenant counterpart, the Passover meal. Christ institutes the Lord's Supper after having stated "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."¹⁹ Keeping the feast of 1 Cor 5:7 is to eat the New Covenant "passover" meal, the Lord's Supper. Both ordinances exhibit and signify the same substance, the sacrifice of Christ.²⁰ The OT paschal meal anticipates the coming Passover sacrifice of Christ, and the NT Lord's Supper commemorates the Passover sacrifice of Jesus. This is the first way that the Confession grounds the Lord's Supper in the covenantal language of scripture.

Secondly, the Confession connects sacraments in general, and the Lord's Supper in particular, to the nature of covenants when calling them seals. WCF 27.1 states that, "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace" citing Gen 17:7 and Rom 4:11.

Genesis 17 is the account of God reaffirming his covenant with Abram previously established in Genesis 15, renaming him Abraham, and establishing circumcision as the sign of God's covenant with him. In Rom 4:11 Paul states that the sign of circumcision that Abraham received was a seal of the righteousness he had by faith. Colossians 2:11-12 identifies circumcision and baptism as pointing to the same spiritual truth of the death and resurrection of Christ.²¹ The Westminster divines derived and affirmed from scripture that baptism as a sacrament is both a sign and seal. Circumcision was the covenant sign and seal given to Abraham that pointed to Christ's death, and baptism is the New Covenant sign and seal given to Christians that points to Jesus' death,

¹⁹ Luke 22:15. This could be referring to the Passover meal with the disciples before his crucifixion, or to eating the New Covenant meal with them. Either way, there Luke identifies the Lord's Supper being instituted in an explicitly paschal context.

²⁰ The *Pascha Nostrum*, an early 16th century Latin hymn that directly quotes 1 Cor 5:7-8, was translated into English and added to the 1549 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* for use as a canticle for the liturgy of the Lord's Table during the Easter season. It is sometimes used as a call and response among American Presbyterians as part of the liturgy of the Lord's Table.

²¹ WCF 7.5 and 27.5 both cite Col 2:11-12 to argue this point, and WLC 176 cites it to demonstrate that baptism and the Lord's Supper coincide in sealing the same covenant.

burial, and resurrection. Paul stated that circumcision was given to Abraham as a seal of the righteousness received by faith, a gift received by Abraham as a result of Christ's mediation.²²

Therefore a characteristic of baptism as a sacrament of the covenant of grace is its sealing the benefits of Christ's mediation to its recipients. Thus, WLC 162 affirms a sacrament is "an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church to signify, seal, and exhibit, unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation" by citing Rom 4:11.

WLC 162 also cites Paul's quotation of Jesus' words of institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:24-25. The cup of the Lord's Supper is identified here as the new covenant in Christ's blood. It is the covenant proclamation and memorial of Christ's death. By citing 1 Cor 11:24-25 alongside Rom 4:11, WLC sees the two covenant actions as similar in nature and purpose. They are both pointing to the same reality: the death and resurrection of Christ and his return, the first in his death and resurrection by baptism, and then his second advent through the Lord's Supper. This is why WLC 176 then states that baptism and the Lord's Supper "both are seals of the same covenant."²³

The general covenant-form seen in the giving of circumcision by God to Abraham in Genesis 17 is true for the New Covenant sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments

²² WCF 11 and WLC 70-73 address the doctrine of justification. There it is affirmed that justification is a result and gift of Christ's mediation (WLC 69), that the elect receive their righteousness from the work of Christ alone (WCF 11.1, WLC 70-71), by resting in Christ by faith (WCF 11.1-2, WLC 70, 72-73), which is in turn a gift from God on the basis of Christ's work (WCF 11.1). Christ's mediation is the basis of righteousness for the covenant people in the OT (WCF 7.5, 11.6, WLC 34), which Abraham received by faith.

²³ WLC 176 cites Matt 26:27-28, Rom 4:11, and Col 2:12. The lack of citation of any text explicitly addressing the Lord's Supper for this clause can be explained first by the Westminster Assembly's previously noted approach to proof-texts. The secondary reason is that the three passages cited deal not just with baptism, but the return of Christ and his covenant promises in Matthew 26, the death and resurrection of Christ in Colossians 2, and the Old Covenant sacrament being called a seal in Rom 4:11. These citations are emphasizing not just a sacramental understanding in general, but the nature of the covenant being sealed by the sacraments. Since WLC has already affirmed by its citation of 1 Cor 11:24-25 that the Lord's Supper seals the same covenant of grace as baptism, there is no need to cite that specific text a second time. However, assorted verses from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 are cited in WLC 176 as scriptural validation of other clauses.

of the same covenant of grace, making them both seals of that covenant. This sacrament-covenant relationship is central to the WCF's understanding of the Lord's Supper as covenant seal.

Several members of the Westminster Assembly articulated this understanding of the sacrament-covenant relationship. At the Assembly in 1646, Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie²⁴ addressed the question of whether the Lord's Supper was a "converting ordinance." William Prynne²⁵ argued that it was, and therefore the church should not bar anyone from taking it as it could be used to convert non-believers. Rutherford and Gillespie appealed to the covenantal nature of the Lord's Supper as grounds for rejecting understanding it as a converting ordinance. "Gillespie and Rutherford replied [to Prynne], first, by saying that the Lord's Supper was a 'confirming and sealing ordinance,' appointed to 'seal unto a man that interest in Christ and in the covenant of grace which he already hath.'...Moreover, the sacrament sealed God's promises to the elect."²⁶ Rutherford understood the Lord's Supper to be for believers only, as it was a seal of what they already possessed in Christ. To serve it to non-believers in the hope of converting them would be inappropriate, since the sacrament could not seal to them what they did not possess.²⁷ Gillespie

²⁴ Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, who served as a professor of divinity at the University of St. Andrews from 1638, becoming the Rector at St. Mary's College at St. Andrews in 1651. He was one of the four primary Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly. George Gillespie (1613-1648) was a Scottish minister and one of the four Scottish commissioners sent to the Westminster Assembly. He was the youngest member of the Assembly.

²⁵ William Prynne (1600-1669) was a prominent English lawyer and political figure. He was an active author, and during the Long Parliament which overlapped with the Westminster Assembly he wrote extensively in the defense of state control of the church in response to Oliver Cromwell's push for church independency. Between 1644 and 1647 he published four works defending state control of the church.

²⁶ E. B. Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 115. See *The Divine Right Of Church Government and Excommunication* (1646) by Rutherford and *Aaron's Rod Blossoming* (1646) by Gillespie.

²⁷ Rutherford and Gillespie were commenting on who should come to the Lord's Table, and who was authorized to deny or allow access to it. In WLC 173 and WCF 23.3 and 30.4 the authority to withhold the Lord's Supper from non-Christians and unrepentant Christians is given exclusively to the church and its officers, and explicitly denied to civil governments. The Assembly's theology, and Rutherford and Gillespie's conviction in rejecting Erastianism, is grounded not in a political closing of ranks for the Presbyterians, but flows out of the commitment to the Lord's Supper as the seal of God's covenant, which comes with weighty

and Rutherford were following through the logic that sacraments were seals of covenants between two actors; people who are not party to a compact could not have it sealed to them. Therefore the Lord's Supper could not renew a covenant for those who were not partakers of it, and therefore it should be reserved for Christians.²⁸

Edmund Calamy

Edmund Calamy²⁹ focused extensively on the covenant-sacrament relationship. He makes the case that covenants in the OT were sealed with sacrifices, and that the New Covenant established by Christ's sacrifice is likewise sealed with the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper. "And as the people [the Old Testament Jews], by feasting on those sacrifices with God, ratified and confirmed the covenant on their part, so we, by feasting on this sacrifice, ratify and confirm the covenant between God and us."³⁰ Calamy explicitly identifies the OT sacrificial meals as seals of the covenants, and therefore the Lord's Supper as a seal of the New Covenant:

As their sacrifices were federal rites, and signs and seals of the covenant between God and the people, so is our solemn commemoration of the sacrifice once offered for us on the cross a federal rite. And this sacred institution is a sign and seal of the covenant between God and us, founded in the blood of our dearest Savior.³¹

Calamy appeals to the feasting that accompanied the compacts made between Isaac and Abimelech in Gen 26:30 and between Jacob and Laban in Gen 31:44-46 as standard practice in sealing

terms and implications. The state is not given the stewardship of that covenant mystery, nor do individuals have the right to claim the covenant rights apart from the structure of the covenant community.

²⁸ This is affirmed by WLC 170-173 and WCF 29.8. WCF 30.3 specifically says that church censures, such as prohibiting access to the Lord's Supper, are necessary in order to prevent God's covenant and its seals from being profaned.

²⁹ Edmund Calamy (1600-1666) was an English minister and theologian. Prior to the formation of the Westminster Assembly, Calamy was active in articulating and defending presbyterian polity. Van Dixhoorn notes that the WCF chapter on the Lord's Supper was handled by a committee of the Assembly that included Calamy. Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes* Vol. 4., 330-331.

³⁰ Edmund Calamy, "The Lord's Supper is a Federal Ordinance," 23-37 in *The Puritans on the Lord's Supper*. (ed. Don Kistler, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 33.

³¹ *Ibid*, 32-33.

covenants among people in the ancient near east. He then appeals to the sacrifices made by the Israelites accompanying the covenant in Exod 24:5, 8 as OT examples of sacrifices being used to seal covenants as the ideal form.³² The covenant form present in the OT sets the interpretive grid for understanding covenant forms in the NT. As OT covenants required sacrificial meals to seal the compacts, so too does the NT require a covenant seal.

While the meals listed by Calamy took place at the initiation of the covenants, and sealed the compacts as a way of affirmation, other OT examples of ongoing covenant meals were also appealed to by him. OT covenants were reaffirmed by regular covenant feasting. By regularly participating in covenant feasts, the OT people of God were not only receiving confirmation of the covenant promises, but were participating in covenant renewal. Calamy states,

[It] may be further observed that eating God's sacrifices was a federal rite between God and those who offered them....and sacrifices being seals of the covenant, feasting upon the remainders of them was a further engagement to those who offered them to fulfill their part of the covenant with God, by whom, by their being admitted to feast with Him, they had reason to hope they were accepted.³³

Calamy understood the sacrifices of the Mosaic system to be seals of the covenant God had made with Israel. The sacrifices made, and the feasting upon the leftovers by the people, served as covenant ratifications and renewal. In the same way, feasting upon the sacrament of the New Covenant, the Lord's Supper, served as a covenant ratification and renewal for the church. The elements were not by themselves the seal, but the meal itself in its entirety functioned as such. By similarly partaking of the Lord's Supper habitually, the church is regularly reconfirmed in the New Covenant.³⁴

³² *Ibid*, 27, 29.

³³ *Ibid*, 31-32.

³⁴ Habitual and regular does not necessarily indicate weekly. WCF and WLC are silent on how often a congregation should partake of the Lord's Supper. *The Directory of Public Worship* produced by the Westminster Assembly opens up its section on the Lord's Supper with, "The communion, or supper of the Lord, is

The meals attached to the making of covenants in the OT were seals first by symbolizing covenant ratification. These ongoing meals in the OT, especially the Passover, were seals by recommitting the people to the covenant and reconfirming it. The New Covenant, in following the covenant form, requires a seal as much as the Old Covenant did.

Calamy is first relying upon the establishment of the Lord's Supper and its connection to the Passover by Jesus to affirm that the covenant-seal forms of the OT are being repeated in the NT. Secondly, Paul's words in 1 Cor 11:23-26 affirm that the Lord's Supper is an ongoing meal of the church, practiced in memorial to Christ's establishment of the New Covenant. Calamy thus provides a clearer picture of the theology of WCF and its use of those proof-texts by arguing that the church is participating in covenant reaffirmation and renewal when it partakes of the Lord's Supper. His language of "further engagement" reveals one aspect of how members of the Westminster Assembly thought of the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal. It functions as a memorial to Christ's work and establishment of the New Covenant. By following the interpretive grid of the OT covenant-meal form, the divines understood the church to be reaffirming its commitment to its covenant terms, and likewise being confirmed by being reminded of the covenant terms established by a rite between God and his people.³⁵

Edward Reynolds and Richard Vines

Edward Reynolds³⁶ used similar arguments to Calamy in his work *Meditations on the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Last Supper*. Reynolds goes so far as to argue that without a seal, a covenant

frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge."

³⁵ WLC 174.

³⁶ Edward Reynolds (1599-1676) was a minister in the Church of England who sided with the presbyterians in the English Civil War. He served as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford and the Dean of Christ Church from 1648-1650, and later served as the Bishop of Norwich from 1661 until his death in 1676. He

loses a necessary and defining characteristic, and that the sacrament ceases to be a sacrament if it is not a seal as well.³⁷ He argues that all covenants require seals, including the New Covenant:

Covenants are not to be presented without seals. Now the seal of our covenant is the blood of Christ: no testament is of force but by the death of the testator. Whosoever therefore we present unto God the truth of his own free covenant in our prayers, let us not forget to show him his own seal too, by which we are confirmed in our hope therein.³⁸

Here Reynolds understands that covenant seals serve the purpose of showing both parties the commitment involved in the covenant. The people receiving the Supper are reminding themselves and each other of God's covenant promises, and the seals of the covenant are displayed to God. God does not need to be reminded of or urged to keep his covenant obligations. The display of the seal of the Supper to God serves rather as an expression of thankfulness in worship for "his own free covenant." WLC 168 says that in the Supper the participants "testify and renew their thankfulness." Reynolds is expounding WLC by expressing another element of the importance of the repetition of the Lord's Supper. It is not only a covenant renewal, but a means of urging us on to renewed thankfulness in worship. The Lord's Supper as covenant seal should draw that thankfulness out of the participants by compelling them gratefully to acknowledge the free covenant gift of God.

Reynolds here also identified the necessary seal of the New Covenant as both the blood of Christ and the Lord's Supper – not as two separate seals, but as two aspects of the same seal.³⁹

contributed The General Thanksgiving prayer as part of the office of Morning Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

³⁷ Edward Reynolds, "Meditations on the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Last Supper," in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Edward Reynolds, Lord Bishop of Norwich*. (eds. Benedict Riveley and Alexander Chalmers, Vol. 3., 5-172, B. Holdsworth, 1826. Accessed March 8, 2016. <https://books.google.com/books?id=LOy61HKObwsC&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false>), 110.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 126-127.

³⁹ Reynolds is relying upon the language used by Jesus in Matt 26:27-28 and found in Heb 9:16-17.

This nuance was also articulated by Richard Vines, another Westminster divine who wrote on the Lord's Supper as a seal of God's covenant.⁴⁰ Vines argues that all covenants between God and sinful men are sealed in blood,⁴¹ and says in commenting on Matt 26 that the blood of Christ seals and confirms to Christians the remission of sins. Citing 1 Cor 11 and Rev 1:10, he argues that Jesus is the one who appoints the Lord's Supper as the seal of his covenant and ratifies it with his blood.⁴² Vines understands Jesus' blood as the proper seal of the covenant. Citing 1 Cor 11:1, Gen 17:11, 13, and Rom 4:11, he says: "For in scripture both signs figuratively representing, or Sacramentally sealing, do bear the name of the things represented or sealed."⁴³ The Lord's Supper as a seal then conveys to Christians their participation and comfort in the covenant sealed in Christ's blood.⁴⁴ Jesus seals the covenant of grace with his shed blood on the cross, but the Lord's Supper bears the name of Jesus' blood, and to believers bears the effect of Christ's blood in sealing the covenant to them.

Reynolds and Vines are employing arguments also used by WCF 29.5 on the Lord's Supper: "The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ."⁴⁵ WCF 27.2, citing Gen 17:10,

⁴⁰ Richard Vines (1600-1656) was an English minister. He served as the Master of Pembroke Hall at the University of Cambridge from 1644-1650.

⁴¹ Richard Vines, *A Treatise of the Institution, Right Administration, and Receiving of the Sacrament of the Lords-Supper* (London: William Miller and Robert Boulter, 3rd ed, 1677), 127.

⁴² *Ibid*, 53. Vines cites Rev 1:10 as another example of an ordinance established by Jesus and called by his name. "The Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper are particularly in Scripture called by his Name, the Lord's." *Ibid*, 54. The connection between the two ordinances is found in that Jesus establishes them by his death, names and is the namesake of them, and presides over them. "...the Lord's Supper is the memorial of his death; for his death and resurrection, *have a Supper*, and a day to memorialize them" *Ibid*, emphasis original.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 126-127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 132.

⁴⁵ Citing Matt 26:26-28.

Matt 26:27-28, and 1 Cor 10:16-18 also states, “There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.” The citation of 1 Cor 10:16-18 here is particularly illuminating for the theology of the Westminster divines. The bread and cup of the Supper are identified by Paul as participation in the blood and body of Christ by believers. The Lord’s Supper as the seal of the New Covenant established in Christ’s blood, called the body and blood of Christ, is truly by a spiritual union the body and blood of the crucified Jesus, which effects the benefits of his sacrifice. In partaking the believer does really receive and feed upon Christ. The Westminster divines do not teach that the bread and wine physically change into Christ’s body, but that the body of Christ is really present to the partakers by faith.⁴⁶ As a sacrament of the New Covenant, the Lord’s Supper functions as a seal to the degree to which it corresponds to the blood of Christ which was poured out for the establishment of that covenant. In other words, the Lord’s Supper is a seal of the covenant insofar as it can be called truly the body and blood of Jesus. This is what WCF means when it says there is a sacramental union between the thing (the Lord’s Supper) and the thing signified (Christ crucified and risen).

This is how Reynolds and Vines are able to describe both the Lord’s Supper and the blood of Christ as the proper seal of the New Covenant. Reynolds is worth quoting at length,

This then is a singular benefit of this Sacrament, the often repetition and celebration whereof, is (as it were) the renewing, or rather the confirming with more and more seals our patent of life; that by so many things, in the smallest whereof it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have our refuge to lay hold on him, who in these

⁴⁶ WCF 29.6-7, WLC 170 and similar language for baptism in WCF 28.6. The term “real presence” is often used in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran traditions to denote Christ’s physical presence contained in the bread and wine. The Westminster divines, following Calvin (*Institutes* 4.17.10-11), who in turn is following Augustine in asserting that “no one bears away from this Sacrament more than is gathered with the vessel of faith” (*Institutes* 4.17.33, page 920), use the language of “really” or “truly” not to denote that the elements of the Supper become the physical body of Christ, but that the Church feeds on Christ in truth, by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same manner as the partakers’ physical body is truly nourished by the bread and wine, their faith is truly nourished by spiritually feeding upon Christ.

holy mysteries is set before us: for the Sacrament is not only a sign to represent, but a seal to exhibit that which it represents. In the sign we see, in the seal we receive him; in the sign we have the image, in the seal the benefit of Christ's body: for the nature of a sign is to discover and represent that which in itself is obscure or absent, as words are called signs and symbols of our invisible thoughts: but the property of a seal is to ratify and establish that which might otherwise be ineffectual: for which cause, some have called the Sacrament by the name of 'a ring,' which men use in sealing those writings, unto which they annex their trust and credit. And as the Sacrament is a sign and seal from God to us, representing and exhibiting his benefits, so should it be a sign and seal from us to God; a sign to separate us from sinners, a seal to oblige us to all performances of faith and thankfulness on our part required.⁴⁷

Reynolds, like Calamy, places the value of the Lord's Supper on its repetition. But Reynolds emphasizes the regular reception and ratification of Christ and his benefits in the Supper: the Lord's Supper as a sign of the covenant serves to remind and commemorate the establishment and the benefits of the covenant, and as the covenant's seal it presents the body of Christ to the church and ratifies the covenant promises of God met in Christ's death such that they are effectual.⁴⁸ The Lord's Supper as a seal of the covenant delivers Christ truly to the believing participant. Jesus and his benefits, all that he accomplished in his death and resurrection, are brought to bear in the Supper on the participating believer.⁴⁹ This is how Vines can say that Christ's blood seals the remission of sins to believers while commenting on the cup of the Supper being called the blood of the covenant in Matt 26. The Supper can be the seal of the covenant because of its true sacramental correspondence to the blood of Christ.

⁴⁷ Reynolds, *Meditations*, 84.

⁴⁸ It is not quoted by Reynolds, but he is echoing the theology of 2 Cor 1:20-22, where Paul assures the Corinthians that all the promises of God (which would include the "patent of life" referenced by Reynolds) are yes and amen in Christ. God has established his people in Christ, has sealed them, and placed the Spirit in their hearts as a guarantee of that promise. In the covenant seal of the Lord's Supper the church receives Christ truly as an assurance that promises of God are upheld.

⁴⁹ These benefits are outlined in WLC 65-83 and flow from a believer's union and communion with Christ. The Supper does not establish this union with Christ, but confirms the truth of that union to believers. WLC 172 and 174 on the Supper instruct on how the Supper is to stir up and remind believers of that truth and strengthen them in their faith.

Reynolds and Vines recognize that the Lord's Supper seals in different ways from the way it signifies. It is a sign of the covenant, and by sealing Christ's promises to the believer, it truly and really does ratify the benefits of the covenant. There is a spiritual reality by which Christ comforts and nourishes his people by sealing them in affirmation of his covenant truth. This is done not by something intrinsic in the sacramental elements at any particular point in the administration, but by Christ's action in the meal. Vines' conviction is that the sacrament has no power to seal in itself, but Christ is really sealed in the sacrament because as a seal, the Supper passes Christ to his own:

Thus the Sacrament is a seal of confirmation and conveyance of the inward Grace to the hand or faith of a believing soul: And as really the estate doth pass by the Seal into your right and possession, not by any inward work or power of the Seal in it itself, but by the use it's of in sealing and conveying; so really is Christ, and all his treasure passed over unto you that receive him by faith, not in respect of any worthiness or virtue in the very outward Sacrament, but in and by the use it's of, by Christ's appointment to seal, confirm and convey. That excellent place speaks my mind fully, [then quotes 1 Cor 10:16].⁵⁰

The Lord's Supper is a stamp from Christ to his people, where he as Lord of the meal authenticates them as his own and ratifies the benefits of his mediation to them through his seal. Vines states the whole covenant that Christ established is sealed by both the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but that the Lord's Supper specifically looks to the Christian's progress and confirmation in the covenant, which involves both the building up of, and the fellowship of the Christian with Christ.⁵¹ Christ regularly seals the benefits of his mediation to his people and confirms their possession of him by the repetition of the sacramental meal.

The benefits of Christ are truly sealed in the Supper, just as a king's decree may truly be sealed.⁵² But just as the wax of a royal seal is ineffective for anyone to whom the benefit is not

⁵⁰ Vines, *Treatise*, 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 285.

⁵² Robert Letham follows this line of thought on ratification and authentication in his commentary on the Assembly, "The Lord's Supper seals these benefits [the fruits of Christ's passion: effectual calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, saving faith, repentance, good works, perseverance, and assurance],

intended, the Lord's Supper does not apply Christ to those outside of the New Covenant. Eating the sacrament and expecting that alone to seal you is like thinking that the wax of a royal seal automatically clothes or feeds you.⁵³ Reynolds put it this way, "all the merits of [The Lord's Supper] obsignate, doth no more than the seal of a king, without any grant or patent whereunto it should be joined; in which there is no profit beyond the bare wax and much danger in trifling with so sacred a thing."⁵⁴ Vines is following the analogy also used by Reynolds and employed earlier by Ussher.⁵⁵

Vines understood that the Lord's Supper did truly seal the benefits of Christ to the believer, but that partaking of it as an unbeliever was not ineffectually harmless, but dangerous to that participant. "For as the same Signet or Seal of a Prince, doth to one seal a pardon, to another an execution: so this very Sacrament is to a Believer a seal of pardon, to another, as it were, the seal of his condemnation."⁵⁶

Jesus truly is sealed in the Supper, and the believer who partakes in faith receives Christ with all of his benefits. However, to partake of the seal of the covenant without faith is to eat and drink the judgment of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor 11. Vines understands that the judgment comes because

affirming them and assuring us of their truth and reality. In the 1640s, a seal was something that authenticated or confirmed something, or attested a promise, often of a covenant." Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub, 2009), 348.

⁵³ Vines, *Treatise*, 299.

⁵⁴ Reynolds, *Meditations*, 12-13.

⁵⁵ Ussher's understanding of the Lord's Supper is that Christ is given in the sacrament in the same manner in which a legal deed gives over property; the deed itself is not the property, but contains the force of the issuing legal body, which guarantees the property. The Lord's Supper seals Christ to his people in the same way that the wax containing a royal signet seals the deed to the person to whom it was issued. As the wax of a seal has no validity apart from the person to whom it was intended, so the Lord's Supper does not seal someone to whom Christ has not been already given. Ussher makes the case from 1 Cor 11 that for the reprobate or the unworthy to partake of the Lord's Supper is to actually twist the seal of Christ's communion into a seal of divine revenge. Ussher, *Whole Works*, Vol 1. 197.

⁵⁶ Vines, *Treatise*, 184. Reynolds' comments, previously quoted, are consistent with Vines, but emphasize that the force of a king's signet ring obligates the recipients of a letter to follow its contents; Christians in receiving the covenant seal of God are obligated to the faith and thankfulness that stems from the covenant conditions.

the Supper is not just called a seal, but is a seal of the covenant. For someone without faith to partake of the Lord's Supper is to eat the covenant seal without being party to the covenant, which is a violation of the covenant terms and an egregious sin.⁵⁷ As Gillespie and Rutherford argued, this should preclude non-believers from participating in the Lord's Supper. But the elements of the sacrament are the Lord's Supper whether or not the participants believe them to be so, and thus they still have a covenant force. To eat the meal apart from faith in Christ is to grasp at his benefits apart from his lordship, and is to make a mockery of the sacrifice of Jesus. By breaking the covenant terms, by eating the covenant seal without being party to the covenant, the unbelieving participant becomes guilty of the body and blood of Christ. The force of the covenant does not disappear when the participant is unworthy, for without Christ bearing the judgment for sin in the covenant terms, he is bringing that judgment upon himself. This is why Ussher and Vines can describe the Lord's Supper as either a seal of divine revenge or condemnation for the unworthy participants. Their comments do not suppose that the unworthy partaker is truly feeding on Christ, but is in violation of the covenant terms of the sacrament established by the Lord. To participate in the covenant meal is to accept the covenant terms, but a nonmember of the covenant community who participates is then accepting, albeit inadvertently, terms of divine condemnation upon a sinner.

The Lord's Supper really does seal the benefits of Christ's redemption to the participating believer, just as the sealing of a deed truly transfers legal ownership from one party to another. But, just as a deed or key being stolen does not indiscriminately grant legitimate ownership to the thief, eating the Lord's Supper without faith effects only judgment. Reynolds argues that the Holy Spirit

⁵⁷ WCF 29.8 states, "Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries; or be admitted thereunto."

uses the Supper as a divine instrument to actively confirm and apply the benefits of Christ to those who believe in him, but the instruments are only effective according to the will of God, not in themselves, so that an unbeliever cannot steal and usurp the divine sealing. Reynolds makes the case that the true seal of God's covenant is the Holy Spirit as an invisible seal, of which the sacrament was a visible seal,

To the soul alone by the testimony of his Spirit, which is both the seal and the witness of God's covenant ; and, Secondly, Both to the soul and to the senses by that double bond, his Word written or preached, and his seal visibly exhibited to the eye and taste...and these seals, annexed unto the Word or patent of God's promise, have been ever proposed unto the church in all its estates, and are nothing else but that which we call 'a sacrament.' So that as the testimony of the Spirit is an invisible seal, and earnest to the soul; so is the sacrament a visible seal, and earnest to the sense: both, after a several manner, ratifying and confirming the infallible expectation of that future reward, which as well the senses as the soul shall, in God's presence, really enjoy, after they have fulfilled the service which God requireth.⁵⁸

Reynolds understands the seal of the Lord's Supper to correspond with the Holy Spirit sealing believers. The Holy Spirit is truly the seal of the believer, with the Lord's Supper representing that. The Lord's Supper, according to Reynolds, really does seal the benefits of Christ's redemption to the believer, because it truly represents the sealing of the Holy Spirit. This explains his phrase "earnest to the soul;" just as the carnal elements of the Supper are earnest and are experienced in the believer's body, so is the spiritual truth of what is exhibited experienced in the soul.

While not explicitly stated by Reynolds, the claim that the Holy Spirit is the true seal to which the sacraments correspond is drawn primarily from Eph 1:13⁵⁹ and is expressed in other

⁵⁸ Reynolds, *Meditations*, 7.

⁵⁹ Markus Barth provides two helpful ways of thinking through what the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Eph 1:13 is referencing, though he is specifically wrestling with the question of the relationship of sealing to baptism. Barth's first option is summarized as follows, "Since Eph. 1:13-14 means by 'sealing' an event following upon such hearing and believing [the gospel], i.e. an event that assures men of their forthcoming inheritance and redemption as 'God's own people,' this text appears to speak of baptism." The second exegetical option Barth presents arrives at a broader meaning in this summary, "Sealing is the designation, appointment, and equipment of the saints for a public ministry - a ministry which includes the power to understand, to endure, to pray, to sing, and to live in hope." I am inclined to follow the course laid out by Barth's first option. While sealing could have other meanings in the Ephesians context, the eschatological

Reformed documents.⁶⁰ WCF 18.2 quotes Eph 1:13-14, and cites those verses along with Eph 4:30 and 2 Cor 1:21-22, stating that the Holy Spirit has sealed the people of God until the day of redemption.⁶¹ Reynolds is not contradicting himself or Vines on the true sealing nature of the Supper; the Holy Spirit can be the proper invisible seal of the covenant, while the blood of Christ is also the covenant seal. This is consistent with the relationship between the redemption accomplished by Christ and its application by the Holy Spirit, as WCF 29.1 states. The Westminster Standards teach that the Holy Spirit makes the elect participants in the redemption Christ procured and Christ effectively persuades his people through the Holy Spirit.⁶² The Holy Spirit is Christ's guarantee to his people, and seals their union and communion with him. Christ has provided his church means of growing in the grace of his mediation, which the Holy Spirit works by faith.⁶³ When Reynolds says that the Holy Spirit is the seal of the covenant to which the Lord's Supper corresponds, he is describing the Spirit as the applicator who makes Christ's shed blood effective for salvation. Jesus' blood is the seal which puts the covenant terms into force, and is communicated to believers when they eat and drink the Supper in faith. The sacramental union between the elements of the Supper and the corresponding redemptive blood of Christ is established by the Holy Spirit, by whom Christ has sealed his people for salvation. The Holy Spirit can be described as the proper seal

nature of the sealing spoken of in Eph 4:30 and the soteriological context of the sealing in Eph 1:11-14 strongly suggest that the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians is speaking of the same reality that baptism sacramentally seals. Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1974), 135, 143.

⁶⁰ The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1548), drawn up by John Calvin and edited by Henry Bullinger to forge unity between the Reformed and the Lutherans, affirms in Article 15 that the true seal of the sacraments is the Holy Spirit. While other contemporary Reformed confessions affirm the sacraments generally and the Lord's Supper in particular as covenant seals, only the *Consensus* specifically says that the Holy Spirit is the proper seal of the sacraments.

⁶¹ On the doctrine of adoption, WCF 12.1 also quotes and cites Eph 4:30 to state that those who are justified are sealed as God's children.

⁶² WCF 8.8, 10.1-2, WLC 57-58, 67-68.

⁶³ These means include along with the sacraments the Word, which Reynolds included as the second half of the "double-bond," and prayer. WLC 154-155, 161, 178.

of the covenant because he is the applicator of the seal of Christ's blood. The Lord's Supper can only correspond to the work of Christ because of the work of the Spirit in making it so.⁶⁴ Reynolds' articulation of this is that the Holy Spirit functions as the invisible seal of Christ's redemption, with the Lord's Supper functioning as the visible seal made effective by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In summary, the Westminster Divines made the case that the covenant nature of the Lord's Supper is the primary biblical warrant for labeling the sacrament a "seal." Jesus' words at the institution of the Supper identify it as the meal of the New Covenant. As all other covenant ratifications in the OT utilized seals to confirm them, so too does the New Covenant require a seal to affirm its terms and obligations. The paschal setting of the institution of the Supper, and the appeal made to that setting by Paul in 1 Cor 11, lend a particular weight to this argument in the judgment of the Divines. Since Jesus' blood is the true seal of the New Covenant made effective by the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the seal of the church's salvation, and the Lord's Supper corresponds to the sacrifice of Christ, it can be truly called the seal of the New Covenant. As a seal, the Divines believed that the Lord's Supper truly applies the person and benefits of Christ to the believer in covenant renewal as by faith the recipient is able to feed on Christ. This repeated feeding seals the covenant promises of God to his people and the covenant obligations of the people to God by confirming the covenant promises in Christ. Eating the Lord's Supper condemns unbelievers by their very participation they are in violation of the covenant terms. The blood of Christ is the true seal of the covenant. The Holy Spirit is the invisible seal who applies Christ's blood to the believer, with the Lord's Supper as the visible seal of that application.

⁶⁴ WLC 57-59 says that Christians may partake of the benefits of Christ's mediation, secured by his redemptive work, through the application of them by the Holy Spirit. This application happens first in the effective calling (WLC 67) of the elect by God to Christ through the power of the Spirit, whereby he regenerates them. It also includes sanctification (WLC 75), whereby the Spirit applies the death and resurrection of Christ to the believer as he continues to renew them in the image of God. The Lord's Supper is a seal of the benefits of Christ's mediation, which includes sanctification, which is applied by the Holy Spirit.

2

The Lord's Supper as Covenant Seal in the Post-Assembly Puritans

Tracing the theme of the Lord's Supper as covenant seal in the Reformed tradition from the Westminster Assembly to the Princeton theologians requires addressing the interim period. There is no single organization or assembly that provides an institutional locus for this development. A review of the figures and movements from this period cited by the Princetonians is the most helpful and pertinent organizing tool. This chapter focuses on two British Puritans, John Owen and Thomas Ridgley because of their use by the Princetonians in the Nevin-Hodge debate. Within the works and debates of these figures we find development of the theological understanding of the Lord's Supper as seal from the Westminster Assembly. Most of that development is not grounded on the biblical basis for calling the sacrament a seal, but on what it means in practice to understand it as such.

John Owen

John Owen's⁶⁵ extensive writings directly interacted with the Lord's Supper largely in a pastoral context, and there is limited secondary work on his theology of the Supper.⁶⁶ His work on the topic of the Lord's Supper demonstrates a consistency with and development from the work of

⁶⁵ John Owen (1616-1683) was a prominent Nonconformist English minister. He served as chaplain to Oliver Cromwell throughout the 1640s. Owen succeeded Westminster divine Edward Reynolds as Dean of Christ Church in Oxford and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, from 1652-1660. He sat as the sole member of Parliament for Oxford University from 1654-1655.

⁶⁶ There is debate over whether the three sermons on the Lord's Supper posthumously attributed to Owen and included in his complete works are actually his (*Works* XVI: 527-532). But there is "good reason" to believe that they are Owen's. See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 220.

the Westminster divines⁶⁷ including the Supper's function as a seal, and the relationship of the sealing of the Holy Spirit and the sealing of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁸

Owen affirmed that the Lord's Supper functions as a seal of the covenant. In his *Greater Catechism* he goes into detail on the sealing of the Lord's Supper, "God [in Christ] confirmeth the promises of the covenant to all believers."⁶⁹ John Bellingham observes that Owen is using the language of "sealing" first and foremost to communicate the objective covenant of God being communicated to believers in their sacramental participation, rather than emphasizing a subjective expression of individual faith.⁷⁰ Owen embraces the pattern also expressed by the Westminster

⁶⁷ Ferguson outlines Owen's sacramentology as follows: Owen taught that the sacraments were signs and seals of the promises of the covenant (*Works*, VII.441); in and by a visible pledge they contain a promise, and exhibit the thing promised to those who believe (*Works*, XXIV.166); defined as 'Visible seals of God's spiritual promises, made unto us in the blood of Jesus Christ' (*Works*, I.469); 'whereby God in [Christ] confirmeth the promises of the covenant to all believers, re-stipulating of them growth in faith and obedience' (*Works*, I.490); that it is Christ who exhibits himself in the Supper (*Works*, IX.589); the elements are not "empty signs, nor are they carnal signs, for it is Christ himself...who is present sacramentally and spiritually, to be received, not by eating, but by believing." (*Works*, IX.563, 584; cf. XV.473). Ferguson, *Owen*, 211-212, 222.

⁶⁸ Owen does not explicitly develop the connection between the sealing of the Holy Spirit and the sealing of the covenant in the Lord's Supper, but some of his comments on the nature of the Holy Spirit's sealing from Eph 1:13 and 4:30 are relevant to the discussion and consistent with the approach of Calamy and Reynolds. "To seal something is to impart the image of the seal to the thing sealed. The character of the seal is stamped on the thing sealed. In this sense, the effective communication of the image of God to us should be our sealing. The Spirit in believers, really communicating the image of God in righteousness and true holiness to the soul, seals us. To have the stamp of the Holy Spirit as an evidence to the soul that he has been accepted by God is to be sealed by the Spirit...The promise is the great grant and conveyance of life and salvation on Christ to the souls of believers. That we may have full assurance of the truth and the irrevocability of the promise, God gives us the Spirit to satisfy our hearts of it. So the Spirit is said to seal us by assuring our hearts of those promises and the faithfulness of the God who promised. But though many expositors take this line, I do not see how this accords with the true meaning of the word. It is not said that the promise is sealed, but that we are sealed. And when we seal a deed or grant to anyone, we do not say the man is sealed, but that the deed or grant is sealed." Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, Vol. 2, 184. Ferguson summarizes the understanding of the seal of Holy Spirit by the Puritans in general and John Owen in particular, *Owen*, 117-122.

⁶⁹ Chapter 22, Q&A 1 of Owen's *Greater Catechism*, in Owen's *Works* I.490, cited in *Christ Exhibited and the Covenant Confirmed: The Eucharistic theology of John Owen*. John Bellingham, *Christ Exhibited*, (Master's Thesis), 98.

⁷⁰ Bellingham, in answering the question of whether Owen's understanding of the Lord's Supper as a seal is following the more objective meaning of John Calvin, or the more subjective understanding of Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, notes, "Because this sealing, or confirmation, derives from God's sovereign

Assembly that the covenant nature of the Lord's Supper as seal finds its biblical origin first in the covenant forms of the OT. Jon Payne argues that Owen's understanding of the OT covenant forms is that "...it is Christ who fulfills these [OT covenant] promises and initiates new covenant signs taking the place of the old ones."⁷¹ Owen, like the divines, connects the covenant forms of the NT sacraments to the OT covenant forms. He also appeals not just to the various covenant administrations within the Covenant of Grace as OT evidence of this form, but also to the forms present prior to the establishment of the Covenant of Grace.⁷² Bellingham comments,

Although the Lord's Supper seals the Covenant of Grace – the theological Covenant which relates to the redemption of the elect – Owen also uses sacramental language with respect to the other theological covenants [in scripture]. For example, he speaks in question five of the *Greater Catechism* of God's covenant with Adam being sacramentally sealed by the tree of knowledge of good and evil...For Owen and the Puritans, the establishment of a divine covenant was always accompanied by a visible token, given by God as a pledge to seal the promises contained for his elect people.⁷³

The Lord's Supper as a seal of the covenant follows the pattern established by God, not just in the OT as part of the divine plan of redemption, but in the manner in which God created the world. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the seal of the covenant God made with Adam and Eve, and stands as an example of all of God's covenants possessing attached seals.

In the Lord's Supper, the covenant is sealed to the participating believer through obsignation, that is, through the formal ratification of the blood of Christ.

Christ is present in this ordinance by obsignation: he comes here to seal the covenant; and therefore the cup is called 'The new testament in the blood of Christ.' How in the blood of Christ? It is the new covenant that was sealed, ratified, confirmed, and so made stable, as you

initiative and not from human obedience, the conclusion follows that Owen is using the word 'seal' in an objective sense." Bellingham, 98.

⁷¹ Payne, 33.

⁷² WCF 4.2, 19.1 and WLC 20, 30, and 97 describes the conditions and promises God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as a 'covenant of works' or 'covenant of life'. This covenant was abrogated by Adam and Eve in their sin, and after which God initiated the Covenant of Grace.

⁷³ Bellingham, 102, referencing Owen's *Works* I.474.

have heard, by the blood of Jesus Christ. For, from the foundation of the world, no covenant was ever intended to be established, but was confirmed by blood; and this covenant is confirmed by the blood of Christ; and he comes and seals the covenant with his own blood in the administration of this ordinance.⁷⁴

Owen grounds the sealing of the new covenant in Christ's blood in the creation order of covenants. From the beginning of creation all covenants have required blood; the covenant of works made with Adam and Eve stipulated their death for trespassing the seal of that covenant, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Lord's Supper is the seal of the new covenant of the Covenant of Grace, which is established and confirmed by the blood of Christ. Owen uses "obsignation" synonymously with "sealing", and describes Christ as coming to the ordinance and sealing the covenant with his blood to the partaking believer: "...in the administration of the Supper, 'Christ comes and seals, confirms and ratifies the new covenant personally to the partaker by his own blood.'" ⁷⁵ Owen connects the presence of Christ in the Supper to his sealing of the covenant. This aspect of Christ's presence in the objective sealing of the Supper is not developed further by him, but remains consistent with the theology of the Westminster divines.

Owen also emphasized that the sealing of the covenant in Christ's blood in the Supper was the ground by which a mutual sealing took place. "Owen promulgates the concept of mutual sealing whereby God not only seals the believer, but the believer also seals or confirms the covenant by his sincere God-given faith and obedience."⁷⁶ This obedience out of sincere faith includes a

⁷⁴ Owen's 10th Discourse on 'Christ's Presence by Obsignation' in Owen's *Works* IX.574, quoted by Payne, 172-173. See Ferguson, 222.

⁷⁵ Payne, 43. He is quoting David Wong's unpublished dissertation, *The Covenant Theology of John Owen* (Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1998).

⁷⁶ Payne, 33-34. Payne's statement that the believer is sealed at the Supper, rather than the Covenant of Grace or God's promises being sealed and received at the Supper, cannot be substantiated from his use of Owen. Payne may be using the phrase "seals the believer" as shorthand for the believer receiving the Supper as a seal, but this is unclear. Nevertheless, his point about Owen's understanding of the mutual aspect of the sealing is helpful.

“wholehearted ‘resignation’ of the mind and will to the Lordship of Christ and His redeeming promises.”⁷⁷ Owen explains at length this statement’s meaning and ramifications:

Know what you come to meet him for; which is, to seal the covenant, –solemnly to take upon yourselves again the performance of your part of the covenant. I hope I speak in a deep sense of the thing itself, and that which I have much thought of. This is that which ruins the world, – the hearing that God hath made a covenant of grace and mercy; it is preached to them, and declared unto them, and they think to be saved by this covenant, though they themselves do not perform what the covenant requires on their part, What great and glorious words do we speak in the covenant, – that God gives himself over unto us, to be our God! Brethren, there is our giving ourselves unto God (to answer this) universally and absolutely. If we give ourselves unto the world, and to our lusts, and to self, we are not to expect any benefit by God's covenant of grace. If it be not made up by our sealing of the covenant of grace, or by universal resignation of ourselves, in all that we are and do, unto him, we do not meet Jesus Christ; we disappoint him when he comes to seal the covenant. ‘Where is this people,’ saith Christ, ‘that would enter into covenant with me?’

Let it be in our hearts to see him seal the covenant of grace as represented in this ordinance; and to take upon ourselves the performance of what is required of us, by a universal giving up ourselves unto God.⁷⁸

Owen understands that Christ sealing the covenant through his blood should be a motivation for believing participants to meet Christ in enthusiastic obedience. Coming to the Lord’s Supper involves believers once again reaffirming their promised covenant obligation to give themselves to God in response to God giving himself to them in the sacrifice of Christ. The mutual sealing in the Lord’s Supper – of Christ’s oblation by his blood to his people, and their commitment to give themselves to God in response – is not merely a component of the Lord’s Supper, or a technical appendage to the covenant terms, but a primary motivator in partaking of the sacrament.

Thomas Ridgley

Thomas Ridgley⁷⁹ wrote extensively on the Lord’s Supper and the sacraments in general as covenant seals in his commentary on WLC. In his opening comments on the sacraments from WLC

⁷⁷ Payne, 43.

⁷⁸ Quoted from Payne, 174-175. Owen’s 10th Discourse on ‘Christ’s Presence by Oblation’ in Owen’s *Works* IX.574-575.

161-164, he expends a significant amount of space to argue that the sacraments being both signs and seals is not a distinction without a difference.⁸⁰ His focus on the biblical difference begins with an appeal to Rom 4:11 and Paul's use of Genesis 17. He asserts that signs,

[Only] signify as they are ordained or designed for that use, by custom or appointment; thus, in civil matters, a staff is a sign of power to exercise an office; the seal of a bond, or conveyance, is the sign of a right that is therein conveyed, or made over to another to possess: It is in this respect that the sacraments are signs of the covenant of grace: They do not naturally represent Christ and his benefits; but they signify them by divine appointment.⁸¹

Ridgley goes on to contrast the signing and sealing of the sacraments. "But, on the other hand, a seal, according to the most common acceptance of the word, imports a confirming sign."⁸² God confirms the faith of Christians principally by "his own truth and faithfulness, whereby the heirs of salvation have strong consolation"⁸³ or else "the internal testimony of the Spirit of God in our hearts. The former is an objective means of confirmation, and the latter a subjective; and this the apostle calls our being established in Christ, and sealed, having the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts."⁸⁴ Ridgley's understanding of the subjective nature of the Holy Spirit's sealing is based not in it being dependent upon an individual's acceptance and experience, but that the seal of the Holy Spirit is placed on a subject. This is in contrast to understanding God's faithfulness being an objective seal that is observable. Ridgley is not emphasizing the effectiveness of the sealing as either objective (*i.e.* dependent upon the divine appointment of the sacrament) or subjective (*i.e.* dependent

⁷⁹ Thomas Ridgley (1667-1734) was a Nonconformist Congregationalist minister in London. From 1712 until his death he was a divinity tutor at Fund Academy in Tenter Alley, Moorefields, an educational institution established by the London Congregational Fund Board.

⁸⁰ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, comp. James P. Wilson (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, Vol. 4., 1815) 163-164.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 164.

⁸² *Ibid*.

⁸³ *Ibid*, citing Heb 15:17-18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 165, citing 2 Cor 1:21, 23.

upon the participant's reaction), but rather, what is sealed: the objective, being the immutable faithfulness of God represented, and the subjective, being the work of the Holy Spirit establishing the individual believer in Christ, present in the heart of the Christian.

Ridgley then states that the sacraments are seals not in this subjective sense of the Holy Spirit's sealing, where the individual is established in Christ, but in the objective sense, wherein the promises of God are made visible.

This is not the [subjective sense] in which we are to understand the word as applied to the sacraments; since if we call them confirming seals, we intend nothing else hereby, but that God has, to the promises that are given to us in his word, added these ordinances; not only to bring to mind this great doctrine, that Christ has redeemed his people by his blood; but to assure them, that they who believe in him, shall be made partakers of this blessing; so that these ordinances are a pledge thereof to them, in which respect God has set his seal, whereby, in an objective way, he gives believers to understand, that Christ, and his benefits, are theirs; and they are obliged, at the same time, by faith, as well as in an external and visible manner, to signify their compliance with his covenant, which we may call their setting to their seal that God is true; as we may allude to that expression of our Saviour, *He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true* John iii. 33, The sacraments are God's seals, as they are ordinances given by him for the confirmation of our faith, that he would be our covenant God; and they are our seals, or we set our seal thereunto, when we visibly profess, which ought to be done also by faith, that we give up ourselves to him, to be his people, and desire to be made partakers of the benefits which Christ hath purchased, in his own way.⁸⁵

Ridgley's argument is that the sacraments are seals of the covenant in that they objectively stand as confirmations of God's covenant promises and the covenant obligations. For Ridgley, the difference between the sacraments as signs and as seals is small. They function as signs by representing, through God's appointment, covenant promises. As seals, they are a type, or subset of, covenant signs, that confirm God's covenant pledges and the obligations of the covenant upon the recipients. By explicitly separating the sealing of the sacraments from the sealing of the Holy Spirit, Ridgley is rejecting the view that the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal objectively impresses the benefits of

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 164-165. Emphasis original.

Christ and his mediation upon the believing participants. Rather, the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal is simply an objective confirmation of and summons to respond to God's covenant.

Ridgley follows this line of thought further, by distinguishing the sealing of the sacraments from their exhibition of Christ's mediation.⁸⁶ In evaluating what it means for the sacraments to exhibit the benefits of Christ's mediation, Ridgley concludes that if, "To exhibit sometimes signifies to show, or present to our view; which word, if it be so understood in this place, imports the same as when it is said, that the sacraments are signs or seals thereof, or significant ordinances for the directing and exciting our faith"⁸⁷ then it would merely be synonymous with WLC's usage of sign and seal, therefore rendering it a needless characteristic. Ridgley then states,

To exhibit sometimes signifies to give, communicate, or convey; and because it is not only distinguished from signifying and sealing in the definition which we have of a sacrament in the Shorter Catechism; but is described as that by which Christ and his benefits are applied unto believers; therefore, I am inclined to think, that it is in this latter sense that the word is to be taken in the answer which we are explaining; and if so, we must distinguish between Christ's benefits being conveyed, made over, exhibited, or applied, by the gift of divine grace, through the effectual working of the Spirit; and this being done by an ordinance, as an external means of grace.⁸⁸

Ridgley argues that it is through the sacraments as exhibitions of the covenant, not as seals of it, that Christ and the benefits of his mediation are applied and conveyed to believers. But Ridgley continues to distinguish between the subjective sealing of the Holy Spirit, and the sacraments as means of application of Christ and his work. He states, "I am bound to conclude, that as the Spirit of God gives these blessings to believers, who engage in a right manner therein; so this grace is

⁸⁶ WLC 162 states that the sacraments were instituted to signify, seal, *and exhibit*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 165

⁸⁸ *Ibid*. In the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) companion question (92) to WLC on this point, it states that in the sacraments the covenant benefits of Christ are "represented, sealed, and applied." Ridgley is defining the term "exhibit" in WLC 164 based on its alternative "applied" in WSC 92. However, he does not consider WLC 177, where the Lord's Supper is to "represent and exhibit" Christ as the companion expression to baptism being the "sign and seal" of regeneration. In WLC 177 "exhibit" is used interchangeably with "seal" as "represent" is used interchangeably with "sign," rather than in addition to it.

represented, and God's people have ground to expect, as far as an ordinance can be the means thereof, that they shall be made partakers of these benefits."⁸⁹ In Ridgley's view, the believers who participate in the sacraments only have reason to *expect*, in full confidence of God's objective faithfulness, that they *will be made* partakers and recipients of Christ and his work. The sacraments as exhibits of the covenant only convey the benefits of Christ's mediation insofar as they communicate the truth and assurance of God's promises. The exhibition of Christ is grounds for expectation of the grace of God being worked, not the means by which God continues to work grace.

Ridgley uses WLC 170's description of how worthy recipients feed upon Christ in the Lord's Supper to expound upon his conclusion in the language of exhibition and application:

As for our feeding on, or being nourished by the body and blood of Christ, these are metaphorical expressions, taken from, and adapted to the nature and quality of the bread and wine by which it is signified; but that which we are to understand hereby, is, our graces being farther strengthened and established, and we enabled to exercise them with greater vigour and delight; and this derived from Christ, and particularly founded on his death. And, when we are said to feed upon him, in order hereunto, it denotes the application of what he has done and suffered, to ourselves.⁹⁰

The acquisition of Christ's benefits for his people took place in his death and resurrection, and at the Lord's Supper participating believers request the forgiveness of their sins on the basis of that work, and along with that renew their covenant commitments. The Lord's Supper exhibits the benefits of Christ's mediation by displaying a visual metaphorical expression for the application of Christ's sacrifice. This objective exhibition is what reminds believers of the redemption purchased by Christ, and therefore invigorates faithfulness in the participants. This is a means of grace by which God strengthens his people and moves them to pray and hope for the covenant blessings of Christ's mediation.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 166.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 245.

This informs Ridgley's theological approach to determine who may come to the Lord's Supper. The objective seal of the covenant, in pointing to the grace of the application of Christ's sacrifice, cannot confirm that application to people outside of the covenant:

We may also observe, that, though the sacraments are appointed to signify to all that partake of them, that Christ has purchased salvation for his people; or, that the work of redemption is brought to perfection: Yet it is they alone that engage herein by faith, who can look upon them as signs or seals to confirm their faith, that they have a right to the benefits of Christ's redemption, as not only signified, but exhibited or applied to them: In this sense the sacraments are signs to them that believe, in such a way as they are to no others.⁹¹

Ridgley's understanding of the objective sealing of the sacraments, in that God objectively declares his covenant purposes to redeem his people, excludes then nonbelievers from sacramental participation. The objective sealing cannot be received by faith where faith does not exist, and the assurance of the exhibition or application of the covenant promises is not for those outside the covenant. Since this is how the sacraments seal and apply the benefits of Christ, the objective nature cannot be in the internal sealing of the Holy Spirit, or nonbelievers without faith would have an identical right to Christ as covenant participants.

In addressing WLC 171 on what preparation is required of those who are going to partake of the Lord's Supper, Ridgley observes that the examination and discernment of 1 Cor 11:28-29 includes potential participants evaluating whether they grasp the covenant meaning of the Lord's Supper as a seal: "In order to our partaking of it aright, we are to enquire, whether we do not want a clear and distinct apprehension of the covenant of grace, and the seals thereof, and how we are to act faith in a way of self-dedication, and how we ought to renew our covenant engagements with God, which we are more especially called to do therein?"⁹² The Lord's Supper stands as an objective seal and sign of the covenant, and understanding what it signifies is critical before coming to it. To

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 166

⁹² *Ibid*, 250.

come to the table in sin, disregarding the objective message of the sacramental seal, is a failure to ascertain the obligation for believers to renew their covenant commitments. Commenting on who may approach the table (WLC 172-173), Ridgley asks rhetorically, “if they do not desire the spiritual blessings of the covenant of grace, what right can they have to make use of the seals thereof?”⁹³ Since the Lord’s Supper is a covenant seal by objectively declaring God’s covenant promises and the benefits therein, those who do not subscribe to the covenant or desire its stipulations and benefits should not participate in the meal.

In summary, Owen followed in the tradition of the Westminster Assembly in regards to the conveyance of the benefits of Christ in the sealing of the Lord’s Supper. He stressed that this sealing was done by Christ because it is Christ who presides over the sacrament and gives himself. The mutual-sealing ongoing in the Supper finds its grounds in Christ first giving and sealing himself to his people, who are then motivated to reaffirm their commitment to God in faith and obedience, which they sealed in the covenant. Ridgley understood the sealing of the Lord’s Supper to be the objective display of God’s covenant promises, while conveyance of Christ’s benefits through the sacraments comes through its exhibition. This exhibition is a conveyance of confidence in the gospel promises. Only those who are able to affirm this objective covenant seal and its promises may come to the Lord’s Supper.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 263.

3

The Half-Way Covenant and New England Congregationalists

Puritans in the American colonies debated and built upon the Westminster Assembly's work on the Lord's Supper as covenant seal, and had a large influence on the later Princeton theologians. This was particularly true for the theologians and ministers involved in the Half-way Covenant controversy. This chapter focuses on New England Puritans either because they were cited by the Princetonians (such as Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Bellamy) or because the debate over the relationship of the Half-way Covenant to the Lord's Supper as a seal would be incomplete without reference to them (such as Solomon Stoddard, Samuel Willard, and Edward Taylor). All the developments addressed here come from Congregationalists, although the Princetonians were decidedly Presbyterian. This cross-denominational pollination in Colonial America led to a significant influence of these Puritans on the overall reformed landscape, including upon those who followed in the theological tradition of the Westminster Assembly.

In New England Congregational theology in the 17th and 18th centuries there arose a dispute around the "Half-Way Covenant."

The Half-Way Covenant of 1662 tried to address the problem that many of the second generation Puritan adults experienced. Although they were baptized as infants, many could not give testimony to their personal regeneration and yet wanted their children baptized. The Synod of 1662 mandated that these parents could substitute a confession of faith (called 'owning the covenant') for a personal testimony of saving grace. This confession would earn for them a type of membership which would give them the privilege of baptizing their children, but not of participating in the Lord's Supper.⁹⁴

Thus, the parents of these children were only considered "half-way" members of the covenant. Their children were eligible for baptism, while the parents remained ineligible for the

⁹⁴ David Paul McDowell, *Beyond The Half-Way Covenant: Solomon Stoddard's Understanding of the Lord's Supper as a Converting Ordinance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xviii.

Lord's Supper.⁹⁵ This dispute found its formal culmination in the New England Congregationalist Synod of 1662, followed by debates over the extent of the Half-Way Covenant. Prior to the Synod the debate was initiated by demographic changes: the number of people becoming church members by confession of faith was dropping, and there was not a uniform practice on whether or not the children of these people could be baptized. While both sacraments were called signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace, they were functionally treated as representing two different things: baptism of children did not require the holiness of the parents, nor did the baptism of converts. Both simply required the acknowledgment of the holiness of the church for the administration of the federal ordinance of baptism. However, the Lord's Supper required personal evidence of regeneration.⁹⁶

Solomon Stoddard

The Synod of 1662 was called to create a uniform practice, but almost immediately this led to some congregations allowing these half-way covenant members access to the Lord's Supper. The Covenant of Grace came to be understood as an internal covenant with individual believers, with the covenant practices of the church reflecting an external, "graceless" covenant.⁹⁷ It was in this context that Solomon Stoddard⁹⁸ put forth an expanded understanding of the Half-way Covenant. Following

⁹⁵ "In the fourth proposition [of the Synod] the presence of two types of church members was admitted. They argued the legitimacy of this from the 'different nature of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.' According to them Baptism sealed 'covenant holiness, as circumcision did,' but the Lord's Supper was the 'Sacrament of growth in Christ...which supposeth a special renewal and exercise of Faith and Repentance in those that partake.'" Peter Y. De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology: 1620-1847* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1945), 114.

⁹⁶ De Jong, 112.

⁹⁷ De Jong, 163. The external covenant that people enjoined in the Half-way Covenant was considered "graceless" since it was not part of the redemptive, Covenant of Grace, which brought salvation by grace.

⁹⁸ Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) was a Congregationalist minister in New England, graduating from Harvard College in 1662. He served as the pastor in Northampton from 1670 until his death. His primary theological sparring partners were his brother-in-law Increase Mather (1639-1701, of Salem Witch Trial fame, and President of Harvard College 1692-1701) and nephew Cotton Mather (1663-1728), both of whom Stoddard eventually convinced to support the Half-way Covenant. See Ralph J. Coffman's *Solomon Stoddard*

William Prynne's arguments, Stoddard argued that the Lord's Supper was not a sacrament of the Covenant of Grace, but an element of worship open to all regardless of their faith. The Supper then took on a role as a converting ordinance for the non-Christian partaker. Because of the Half-way Covenant's formal status from the Synod of 1662, Stoddard was protected from church censure.⁹⁹

Because of Stoddard's understanding of the bifurcated relationship between the Covenant of Grace and the worship of the church, he believed that anyone, regardless of personal holiness or evidence of their claimed faith in Christ, and could attend a congregational worship service, must be allowed access to all elements of the worship of the church. "Stoddard argued: first, that the Lord's Supper was not primarily a seal of personal regeneration, but part of the worship of God which should be open to all who professed faith in Jesus Christ, whether or not they were regenerated."¹⁰⁰ Because of Stoddard's rejection of the Lord's Supper as seal of the Covenant of Grace, access to the sacraments became open to any that merely professed faith or simply wanted to participate, whether or not there was evidence of faith in Christ.

The Half-way Covenant and Stoddard's attempted expansion of it drew a plethora of responses. One prominent peer of Stoddard who rejected the Half-way Covenant was Samuel Willard.¹⁰¹ He wrote an expansive commentary on WSC, and discussed the role that the Lord's Supper played as a covenant seal in contrast to Stoddard's position. Willard reflects some of the same theological developments expressed by Owen, such as as understanding the Tree of the

(Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) for full biographical details, and *Beyond The Half-Way Covenant* for a full consideration of Stoddard's entire approach to the Half-way Covenant.

⁹⁹ Coffman, 79. Stoddard argued that his practice was consistent with the Half-way Covenant, though many other Congregationalists disagreed with him.

¹⁰⁰ McDowell, 41.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Willard (1640-1707) was a colonial minister in Massachusetts who graduated from Harvard College in 1659. He served as a Congregationalist minister from 1663 until his death. From 1701 until his death he replaced Increase Mather as the acting president of Harvard. Willard was a prominent opponent of the Salem Witch Trials.

Knowledge of Good and Evil as the seal of the covenant between Adam and God.¹⁰² Willard stressed that Adam's sin in the garden was a tearing off of the seal from the covenant that it had confirmed. The sacraments were seals of the covenant, and needed to accompany the preached Word, as the scriptures contain the covenant terms and alone inform what is sealed in the sacrament.¹⁰³ However, Willard's theological development of the sacraments as seals ends there. While he was a very prominent opponent of Stoddard, and his theological opposition to the Half-way Covenant dealt with the topic of the sacraments as seals, he only repeated arguments in terms and doctrines familiar to the Westminster divines.¹⁰⁴

Edward Taylor

One of the most critical opponents of Stoddard and the Half-way Covenant was Edward Taylor.¹⁰⁵ While Taylor did not publish much of his criticism of Stoddard and the Half-way Covenant, he spoke in detail against it in his sermons.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² "This sin was against the very Sacrament, or gift, that was given them. This tree [of the knowledge of Good and Evil] was a Sacrament of death; it was that which God gave to Adam to try his love to him by it was a Seal of the Covenant, that was herein violated. Now the Seal is that which ratifies, either the promise, or the threatening. He did, therefore, by this act, as it were, tear off the Seal from the Covenant, that was passed between God and him." Samuel Willard, *A Compleat [sic] Body of Divinity*, (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1722), 192, on WSC 15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 835, on WSC 91.

¹⁰⁴ The sacraments are seals of the Covenant of Grace and confirm the promises of the covenant to the people sealed in the covenant (835, WSC 91); the Lord's Supper sealed the growth in grace and perseverance in the covenant to the believer (844, WSC 93); as a seal of the Covenant of Grace, the Lord's Supper "utterly cuts off all personal merit of our own" in coming to it (866, WSC 96); the Lord's Supper seals grace and faith to believing participants because by looking upon it, they will recall the covenant and have their faith strengthened in grace, and that is how it conveys the good it seals (870, 873, WSC 96, 97); by sealing the pardon of believers, it requires repentance and obedience on their part (876, WSC 97); and as a covenant seal, the Lord's Supper's "Promise of the Covenant is Hypothetical, and not only so, but hath also a Threatening annexed to it..." so that for the one who partakes of it "worthily, it will be a confirming Ordinance to him, and a Seal of the Blessings of the Covenant, for the establishing of his Faith and Consolation; whereas if he do it unworthily; this stands as a witness against him, and ratifieth the Threatening" (881, WSC 97).

¹⁰⁵ Edward Taylor (1642-1729) was an English-born Congregationalist minister in Massachusetts. He emigrated to Massachusetts in 1668 following the restoration of the monarchy and refusing to sign the Act of Uniformity. He graduated from Harvard College in 1671 and then ministered on the western frontier of

The primary end of the sacraments is to seal the Covenant & hence they are called seals from the final cause [author]. Hereby God sealeth unto the believer the truth of the promises: & the believer seals unto God his faith & obedience. The secondary end is the public profession of our faith in God, & communion of saints. Both which final causes are comprehended in these in the description, whereby the blessings of the Covenant represented, are sealingly applied.¹⁰⁷

God is the one who institutes the sacraments as seals, and as such, they first confirm the truth of God's promises to believers. In recognition of that, believers commit themselves to God in faith and obedience. This is the primary purpose of the sacraments; the secondary purpose is to serve as a public profession of faith in God and of membership in the fellowship of the church. By emphasizing the primary purpose of the sacraments as their sealing nature, Taylor is challenging Stoddard that he has wrongly emphasized profession of faith and fellowship as the purpose of the sacraments, and therefore lost sight of their proper role. The sacraments expressed what they corresponded to sacramentally, and are means of grace instituted by God in order to stir up grace by the exercise of them.¹⁰⁸ Since the sacraments corresponded to what God instituted them to convey, being the benefits of the Covenant of Grace, the benefits of redemption are applied by being sealed in the sacraments.¹⁰⁹ Taylor then moves to argue that there must be a union of Christ to the believer

Massachusetts until his death. Taylor was a poet, but his works remained unpublished, at his request, until they were rediscovered in 1937. Taylor is now considered the preeminent Colonial American poet and one of the most powerful writers in American literature. For full biographical details and poetic analysis, see Norman S. Grabo, *Edward Taylor* (New York: Twayne Publishers), 1962.

¹⁰⁶ A full summary of the debate between Stoddard and Taylor can be found in *Edward Taylor vs. Solomon Stoddard: the Nature of the Lord's Supper* edited by Thomas Marion Davis, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981) and *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, edited by Norman S. Grabo (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1966).

¹⁰⁷ *Edward Taylor's "Church Records," and Related Sermons* (eds. Thomas M. Davis, and Virginia L. Davis, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 57-58. Formatting and syntax original.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*.

in order for the sacraments to function as intended; without the union of the soul of the believer to Christ, there is no agreement in the partaking of the sacrament to what it is intended to convey.¹¹⁰

Taylor's concerns are primarily pastoral. He wants to ensure the integrity of the sacraments and the purity of the church, but his main focus is on the faith and confidence of the believers in the church.¹¹¹ He argues that the purpose of the sacramental sealing is to protect against counterfeit covenants. "For where the [the covenant] is not signed & sealed there is a danger of forgery; but where they [sic] are signed, & sealed there is a sure making."¹¹² Since people are so easily led astray by false assurance and hollow gospels, there needs to be some means by which the Covenant of Grace is confirmed. If there is not, the covenant becomes camouflaged among the false covenants. Without the seals, the covenant parties will suffer doubt and fear that they are being deceived. "Parties concerned in covenant, are in fear & doubt of the good they aim at, while the covenant is unsealed but when it is sealed it is not so. So if God's people had no seal unto this covenant there would be doubting. But now God hath sealed it, he hath excluded doubting & so confirmed their faith therein."¹¹³ God has instituted the sacraments in order to calm the fears and doubts of his people. They are seals as an expression of divine comfort. The sacraments are not the covenant, nor does God need to validate himself, but the Lord's Supper as a seal reflects the nature of the covenant. This is not simply true in its correspondence to the bodily sacrifice of Christ, but to the attitude and character of the sacrament.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 59, citing Matt 20:2, 1 Cor 11:27, 29, and Heb 8:9.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 60-62. Taylor spends several pages making the case that the Lord's Supper as a seal of the covenant verifies it as one of the keys of Christ's kingdom given to the church to maintain its purity. Taylor never explicitly says that non-believers should not take the sacraments because it is a seal, but argues that the church has the obligation to exercise its power in wielding the keys by withholding the sacraments from people in violation of the covenant terms.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 59.

¹¹³ *Ibid*.

From the end of these seals this appears to be so...that every soul believing may come into a public covenant with God: God greatly requires this, for in this public covenanting there is a Great Solemnity & awe of God upon the soul, but now in sealing there is this public covenanting. But where this is not, there is no public, or any, covenanting & therefore it is so.¹¹⁴

The covenants that God has made with his people require solemnity and awe, and should stir that reaction in their souls. The sacraments are then a means of communicating the covenant truth of God to his people, and as such are not just memorials or forensic declarations of God's purposes, but intended to move their affections in awe and worship. In this way the sacraments are means of love and comfort to God's people. Taylor is arguing that Stoddard failed to see that the sacraments cannot accomplish this if they are not seals of the Covenant of Grace, but merely statements of faith open to all regardless of their covenant status.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards opposed the Half-way Covenant and its expansion under Stoddard.¹¹⁵ Edwards emphasized that the people's profession in the Lord's Supper is their own act, from their own volition and affections, and that therefore the church should be composed of believers.¹¹⁶ Edwards did not write extensively on the subject of the Lord's Supper as covenant seal, but did address it in his work *Full Communion* and in his sermons. In *Full Communion*, Edwards outlined his

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a Congregationalist minister in New England. Grandson of Solomon Stoddard, he entered Yale in 1716 at the age of 13, graduating in four years and later receiving a masters there. Edwards became the assistant minister at his grandfather's church in Northampton in 1726, and took over as the sole minister upon Stoddard's death in 1729. He served there as the pastor, and was a prominent figure in the revivals of the First Great Awakening. In 1748 he reversed Stoddard's position of allowing anyone to take the Lord's Supper, and was forced to leave the church in 1750. He wrote *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* in 1749 as a defense of his practice. From 1751 Edwards served in a congregation in western Massachusetts where he also ministered as a missionary to the indigenous population. In 1758 he became the President of the College of New Jersey (later, Princeton University), but died only three months later from a failed smallpox vaccination.

¹¹⁶ "Edwards repudiated the distinction between an external and an internal covenant." De Jong, 145-146.

position on the purpose of the Lord's Supper and on who possessed the right to come to it in explicit contrast to his grandfather.¹¹⁷ He articulated many of the same arguments employed by the Westminster divines, but placed a particular focus on the Lord's Supper as a seal in its comforting aspect rather than upon the spiritual application of the benefits of Christ's mediation.¹¹⁸ In a sermon on 1 Cor 10:17, Edwards focused primarily on the subject of the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal.¹¹⁹ In this, the sealing of the Lord's Supper was predicated upon the believing recipient being united to Christ,¹²⁰ a theme which also appeared in *Full Communion*.

It is a thing well agreeing with the wisdom of Christ...[that] he has made provision in his institutions, that they might have the comfort of uniting, with such as their hearts are united with in that holy intimate affection which has been spoken of, in some special religious exercises and duties of worship, and visible intercourse with their Redeemer, joining with those concerning whom they can have some satisfaction of mind that they are cordially united to them in ordering and expressing their love to their common Lord and Savior, that they may with one mind, with one heart, and one soul, as well as with one mouth glorify him...And how eminently fit and proper for this purpose is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Christian church's great feast of love; wherein Christ's people sit together as brethren in the family of God, at their father's table, to feast on the love of their Redeemer,

¹¹⁷ *Full Communion* opens with these lines, "My appearing in this public manner on that side of the question, which is defended in the following sheets, will probably be surprising to many; as 'tis well known, that Mr. Stoddard, so great and eminent a divine, and my venerable predecessor in the pastoral office over the church in Northampton, as well as my own grandfather, publicly and strenuously appeared in opposition to the doctrine here maintained."

¹¹⁸ "Further [Edwards] discussed the necessity of baptism to church membership and attendance upon Communion. He repudiated any magical conception of the grace thereby signified and sealed." De Jong, 146.

¹¹⁹ This sermon was preached to his Northampton congregation in the midst of the debate over access to the Lord's table, either in January of 1750 just prior to his dismissal, or January of 1751 after he was ousted but still allowed to preach to the congregation. Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons on the Lord's Supper*, edited by Don Kistler, (Orlando, FL: Northampton Press, 2007), 70.

¹²⁰ The union of Christ to the believer was first a union of hearts, for which Edwards cited 1 John 4:10 and Eph 5:25-27. This produces a three-fold union: "a relative union, a legal union, and a vital union consisting in two things, conformity (1 John 1:10) and derivation (Galatians 2:20). But it must be remembered that a union of hearts is the foundation of all." Edwards, *Sermons*, 72. Vital union was understood to be how all believers receive life and spirit from Christ, relative union meant that Christ and the believer were closely positioned in relationship to each other, and the legal union meant that Christ created a holy society, which was subject to the same Lord and to the same laws. *Ibid*, 73.

commemorating his sufferings for them, and his dying love to them, and sealing their love to him and one another?¹²¹

The purpose of the Lord's Supper was to provide a means of comfort for those who are united to Christ. This is the great feast of the church where the comforts of Christ's love are sealed to his people, and their love sealed to him and to one another. The union the church has with Christ prompts a unity among members of the church family, and the Lord's Supper is the sealing feast of this union.

Edwards was fond of using marriage as an analogy for the covenant sealing of the Lord's Supper in this aspect.¹²² The Lord's Supper is, "a representation of the union of Christ and His people, a union of hearts. This may be likened to a relative union, a father among his children. It may be likened to a marriage union, since the Bridegroom here is manifesting His great love and offering himself, and the bride is receiving Him."¹²³ The Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of the covenant union between Christ and his people, particularly as understood in Edwards' category of the relative union the believer has with Christ. The Lord's Supper represents the relational nature of the covenant; a father among his children, the reception of the groom by his bride.

Edwards defines the Lord's Supper as a seal in much the same way as the Westminster divines,¹²⁴ and he emphasizes that the seal is between Christ and his people, and instituted as Christ's free act flowing from his heart.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Edwards, *Full Communion*, 255. He cites a comparison of Rom 15:5-6 with Acts 4:32 to sustain his argument

¹²² "Our taking the bread and wine is as much a professing to accept of Christ, at least as a woman's taking a ring of the bridegroom in her marriage is a profession and seal of her taking him for her husband." *Ibid*, 257.

¹²³ *Sermons*, 74.

¹²⁴ "The Lord's Supper is a seal...A seal is some sign or token exhibited by any person or persons as a solemn, explicit confirmation of the thing sealed as what they profess to be their own act. Thus it is in the sealing of covenants, testaments, deeds, and all instruments whatsoever among men one towards another." *Ibid*, 74-75.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

'Tis a seal on Christ's part. The minister acts in that ordinance as Christ's representative. The minister's actions in breaking the bread and pouring out the wine represents the offering of Christ for us; these are appointed as an open declaration and confirmation of the act of His heart. They show that He fully and freely consents to and complies with His part of the covenant. The union of his heart to His people exhibits His dying love, and His readiness to receive them into that near relation, into a vital union.¹²⁶

The Lord's Supper seals Christ to his people by demonstrating and ratifying his heart; that is, his affections for and covenantal love to his people. The administration of the sacrament is a seal by showing that Christ is maintaining his covenant. The sealing aspect of the Supper is grounded in the union of Christ to the believer not in its *conveyance* of the vital union, but in *confirmation* of Christ's reception of believers into that union. It is a ratification of the benefits of union with Christ, not the means of receiving the benefits of his mediation. "Thus the Lord's Supper is plainly a mutual renovation, confirmation, and seal of the covenant of grace: both the covenanting parties profess their consent to their respective parts in the covenant, and each affixes his seal to his profession....And thus the covenant transaction of this spiritual marriage is confirmed and sealed, from time to time."¹²⁷

Edwards discusses the mutual sealing taking place in the act of the Lord's Supper, with a greater emphasis on the role of the participants, stating the people "with their act, give testimony of the free compliance of their hearts."¹²⁸ The participants affirm and freely assent to the covenant terms in their participation.

'Tis also a seal on His people, a solemn declaration and open testimony and confirmation that they make this part of the covenant, that they comply with the condition required of them, that as Christ offers, they accept. Their taking the bread and wine is a declaration that they accept Christ, that they accept that sacrifice. Their eating and drinking declares that they

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Full Communion*, 256-257.

¹²⁸ *Sermons*, 75.

accept Christ as their food. Here they openly profess their union of heart, their faith and love.¹²⁹

The sealing done on the part of the people is a declaration of their covenant loyalty and commitment. They are in compliance with the covenant terms, and this acceptance flows out of their union of hearts with Christ. Covenant feasting professes that union of hearts, and therefore leads to a declaration of loyalty to Christ characterized by faith and love. It is a solemn and loving act, and as such is a source of confirmation of their love and union to Christ, which thus leads to a commitment of love to each other.

’Tis the most solemn confirmation that can be conceived of, that so far as they know their hearts they make this union their own free act and deed. It is more solemn than a mere oath. ’Tis just in this ordinance as it is in the mutual tokens of consent and acceptance in marriage. So in this ordinance the people of Christ solemnly confirm this union, and Christian love one to another. Feasts among all nations and from the beginning of the world have been used as seals of peace and friendship, such as between Isaac and Abraham and Jacob and Laban.¹³⁰

Because the Lord’s Supper finds its source as a covenant seal of the union of individual believers with Christ and seals that union, it necessarily leads to sealing the shared union all believers have in Jesus. In this way, the Lord’s Supper seals in three directions: Christ to his people, the people to Christ, and the people to each other. Edwards understands the imagery of the sealing feast as necessarily communal, not merely individualistic. While the Lord’s Supper does seal Christ’s promises to the believer on the basis of their union of hearts, it also seals his covenant promises to the believing community as part of the legal union of a holy society, characterized by love. The OT feasting that sealed covenants between the patriarchs resulted from the covenant between the individuals, but the feasts included their whole company who were covered by the covenant terms.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 75-76.

¹³⁰ *Sermons*, 76.

Since the Lord's Supper seals the Covenant of Grace, it seals a community covenanted with Christ on the basis of their union with him, and also seals the community together in its feasting.

This covenant community feasting strengthens the communion of saints in friendship, and is therefore quite distinctive. "There are other covenants and other friendships; but 'tis a Christian friendship, a spiritual friendship, a holy Friendship. 'Tis friendship with Christ and one with another. But how can they come and seal such friendship who are no friends? How can they seal peace who have never made their peace?"¹³¹ Because the Lord's Supper seals a spiritual friendship existing as a result of union with Christ, it is irrational for nonbelievers to participate in the sealing of something they do not possess. It makes no more sense for them to take the Lord's Supper than it would for them to exchange wedding rings with someone other than their spouse. They do not possess the peace and friendship with Christ represented by and sealed in the Supper. By taking the sacrament, a communicant is expressing acceptance of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice and the obligations flowing from it.¹³²

Joseph Bellamy

Jonathan Edwards' student Joseph Bellamy became one of the most prominent critics of the Half-way Covenant and its effects.¹³³ By the time of Bellamy's life the theological positions of Stoddard had not only been opposed, but had also been embraced and pushed further by the

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 77.

¹³² *Ibid*, 77-78.

¹³³ Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) was a Congregationalist minister in Connecticut who graduated from Yale in 1735 and studied under Jonathan Edwards in Northampton. He ministered at the same Connecticut congregation from 1740 until his death. Bellamy was on the side of the "New Light" during the revivals of the First Great Awakening, and was considered the most influential preacher in New England during his time other than Edwards. It was by the efforts of Bellamy, along with other students of Edwards known as the New Divinity, that the Half-way Covenant was finally overthrown. De Jong, Chapter 8.

Mathers, whom Bellamy used as his primary targets rather than Stoddard himself.¹³⁴ He had observed the substantially decreased piety in the Congregationalist churches of New England following the establishment of the Half-way Covenant and prioritized restoring a pure church.¹³⁵

Bellamy assessed that the Half-way Covenant and the expansion of it by Stoddard inevitably led to there being two covenants allegedly sealed in the sacraments: the external, graceless covenant in which people merely adhered to church membership, and the Covenant of Grace. In engaging with this argument, Bellamy's approach was first rhetorical, and secondly theological. He used Increase Mather's words against him to illustrate the inconsistency of his position and to demonstrate the necessity of understanding the sacraments as seals of the single Covenant of Grace. Bellamy quoted Mather to show that he understood the sacraments to be sealing what they represented, and therefore the sacramental participants were sealing their commitments to the covenants, which is both the external covenant and the Covenant of Grace in Mather's articulation. For an "unconverted covenanter" to participate in the Lord's Supper is to then seal his commitment to the covenant terms of both the external covenant and the Covenant of Grace.¹³⁶ Bellamy employs Mather's logic to use Abraham as an example of the inconsistent practice this produces: Abraham would have sealed both the external covenant and the Covenant of Grace simultaneously, and was therefore obligated to perform the stipulations of both. Since the external covenant is allegedly graceless, Abraham was acting in an ungodly manner by keeping its graceless terms, while he was simultaneously obligated to keep the terms of the Covenant of Grace. Bellamy argues that this is an incoherent position, because it would prevent anyone from being sealed in the Covenant of Grace,

¹³⁴ De Jong, 161. Bellamy also engaged with Moses Mather (1719-1806, no relation to Increase and Cotton Mather), who argued in 1759 in *The Visible Church in Covenant with God*, that "by uniting with the church one merely agrees intellectually with the church-covenant, which bears no necessary relation to the Covenant of Grace. The signs and seals used are then only those of the 'external' covenant." De Jong, 159.

¹³⁵ De Jong, 160.

¹³⁶ Joseph Bellamy, *The Works of Joseph Bellamy* (Vol. 2. Boston: Doctrinal and Tract Society, 1853), 488-489.

as they would be sinning in their participation in the external covenant.¹³⁷ Bellamy then uses Mather's own definition of covenant seal against him, "Mr. [Mather] must give up the common notion of a seal, as declaring a present compliance with, and binding both parties to act up to, what is contained in the written instrument."¹³⁸ Since the sacraments were "written instruments" of the Covenant of Grace, they could not simultaneously be seals of another covenant, as that would require them to violate the terms of the primary covenant they were intended to seal.

Bellamy found the construction that Stoddard and Mather relied upon ridiculous. He contrasts their position with that of Scripture: "but if we turn our eyes...to the New Testament...we shall see not the least appearance of two covenants, of which baptism and the Lord's supper are the appointed seals; we shall find no covenant but the covenant of grace."¹³⁹ The sacraments are seals of the Covenant of Grace, and not an alternative covenant.¹⁴⁰ The objections to the Half-way Covenant could be summed up by Bellamy's statement that "there is but one covenant, of which baptism and the Lord's supper are seals; and that he that is qualified to offer his children in baptism, is equally qualified for the Lord's table; and therefore, that the half-way practice is not according to Scripture."¹⁴¹

Bellamy goes on to show that the NT does not speak of two covenants, or a single external covenant with no bearing upon redemption, but a single Covenant of Grace. Specifically with the Lord's Supper, Bellamy argues that in it,

Our Savior teacheth us, that it is the seal of the new covenant, in which remission of sins is offered through the blood of Christ. 'For this is my blood of the New Testament, which is

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 489.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 490.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*. Cf. 688. Bellamy wrote a series of four dialogues on the Half-way covenant, and this argument also appears in the third installment.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 703, from Bellamy's fourth dialogue.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 707.

shed for many, for the remission of sins.’ Which is essentially different from Mr. [Mather’s] external covenant, by which no remission of sins can be obtained.¹⁴²

The external covenant practiced by adherents of the Half-way Covenant has no connection to redemption, and the Lord’s Supper is a seal of the covenant precisely in that the remission of sins is necessary for human salvation. Because the external covenant cannot offer redemption, the Lord’s Supper cannot be a seal of that covenant, but must be the seal of another.

In the Lord’s Supper Christ seals the covenant promises by giving himself to be feasted upon by the church. And “thus it is sealed on Christ’s part. On the other hand, the communicant, by his practice... seals the covenant on his part; and thus the ‘written instrument’ is externally and visibly sealed, and ratified, and confirmed on both sides, with as much formality as an ‘written instrument’ is mutually sealed by the parties in any covenant among men.”¹⁴³ Christ seals it by offering himself, and the believer seals the covenant by acting upon the sacrament. The similarities to the Westminster divines and Owen are clear at this point; however, Bellamy goes on to say,

This promise [of salvation] is sealed by Christ at the Lord’s table. The condition of it is externally complied with, in the sacramental actions, by the communicant, who visibly eats his flesh and drinks his blood. And if the exercises of his heart answer to his external actions, the covenant is on his part complied with, sealed, ratified, and confirmed.¹⁴⁴

Bellamy affirms that Christ seals the promises of the covenant at the Lord’s Supper, and that there is a mutual sealing for the sacramental participant. However, the sealing of the participant of the covenant terms occurs not only by outwardly partaking of the Supper, but also inwardly assenting to it. Bellamy spends a significant portion of his argument here making the case that if deceitful intent is present on the part of the communicant, then sealing by the participant does not occur. Lying by

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 492.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 492-493. Bellamy cites Christ’s words of institution and John 6:51, 56.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 493.

not intending to comply brings danger upon the soul of the participant.¹⁴⁵ This is because deceit has been practiced, and the sealing of covenant terms from God have been violated. However, the pledge of the sealing on the part of the communicant would never have occurred, because of the falseness of intent. The objective nature of the Lord's Supper lies on God's part in his covenant, which requires assent on the part of communicant, not merely motions.

In answering the anticipated objection that simply observing the sacrament rather than partaking of it, or taking it despite lacking an intent of fulfilling its terms, is justifiable on the grounds of having "the truth of the gospel deeply impressed upon" the heart, Bellamy answers,

This end might be as well obtained...those who stand by as witnesses, when a bond is signed and sealed, may know what is done, as well as those who are parties, and who bind themselves. Men that mean not to bind themselves should not sign and seal the bond. No one seals a bond, unless he means to bind himself to fulfill it. Should a man offer to sign and seal a bond, which he did not mean to bind himself to fulfill, in order to get his heart affected with what is contained in it, his neighbors would think him delirious.¹⁴⁶

Entering into a bond with the intention of breaking the objective seal is not sealing the covenant at all from the perspective of the communicant. Bellamy argues that the mutual sealing by the communicants is dependent upon their intent, with the danger of judgment springing from the madness of attempting to deceive God. While Bellamy affirmed that Christ sealed his covenant promises in the sacraments, this was not his priority. Instead, "Bellamy taught that in the sacraments man sealed his covenant with God. The idea of God sealing the covenant with man was largely obscured by the other emphasis."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, Cf. 709, from the fourth dialogue.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 494.

¹⁴⁷ De Jong, 160, footnote 407.

In the Half-way Covenant, Stoddard argued that the Lord's Supper was not a seal of the covenant of grace, but part of the structure of the external covenant, and therefore open to anyone. He was initially opposed by Willard, who employed the arguments of the Westminster divines, and Taylor, who argued that if the Lord's Supper is not a seal of the Covenant of Grace, then Christians are robbed of a source of confidence in the gospel, and may more easily be taken in by false covenants. The Half-way Covenant faced continued criticism from Edwards, who affirmed that the Lord's Supper was a seal of the covenant, and that as such it demonstrated Christ's commitment to his people, his people's commitment to Christ, and the commitment of the people to each other. This sealing commitment was dependent on a free expression of sincere affections from all parties, that flowed into a spiritual feasting built upon the union with Christ described in 1 Cor 5:17. Finally, Bellamy attacked the Half-way Covenant for illegitimately separating the Covenant of Grace in scripture from its external expressions, and therefore establishing a false covenant. The Lord's Supper is the seal of one covenant, not two. In the Supper Christ seals his covenant promises, and his people seal their commitment to him upon their hearts matching their external actions.

The Princeton Theologians

Sacramental theology was not as prioritized among the Princeton theologians as it was with the Westminster divines.¹⁴⁸ With few exceptions, the Princetonians assumed rather than developed the theological framework of the divines. Their perspective focused more on the forensic aspect of the covenant: since the covenant is a legal declaration, wherein God in his covenant makes a divine commitment and oath to his people, the Lord's Supper is a seal of that commitment. While consistent with the approach of the Westminster divines, this led to one of most notable debates within the American Reformed community over the sacraments between Princeton Seminary graduate John Williamson Nevin and Princeton Seminary professor Charles Hodge. Nevin charged that the Reformed community, particularly the segment influenced by “modern Puritanism,” had in practice fallen away from the tradition of Calvin and the Westminster divines that had recognized the Lord's Supper's spiritual natures and objectivity and had instead assumed a memorialist, subjectivist position.

While Princetonians James W. Alexander,¹⁴⁹ B.B. Warfield,¹⁵⁰ and Geerhardus Vos¹⁵¹ all wrote on the Lord's Supper, only Charles Hodge, his son A.A. Hodge, and John Murray contributed significantly to the discussion of the Lord's Supper as covenant seal.

¹⁴⁸ Historian Mark Noll's work has provided helpful biographical information and historical overview of Princeton during this period. Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology: 1812-1929: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 1983.

¹⁴⁹ James W. Alexander (1804-1859) was the son of Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), the first professor of Princeton from 1812 until his death. Alexander's helpful additions are limited to, “And we believe the more tenderly, and cling to our faith the more earnestly, when we discover in these symbols, not a sign merely, but a seal, of divine appointment, pledging unto us, and to each of us, who so eats and so drinks, all the loving kindness and covenant grace purchased by the death of Christ.” James W. Alexander *Sacramental Discourses*, (2nd ed. New York, New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1867), 135-136. and “The Lord's Supper seals the

Charles Hodge

Charles Hodge,¹⁵² like the Westminster divines, grounded his argument that the Lord's Supper was a seal in a covenant framework. Primarily, Hodge focused on the paschal setting in which the Lord's Supper was instituted. He brought the sacrificial-covenant nature of the Lord's Supper to bear in his commentary on 1 Cor 10-11. On 1 Cor 11:25 Hodge states, "This cup is the New Testament in my blood. The same words occur in Luke 22:20. In Matthew and Mark the corresponding expression is, 'This is my blood of the New Testament.' The sense must be the same. 'The blood of the covenant' means here, as in Ex. 24, 8, the blood by which the covenant was ratified and its blessings secured."¹⁵³ Commenting on Matt 26: 26-28; Mark 14: 22-24; Luke 22:19-

benefits of Christ's mediation to those within the covenant of grace," in *Remember Him* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 2.

¹⁵⁰ B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) from 1886 to his death served as the final Principal of Princeton Seminary, a position that Princeton used rather than President or Academic Dean. For the discussion of the Lord's Supper as seal, Warfield's most helpful contribution is his claim that the Passover setting is the most salient fact of the Lord's Supper. Benjamin B. Warfield "The Fundamental Significance of the Lord's Supper," in *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings* (ed. John E. Meeter. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1970), Vol. 1., 332.

¹⁵¹ Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) was a Dutch-born theologian who completed his seminary education at Princeton. After teaching at what became Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Vos began teaching at Princeton in 1892 as its first professor of Biblical Theology until his retirement in 1932. Vos did write on the Lord's Supper as seal, but did so while as professor at Calvin and wrote out of the Dutch-Reformed tradition rather than the Westminster tradition. His dogmatics were only finally translated from Dutch to English in 2016, limiting their impact upon American Presbyterianism and the Westminster-Princeton tradition. A representative sample of Vos' theology illustrates his consistency with the rest of the Princetonians. "There was therefore in the Passover a sign and seal of God's pardoning mercy [the paschal lamb]...The bread thus replaces the Passover lamb as sign and seal." Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: Ecclesiology, The Means of Grace, Eschatology*, trans. Richard Gaffin, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016) 203, 211.

¹⁵² Charles Hodge (1797-1878) was a Presbyterian minister who graduated from Princeton in 1819, and taught there from 1820 until his death. He was the Principal of Princeton from 1851-1878. He married Sarah Bache, great-grand daughter of Benjamin Franklin. Two of his sons, A.A. Hodge and C.W. Hodge, Sr., also taught at Princeton, as did his grandson C.W. Hodge, Jr. He founded the academic quarterly *Biblical Repertory* in 1825, later renamed *The Princeton Review*.

¹⁵³ *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*. (1857; repr., 1859; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 227. He says something similar in *The Way of Life*, "the Saviour said, 'This cup is the new testament in my blood;'

20; 1 Cor 10:15-17 and 11:23-29, Hodge says that the design of the Lord's Supper includes the purpose "To signify and seal our acceptance of the new covenant as ratified by the blood of Christ."¹⁵⁴ Jesus establishes the new covenant with his blood, and the Lord's Supper functions as the seal of the covenant; however, Hodge here highlights that the believer seals acceptance of the covenant by his participation, rather than emphasizing the application of Christ and his benefits to the Christian. Hodge prioritizes the relational aspect of a covenant: both parties pledge fidelity to the terms of the covenant, and the Lord's Supper is a ratification of that pledging for both parties. But he also consistently emphasizes that both God and the believer are entering into a covenant together, and in the Lord's Supper are sealing and pledging their commitment to that covenant. But he does not deny that the Lord's Supper seals the application of Christ to the believer in reality.

On 1 Cor 11:24, Hodge notes that "He who in faith receives the cup, receives the covenant of which it is the pledge; and he who receives in faith the bread receives the benefits of Christ's body as broken for sin. The one is a symbol and pledge of the other."¹⁵⁵ He elaborates more fully,

As the Hebrews entered into covenant with God when the blood of the heifer was sprinkled upon them and thereby bound themselves to be obedient to the Mosaic institutions, and as God thereby graciously bound himself to confer upon them all its promised blessings on condition of that obedience; so, in the Lord's Supper, those who receive the cup profess to embrace the covenant of grace, and bind themselves to obedience to the gospel; and God binds himself to confer on them all the benefits of redemption. In receiving the cup, therefore, they receive the pledge of their salvation. The death of Christ, which is so often compared to a sin-offering, is here, as well as in the Epistle to the Hebrews, compared to a

that is, the new covenant was ratified with his blood. Of that blood the cup is the appointed memorial, and it is, therefore, at the same time, the memorial and confirmation of the covenant itself; it is the assurance to us that God has promised the blessings of that covenant to all believers." Hodge, Charles. *The Way of Life*. (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1842), 249. This passage is echoed almost verbatim by A.A. Hodge in *Outlines*, pages 596-597.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3. (New York: C. Scribner, 1872), 612. Hodge's systematics replaced Francis Turretin's *elencics* as the primary textbook for Princeton. Turretin, though not part of the Westminster tradition, made several similar arguments to Hodge on this point. François Turretini, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George M. Giger and James T. Dennison, (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub, 1992) Vol. 3., 428.

¹⁵⁵ Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, 226.

federal sacrifice. The two, however, do not differ. The death of Christ is the latter only in virtue of its being the former. It ratifies the covenant of grace and secures its benefits, only because it was a propitiation, i.e. because it was a satisfaction to divine justice, as is so clearly taught in Romans 3:25, 26. Every time, therefore, the consecrated wine touches the believer's lips, he receives anew the application of the blood of Christ for the remission of his sins and his reconciliation with God.¹⁵⁶

The person who receives the Lord's Supper is professing to be a member of the new covenant, and pledging himself or herself to obey God. The Lord's Supper also truly does effect and apply the benefits of Christ's work for salvation to the believer. Hodge's priority is commitment to God's covenant being renewed in the Lord's Supper, but he does affirm the spiritual reality of the benefits of Christ being truly applied to the partaking believer. The benefit of Christ's body being broken is not merely the comfort of a forensic declaration of salvation, but the reception of the application of Christ's sacrifice. Hodge does not here elaborate on what that means, but the singular "application" being renewed precludes that reception being understood either as a resacrifice or merely a reminder of the covenant benefits. Here Hodge uses the term "pledge" rather than "seal," but his statements elsewhere in his comments on 1 Cor 11:26 provide clarity:

...as Christ affirms that his body was to be broken and his blood shed for the remission of sin, this from the nature of the case involves on his part the promise and pledge, that the sins of those who receive and trust Him, shall certainly be forgiven. The sacrament thus becomes not only a sign but also a seal. It is the handwriting and signet of the Son of God attached to the promise of redemption. As, therefore, the truth revealed in the Word has the highest power that can belong to truth in its normal influence on the human mind; so even the natural effect of the truths symbolized and authenticated in the Lord's Supper, is to confirm the faith of the believer. But as the natural or objective power of the truth as revealed in the Word is insufficient for conversation or sanctification without the supernatural influences of the Spirit, so the truths set forth in the eucharist avail nothing towards our salvation unless the Spirit of all grace gives them effect. On the other hand, as the Word when attended by the demonstration of the Spirit, becomes the wisdom and power of God unto salvation; so does the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when thus attended, become a real means of grace, not only signifying and sealing, but really conveying to the believing recipient, Christ and all the benefits of his redemption.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 227-228. Hodge in passing compares the ratification of the new covenant with Moses sprinkling the people with blood of a heifer.

¹⁵⁷ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 622.

Hodge identifies the Lord's Supper as something that seals the promises of redemption to the believer, but differentiates the sealing of the benefits of Christ and his redemptive work from the application of it in the Supper. The Lord's Supper, in Hodge's view, truly does work, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to convey the benefits of Christ to the Christian, but that is different from the sealing. This is what Hodge means when he says that the Supper, "becomes a real means of grace, not only signifying and sealing, but really conveying." The objective power of the Supper lies in the truth to which it testifies, just as is true of the preached Word; both rely upon the work of the Spirit through whom the elements of bread, wine, and spoken word avail as a means of grace. Here, Hodge uses the analogy of a king's signet ring for the Lord's Supper as a seal. But this point is not identical to the Westminster divine. The divines employed it in order to communicate the efficacy of the decree. Hodge uses it to describe the validity and assurance of it. The seal confirms the covenant by reminding the church what has been pledged, but is not the term to describe the way in which the sacrament conveys Christ. This understanding of the sacraments is clear from Hodge's comments on Rom 2:25 in his discussion of baptism,

The apostle considers circumcision under two different aspects...secondly, as a sign and seal of God's covenant...As a seal it was attached in the first place to the national covenant between God and the Jews. It was a sign of the existence of that covenant, and that the person to whom it was affixed was included within its pale. It was a pledge on the part of God that he would fulfill the promises of that covenant...It was the visible sign and pledge that all who believed should be justified...Paul therefore teaches that circumcision had no inherent, magical efficacy; that it had no value beyond that of a sign and seal; that it secured the blessings of the covenant to those who kept the covenant; but to the transgressors of the law it was of no avail.¹⁵⁸

The covenant-sacrament relationship evidenced by circumcision was paradigmatic for Hodge in his approach to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Using "pledge" and "seal" interchangeably here, Hodge

¹⁵⁸ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (1835; repr., 1864; repr. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 63-64.

states that the sacraments function as seals by pledging and reminding of the pledge of God's covenant promises. The sacraments are inert for those not party to the covenant, possessing no power on their own; they serve only as signs and pledges.

In his devotional work, *The Way of Life*, Hodge argues that the sacraments as seals, while being described as conveying the grace they represent, only truly function as evidence of that grace. The covenant is sealed by the Lord's Supper by the sacrament reassuring genuine partakers that the covenant promises are actually being conveyed.

The sacraments are seals, and it is common to attribute to any ceremony by which an engagement is ratified, the efficacy which belongs not to the ceremony, but to the engagement itself. The ceremonial of inauguration is said to induct a man into the office, the right to which it merely publicly declares and confirms. Even in the strict language of the law, a deed, with a signature and seal, is said to convey a right of property, although it is simply the evidence of the purpose of the original possessor. It is that purpose which conveys the right, and if it can be shown that the man who holds the deed was not the man intended by the grantor, the deed would be regarded worthless....the blessings of the gospel are declared to be intended for penitent believers; the sacraments are the external means of recognizing the conveyance of these blessings: to those who are really what they profess to be, they do in fact convey and secure these blessings; to others they confer no such benefits. When an unbeliever receives these ordinances, he no more obtains a title to the blessings which they represent, than a man obtains a title to an estate by falsely assuming the name of the person for whom it is intended.¹⁵⁹

The Lord's Supper recognizes the conveyance of covenant benefits, and in that sense can be said to confirm them, but only to those who are members of the covenant. This implies that sacraments as covenant seals call for a performance of responsive duties of the covenant participant. Partaking of the sacraments is voluntarily to take on the covenant duties and obligations of which the sacraments are seals and certifications.

¹⁵⁹ Hodge, *The Way of Life*, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1842), 260-261. Hodge also utilizes the signet motif for this point, "We should greatly err, however, if we supposed they were merely signs. We are taught that they are seals; that they were appointed by Christ to certify to believers their interest in the blessings of the covenant of grace. Among men a seal is used for the purpose of authentication and confirmation. It is intended to assure the party concerned that the document to which it is attached, is genuine and binding. In condescension to our weakness, God has been pleased not only to promise pardon and purity to believers, but to appoint these ordinances as seals of his promises." Page 247-248. Hodge appeals to Rom 4:11 and Col 2 on 248-249 for justification of this language.

If, however, the sacraments are seals on the part of God, the reception of them implies a voluntary engagement, on the part of the Christian, to devote himself to Christ. The gospel is represented under the form of a covenant: it is so called by Christ himself. But a covenant implies mutual stipulations. God promises to his people pardon and salvation: they, in his strength, promise faith and obedience. The sacraments are seals of this covenant. God, in their appointment, binds himself to the performance of his promise; his people, by receiving them, bind themselves to trust and serve him.¹⁶⁰

Because covenants are mutually-binding commitments, the sacraments act as seals for both parties in the covenant and therefore the Lord's Supper is a confirmation of the covenant obligations. The human covenant participants are sealing their obligations to the covenant in the sense that they are pledging or committing to fulfill it. In this way then, the covenant places obligations upon the church as its recipient, specifically to trust and serve God. Hodge locates the full meaning of the sacraments as seals in their certification of the covenant terms and pledges of their fulfillment; God is not conveying the benefits of Christ to the sacramental participants by sealing them. Hodge affirms that in the Lord's Supper the benefits of Christ are truly applied by the Holy Spirit to the participating believer, but unlike Reynolds he does not use "seal" to describe this. The sealing that occurs in the Supper is nothing more than a pledge to convey Christ and his benefits, even if the renewed application of Christ's mediation occurs simultaneously in the partaking of the Supper.

John Williamson Nevin

Hodge's student John Williamson Nevin¹⁶¹ was convinced that the American Reformed tradition had lost the proper Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper communicated by

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 260-261.

¹⁶¹ John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) attended Princeton, where he studied Hebrew under Charles Hodge. When Hodge went on a sabbatical to study in Europe, Nevin took on Hodge's teaching load at Princeton until Hodge returned. Nevin was a Presbyterian minister and professor of biblical literature at Western Theological Seminary (now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary). In 1840 Nevin left the Presbyterian church for the German Reformed Church and became a professor of theology at the German Reformed Theological Seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. See John W. Nevin and Charles Hodge, *Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology* (ed. and comp. Linden J. DeBie, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013), page XIII-XXXIX for full biographical details.

Calvin and the Westminster divines, and laid the blame for that significantly at the feet of those he called modern Puritans.¹⁶² Nevin's view was that the Lord's Supper was being downgraded into a mere memorial whose objective force was limited to reminding Christians to have faith. In the course of his discussion on this broad topic he did address the narrower issue of the Lord's Supper as a seal. In particular, Nevin believed that the sacraments had an objective force, and relied on John Calvin's analogy of the fertilizing nature of the rain still having an objective reality, even when falling on barren rock rather than upon fertile soil.¹⁶³ Nevin argued that he was following Calvin's understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper, which he understood to mean that the Lord's Supper possessed an objective true force in its very nature, and that it was not a suggestion or merely a memorial.¹⁶⁴ Nevin claimed that the objective power of the Lord's Supper was in its sealing nature.

¹⁶² Nevin, along with his colleague Philip Schaff, primarily engaged in theological discourse through an historical-theological approach. So while Nevin does not explicitly address texts of scripture relating to the Lord's Supper as a seal, his historical critiques on the subject are still relevant to this discussion. Nevin's critiques were not initially directed towards Hodge and Princeton, but after his publication of *The Mystical Presence* in 1846, Hodge directly responded to Nevin, leading to their engagement on the topic. Wayne Spear has tabulated Nevin's comparisons of the Reformers' views and views of those whom Nevin called the modern Puritans. The modern Puritans were never formally defined by Nevin, but roughly corresponded to the heirs of the New Light side of the First Great Awakening in the American colonies. Nevin was insistent that Christ, as WCF puts it, is truly, though not carnally present in the Lord's Supper. This meant that Christians were truly feeding upon all of Christ in union with him, which by necessity included feeding upon his humanity. Wayne R. Spear. "Calvin and Westminster on the Lord's Supper: Exegetical and Theological Considerations" in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly* (ed. J. Ligon Duncan. Vol. 3. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 388.

¹⁶³ John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 113-114. Calvin states "The integrity of the sacrament, an integrity which the whole world cannot violate, lies here, that the flesh and blood of Christ are not less truly given to the unworthy than to the elect believers of God; and yet it is true, that just as the rain falling on the hard rock runs away because it cannot penetrate, so the wicked by their hardness repel the grace of God, and prevent it from reaching them." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge, Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4.17.33.

¹⁶⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 57. Nevin denied that the Lord's Supper could confer grace or faith or that the sacrament had any power in itself. He goes on to say that, "The virtue which it possesses is not put into it by the faith of the worshipper in the first place, to be taken out of it again by the same faith, in the same form. It is not imagined of course in the case that the ordinance can have any virtue without faith, that it can confer grace in a purely mechanical way. All thought of the *opus operatum*, in this sense, is firmly repudiated."

The grace is not comprehended in the elements, as its depository and vehicle outwardly considered. But the union is none the less real and firm, on this account. The grace goes inseparably along with the signs, and is truly present for all who are prepared to make it their own. The signs in this view are also seals; not simply as they attest the truth and reality of the grace in a general way, but as they authenticate also its presence under the sacramental exhibition itself. This is what we mean by the objective force of the institution; and this, we say, is one point that must always be kept in view, in looking at the doctrine that is now the subject of our attention.¹⁶⁵

In Nevin's view, the Lord's Supper was a seal not simply in that it verified the truth of the grace connected to the Supper; rather that the sealing was an action that made real what the Lord's Supper signified.

The sacrament in this view, not only signifies, but seals to believers, the grace it carries in its constitution. It is not simply a pledge that the blessing it represents are sure to them, in a general way, apart from this engagement itself; as when a man by some outward stipulation binds himself to fulfill the terms of a contract in another place and at another time. The sacramental transaction certifies and makes good the grace it represents, as actually communicated at the time. So it is said to exhibit also the thing signified. The thing is there, not the name of the thing only, and not its sign or shadow; but the actual substance itself.¹⁶⁶

The key to Nevin's view is that the Lord's Supper, as a seal of the covenant of grace, makes good what it represents. The Lord's Supper can be truly called a seal of Christ because it not only pledges Christ to the believer, but truly applies him to the believing participant. The objective reality of the Supper is that it does convey the grace it represents to faithful recipients, and this is how the Supper functions as a seal: it seals the promises of Christ to the believer because it truly delivers him to the believer. Nevin believed that the modern Puritan view used the same language of the Lord's Supper as a seal, but meant something different entirely.

¹⁶⁵ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 57.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 114-115. Nevin goes on and quotes Calvin and Owen here, "'The sacrament is no picture,' says Calvin, 'but the true, veritable pledge of our union with Christ.' To say that the body of Christ is adumbrated by the symbol of bread, only as a dead statue is made to represent Hercules or Mercury, he pronounces profane. The signs, Owen tells us, 'exhibit that which they do not contain. It is no empty, painted feast. Here is something really exhibited by Jesus Christ unto us, to receive besides the outward pledge of bread and wine.'"

How different from all this again, the light in which the subject is presented in our modern Puritan theology. Here too the sacraments are indeed said to seal, and also to exhibit, the grace they represent. But plainly the old, proper sense of these terms, in the case, is changed. The seal ratifies simply a covenant, in virtue of which certain blessings are made sure to the believer, on certain conditions, under a wholly different form. Two parties in the transaction, Christ and his people, stipulate to be faithful to each other in fulfilling the engagements of a mutual contract; and in doing so, they both affix their seal to the sacramental bond.¹⁶⁷

Nevin has in mind in particular Ridgley, whom he quotes,¹⁶⁸ and Edwards, with whom he engages at length. Nevin sees Edwards as utilizing the same terms as the Reformers, but meaning something different altogether. Nevin quotes *Full Communion*, and understands Edwards to be limiting the sealing of the Lord's Supper to the kind of mutual pledging that occurs in a wedding.¹⁶⁹ While some of the Reformed churches in the United States may have continued to use the same terms as the Reformers, Nevin believed that they had altered the definitions of those terms. The Lord's Supper, Nevin charged, was being understood by the modern Puritans onwards as a seal of a mutual pledge, the sacramental receipt to a covenant transaction, rather than making good the reality of Christ to

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 115. Nevin cited Edwards, Bellamy, and Ridgley as figures that were complicit in his charge of linguistic slight of hand. Nevin never mentions Stoddard, the Mathers, or the Half-way Covenant, suggesting that his analysis of the effects of Edward's and Bellamy's theology does not include their resistance and overthrowing of the Half-way Covenant.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted by Nevin on page 103, Ridgley states, "The sacraments are also said to seal the blessings that they signify; and accordingly they are called not only signs but seals....we intend nothing else hereby but that God has, to the promises that are given to us in his word, added these ordinances; not only to bring to mind this great doctrine, that Christ has redeemed his people by his blood, but to assure them that they who believe in him shall be made partakers of this blessing; so that these ordinances are a pledge thereof to them, in which respect God has set his seal, whereby in an objective way he gives believers to understand, that Christ and his benefits are theirs; and they are obligated at the same time by faith, as well as in an external manner, to signify their compliance with his covenant, which we may call their setting to their seal that God is true." *A Body of Divinity*, 1815 ed., Vol. IV, p. 163, 165.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted by Nevin on page 105, Edwards states "And how eminently fit and proper for this purpose is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Christian church's great feast of love; wherein Christ's people sit together as brethren in the family of God, at their father's table, to feast on the love of their Redeemer, commemorating his sufferings for them, and his dying love to them, and sealing their love to him and one another?...Thus the Lord's Supper is plainly a mutual renovation, confirmation, and seal of the covenant of grace: both the covenanting parties profess their consent to their respective parts in the covenant, and each affixes his seal to his profession....And thus the covenant transaction of this spiritual marriage is confirmed and sealed, from time to time...Our taking the bread and wine is as much a professing to accept of Christ, at least as a woman's taking a ring of the bridegroom in her marriage is a profession and seal of her taking him for her husband." *Full Communion*, pages 255-257.

the believer. Edwards in particular, and the modern Puritans following him, were using language similar to the divines about the people sealing their promises to God in the Supper, but were emptying those words of the meaning the divines intended.

Nevin's work elicited a number of responses, the most prominent of which was from Charles Hodge in *The Princeton Review*. Nevin's work had challenged the Princetonians, not just simply in the manner in which they talked about the Lord's Supper, but in their theology of its nature. Nevin's presentation of the views of Edwards and Ridgely was close to Hodge's understanding of the Lord's Supper.¹⁷⁰ Hodge's response to Nevin focused more on the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper, but he did briefly address the Lord's Supper as a seal, saying,

[The sacraments] have, indeed, the objective moral power of significant emblems and seals of divine appointment, just as the word has its inherent moral power; but their efficacy as a means of grace, their power, in other words, to convey grace depends entirely, as in the case of the word, on the cooperation of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷¹

Hodge's insistence that the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for the sacraments to be efficacious is entirely consistent with the views of both the Westminster divines and Nevin, but fails to address Nevin's greater point about the language of sealing being misused.

Nevin himself recognized this, and in his response to Hodge states, "One great object of the historical inquiry through which we have now passed, it will be borne in mind, has been to show that the sacrificial and vivifical sides of the holy Eucharist, its force as a memorial of the atonement made by Christ's sorrowful death and its force as a seal or pledge of present participation in Christ's triumphant life, by no means exclude the other, as Dr. Hodge supposes, in the proper constitution of the Reformed doctrine, but on the contrary go necessarily together to make this inwardly perfect

¹⁷⁰ Hodge was also concerned that Nevin in *Mystical Presence* had embraced the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Hegel, as evidenced by the references to Nevin in his *Systematic Theology* nearly all connecting him to their theological approach. *E.g.* Vol. 2, 430 for Hegel and 446 for Schleiermacher. Whether Hodge's concerns were well founded is beyond the scope of this project.

¹⁷¹ DeBie, 104.

and complete.”¹⁷² Nevin affirms Hodge’s view, but only insofar as it is a component of the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper as a seal, not the whole doctrine. Nevin sees Hodge’s view as the same as the theology of the modern Puritans: the sacrament is a seal merely as ratification of the covenant, rather than the full application of Christ to the believer. “Dr. Hodge refers the idea of sealing, no doubt, to the general grace of God as proclaimed in the gospel. But it lies in the whole doctrine of Calvin...and also in the phraseology of the age, that it should be taken in the sense of authentication of what is at hand mystically in the sacramental transaction itself.”¹⁷³

Nevin’s deduction is validated by Hodge’s comments in his *Systematic Theology* and commentaries. But Hodge does in fact hold to God working his grace through the Lord’s Supper and really conveying Christ to the participating believer, though it is not through the Lord’s Supper as seal, but by the independent and free act of the Holy Spirit. Nevin’s concern is that the modern Puritans, and then Hodge in their defense, is making the dispensing of the grace of God an accident of the sacraments; that the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace only insofar as it reminds people of the gospel, and that the Holy Spirit merely happens to freely apply the benefits of Christ at the Supper. Hodge acknowledges that the sacraments have no power apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, and his concern is that Nevin is binding the work of the Spirit to the mere administration of the Lord’s Supper to provide Christ and his benefits. In this area they are talking past one another: Nevin rejects the view that the sacraments possess power in themselves apart from the establishment of God and their ability to convey Christ to the recipients apart from faith; Hodge

¹⁷² DeBie, 84. Commenting on this, DeBie states, “Nevin draws on Calvin’s example of the dove in the baptism of Jesus, which he compared to the elements in the Holy Supper. The dove represented the outward or physical side, which corresponded to the inward spiritual reality. Thus the elements like the dove are not merely ‘accidents’; but a necessary part of the hierophany. It was not the Holy Ghost, but it was the sign and seal of the Holy Ghost – the spiritual reality depicted in natural phenomenon.” LI.

¹⁷³ John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence, and Other Writings on the Eucharist* (eds. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 326.

affirms the conveyance of the grace of Christ and his benefits in the Supper by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Nevin affirms Hodge's articulation of the Lord's Supper as a seal, but not as the extent of the whole doctrine, while Hodge's doctrine affirms Nevin's belief that God uses the Supper as a means to work feeding upon Christ, though not through its sealing nature. Hodge's focus on how the Lord's Supper seals differs from that of the Westminster divines, and though they agree in substance on this point, Nevin believes that the shift in semantics on the Supper as seal belies and portends a shift in theology that leads to the Lord's Supper being treated merely as a forensic memorial of God's grace, rather than truly conveying the benefits of Christ.

A.A. Hodge

Charles Hodge's son, A.A. Hodge, was also a prominent professor at Princeton Seminary,¹⁷⁴ and in his writing the influence of Nevin can be seen. In answering the question, "what is the design of the sacraments?" A.A. Hodge quotes WCF 27.1, "That they should signify, seal, and exhibit to those within the covenant of grace the benefits of Christ's redemption and this as a principal means of grace edifying the church."¹⁷⁵

As seals attached to the covenant, it follows that they actually convey the grace signified, as a legal form of investiture, to those to whom, according to the terms of the covenant, it belongs. Thus a deed, when signed and sealed, is said to convey the property it represents, because it is the legal form by which the intention of the original possessor is publicly expressed, and his act ratified. It is on this ground that in Scripture, as in common language,

¹⁷⁴ Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886) was named after Archibald Alexander, the first professor of Princeton. A.A. Hodge was educated at Princeton during the Hodge-Nevin debate, graduating in 1847. He was ordained and served in India as a missionary from 1847-1850. He returned to the United States and served several congregations as their pastor from 1850-1864. From 1864-1877 he was the chair of systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary (now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary). In 1877 he followed his father onto the faculty at Princeton, becoming its Principal and chair of systematic theology after his father's death in 1878, positions which he held until his own death.

¹⁷⁵ Archibald A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1860; repr., 1879; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 592. He cites Matt 3:11; Gen 17:11, 13; 1 Cor 10:2-21, 11:23-26, 12:13; Rom 2:28-29, 4:11, 5:3-4; Gal 3:27; 1 Pet 3:21 as the biblical warrant of that claim.

the names and attributes of the graces sealed are ascribed to the sacraments by which they are sealed and conveyed to their rightful possessors.¹⁷⁶

A.A. Hodge uses language more consistent with the Westminster divines than his father did, arguing that because the sacraments are seals, they really do convey the benefits of Christ to the believing recipient. The conveyance of Christ's benefits comes from the sacraments as seals, not from another characteristic or function they may possess. Charles Hodge's use of the analogy of a deed for the sacraments as seals affirmed that they did convey the truth they represented, but stressed that this was only in the sense that they provided evidence of that truth. A.A. Hodge stresses that this sealing and conveyance is an actual application of benefits represented by the Supper, and argued that the use of the term "seal" by the Westminster divines was an appeal to the imagery of a conferring deed, and was truly effective according to the will of the Holy Spirit.

The sacraments were designed to 'apply' – i.e., actually to convey – to believers the benefits of the new covenant. If they are 'seals' of the covenant, they must of course, as a legal form of investiture, actually convey the grace represented to those to whom it belongs. Thus a deed conveys an estate, or the key handed over in the presence of witnesses in possession of a house from an owner to the renter. Our Confession is explicit and emphatic on this subject. The old English word 'exhibit,' there used, does not mean to show forth; but, in the sense of the Latin *exhibere*, from which it is derived, to administer, to apply... This the Confession carefully guards in the third section of this chapter, showing that the sacraments have no inherent power or virtue at all, but that the right use of the sacrament is by divine appointment the occasion upon which the Holy Ghost conveys the grace to those to whom it belongs. So that this grace-conferring virtue depends upon two things: (1.) The sovereign will and power of the Holy Spirit. (2.) The lively faith of the recipient. The sacrament is a mere instrument; but IT IS AN INSTRUMENT OF DIVINE APPOINTMENT.¹⁷⁷

The elements of the Lord's Supper have no power to seal on their own, but do so because of their divine establishment. This establishment makes the sacrament effectual only through the

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 597. He cites WCF 27.2., where the sacraments are said to wash away sin, to unite to Christ, to save, etc, and then cites Acts 2:38, 22:16; Rom 6:2; 1 Cor 10:16; 12:13; Gal 3:27; and Titus 3:5.

¹⁷⁷ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding The Westminster Confession* (1869; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 331-332. In describing the grounds of the sacramental union, Hodge lists, "The spiritual faith of the believing recipient, a gift of the Spirit of Christ, whereby, in the proper use of the sign, he is enabled to 'discern the Lord's body'" and cites 1 Cor 11:29. 330. Emphasis original.

supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in his free conferring of grace, and the faith of the recipient, itself produced by the Spirit. Because of the divine establishment of the sacraments for this purpose, they do actually convey the grace they represent when believers partake of them. Whereas Charles Hodge understood the sealing function of the sacraments to be similar to a signature on a deed, which did not in itself convey the property, A.A. Hodge argues that the seal itself is what conveys the property; without a seal, there is no confirmation of the covenant, and the benefits of Christ are not ratified. He expands upon the signet imagery used by the Divines and his father,

[The sacraments] are, as ordinances of God's appointment, seals attached to the promise to authenticate it, as the natural phenomenon of the rainbow was made a seal of God's promise to Noah in virtue of the divine appointment...as seals, thus accompanying a divine promise by divine authority, they do actually convey the grace they signify to those for whom that grace is intended and who are in a proper spiritual state to receive it, 'as a key conveys admission, a deed an estate, the ceremony of marriage the rights of marriage.'¹⁷⁸

A.A. Hodge does emphasize the covenant nature of the sacrament, which includes multiple parties. Commenting on WCF 27.1, Hodge follows the argument of WCF and cites Rom 4:11 and Gen 17:7, 10 to justify describing both sacraments as "seals of the covenant of grace."¹⁷⁹ The sacraments categorically are seals of the covenant, and the Lord's Supper is a ratification of the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood. Participating in the sacrament, then, is to participate in the covenant, which brings both benefits and obligations upon the believer. In partaking of the Lord's Supper, believers are binding themselves to fulfill the obligations of the gospel in their own life.

[The sacraments] were designed to be 'seals' of the benefits of the new covenant. The gospel is presented under the form of a covenant...In receiving the sacrament we actively assume all the obligations implied in the gospel, and bind ourselves to fulfill them...Jesus says, 'This cup is the the new covenant in my blood' (Luke xxii. 20); that is, this cup represents my

¹⁷⁸ Hodge, *Outlines*, 592. He follows this up with an unfavorable analysis of Roman Catholic sacramentology, "They [the sacraments] are seals of the gospel covenant...But a seal merely ratifies a covenant as a covenant. It can convey the grace promised only on the supposition that the conditions of the covenant are fulfilled. But salvation and every spiritual blessing is by that covenant declared to depend on the condition of faith." 594.

¹⁷⁹ Hodge, *The Confession*, 327.

blood, by which the new covenant was ratified; and therefore is a visible confirmation of the covenant, since it is a visible representative of my blood.¹⁸⁰

Hodge goes on to say that the covenant nature of the seal means that not only is Christ sealed to his people in the Supper, but believers pledge and bind themselves to the terms of his covenant. This means that the terms of the covenant are set by Christ, the mediator of the covenant, and not by the ones being sealed.¹⁸¹ Hodge sees two implications for the sacraments as seals of the covenant of grace. They “mark [Christians] as the divine property, and bind us to the performance of our duty; and hence are...badges of our profession, and putting a visible difference between those who belong to the Church and the rest of the world, give visibility to the Church, and separate its members from the world.”¹⁸² The covenant setting and nature of the Lord’s Supper mean that it is a seal, not just of Christ and his covenant benefits to the believer, but also that it seals to the believer distinctive obligations in duty and faith. In this way Hodge follows his father by stressing the covenant obligations put upon the participants when they are sealed in the sacraments.

Hodge identified 1 Cor 5:7 as key to the covenant relationship between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper, “The sacramental seals of the covenant must, therefore, be essentially the same then and now...the Lord’s Supper grew out of the Passover. He took the old bread and the old cup, and gave them a new consecration and meaning. Matt. xxvi. 26–29. ‘Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.’ 1 Cor. v. 7.”¹⁸³ The Lord’s Supper specifically is understood to be “a seal of the gospel covenant wherein all the benefits of the new covenant are signified, sealed, and applied to believers...Christ

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 331. Hodge here also cites Paul’s description of circumcision in Rom 4:11 and Col. 2:11-12, and baptism in Rom 6:4 and Gal 3:27 as examples of the sacraments being seals of the gospel presented under the form of covenant. Later Hodge also appeals to the relationship between baptism and the Lord’s Supper to justify describing the Supper as a covenant seal, citing 1 Cor 12:3 as evidence of Christ sealing his truth in baptism. *Ibid*, 344.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 332.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 335-336.

says, ‘This cup is the new testament (covenant) in my blood, which is shed for you’ (Luke xxii. 20); i.e., My blood is the seal of the covenant of grace, and this cup is the symbol of my blood, and as such is offered to you.’¹⁸⁴ Hodge emphasizes that the covenant-sacrament relationship of the sacraments means that more than just obligations are sealed in the Lord’s Supper, but the benefits of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice are applied to believers. Both parties are sealing commitments in the covenant ratification, and the pledging of Christ is an objective declaration and actual action that applies himself and his benefits. When Jesus seals his covenant, that sealing affects the recipient, and is more than a mere declaration of intent or restatement of a reality:

[The sacraments] were also designed by Christ to be the seals of his covenant with men. Every covenant implies two parties, who mutually give and receive pledges. A seal is an outward visible thing or action attached by appointment of government, which recognizes and consummates a contract, rendering the contract even more sacred by the governmental recognition. In these sacraments Christ seals his mediatorial undertaking for us, and pledges by an objective declaration, in every case audible and visible, our salvation on the condition of our really and spiritually doing what we in appearance do in receiving the sacrament. We at the same time swear a sacred oath, enacted by word and act, to put ourselves absolutely into Christ’s hands to receive his full salvation and to be consecrated to his service.¹⁸⁵ This is a function of the Lord’s Supper as a covenant seal, rather than being a separate component of the nature of the Supper or an independent, disconnected act of the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus’ blood is the seal of the covenant, the benefits of that covenant, which are the person and work of Christ, really are applied to the believing participant.¹⁸⁶

The sacraments, as physical, objective ratifications of the covenant of grace, truly seal the redemptive work of Christ to the believer. While his father placed the objective nature of the Supper in the absolute truth to which it testified and signaled, A.A. Hodge understood the objective declaration of the sacraments to be an affirmation of what is really being received: the sealing of

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 356. He says something similar in his work *Evangelical Theology*, “Our Saviour instituted [the Lord’s Supper] while he and his disciples were partaking of [the Passover]. It is called the Lord’s Supper because it was instituted at his last supper with his disciples to commemorate his death and to signify and to convey and seal his grace.” A.A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology: A Course of Popular Lectures* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 340.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 317.

¹⁸⁶ Citing WSC 92, Hodge says that one of the unifying elements of a sacrament is that they “were designed to, represent, seal, and apply the benefits of Christ and the new covenant to believers.” *Ibid*, 328.

Christ's mediation. In this way Hodge is closer to Nevin than his father, in that the objective nature of the Supper is not just in being a sign of God's covenant, but in the spiritual reality and application conveyed in the sacrament. A.A. Hodge understood the objectivity of the sacraments to be in what they affirmed, like his father, but that affirmation is in what they convey; Nevin understood the objectivity in the sacraments to be in what they effected, not what they affirmed. A.A. Hodge is not departing from the tradition of his father, but the influence of Nevin can be seen.

John Murray

Scottish theologian John Murray continued to develop the theology of covenant in its relationship to sacraments.¹⁸⁷ He cites Gen 17:9-11 and Rom 4:11 for understanding the sacraments as seals, certifications, and confirmations of the grace they signify.¹⁸⁸ Murray argued that the seal in these texts presupposed the existence of the covenant it is securing, and that its function was to certify, rather than establish, the covenant.¹⁸⁹ He develops this in greater detail in his work *The Covenant of Grace*. He argues that covenants are sealed with oaths resulting in a bond between the two parties, which involves "unreserved commitment in respect of the particular thing involved," and cites as an example the bond between David and Jonathan in 1 Sam 20:8.¹⁹⁰ Murray argues in depth that the covenant oaths in the OT between God and his people were sealed with blood, citing the first explicit covenant formed between God and Israel in Exod 24, which culminates with Moses

¹⁸⁷ John Murray (1898-1975) was a Scottish minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church who completed studies at Princeton and Edinburgh after graduating in arts from the University of Glasgow. He taught Systematic Theology at Princeton in 1929, before joining the faculty at the newly established Westminster Theological Seminary. While his time at Princeton was very brief, his theology follows the tradition of the Westminster-Princeton theologians and was shaped at Princeton. Westminster Seminary was formed by former faculty of Princeton under the leadership of John Gresham Machen in order to continue the theological education and practice found at Princeton prior to its leadership reorganization in 1929.

¹⁸⁸ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 367.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 367-368.

¹⁹⁰ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (London, Tyndale Press, 1954), 8-9.

sprinkling the people with blood to seal the covenant in Exod 24:7-8.¹⁹¹ Murray observes that the covenant had been established prior to the sprinkling of blood, and the blood served as a seal to confirm the covenant relationship.¹⁹² Murray regarded Jesus' statement that his blood was the blood of the covenant as a continuation of the OT covenant format: Christ's blood sealed the new covenant in the same way the Mosaic covenant had been sealed with blood.¹⁹³

Murray's specific exposition of the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal begins with Christ's words in the Synoptics identifying the cup as the new covenant in his blood, and then ties this back to the covenants of the OT. Citing God's promise to Abraham in Gen 17 as an example, he states that in redemptive history a covenant is an oath, "[a] certified confirmation of promise. Redemptive revelation took the form of covenant. So implicit in redemption is the confirmation which covenant always involved."¹⁹⁴ The new covenant in Christ's blood is then a covenant oath that requires a certification in the same manner as the OT covenants. The Lord's Supper is that covenant certification and seal. It does not establish the covenant, but brings the covenant promise close to those who partake in the meal. Murray expounds this as follows:

Jesus on this occasion was speaking of the cup in the Lord's supper. We might think that there is an anticlimax, that the grandeur of the concept, 'the new covenant in my blood', is now curtailed. Oh, it is precisely the grandeur of the conception that enhances the significance of the Lord's supper! All that the new covenant in Jesus' blood means is represented and sealed in the Lord's supper. The confirmatory character of covenant is transferred to the cup. This is what the cup bespeaks. And when we partake of the cup in faith, it is the Lord's own certification to us all that the new covenant in his blood is ours. It is the seal of his grace and faithfulness.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 21-22.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 27-28. Murray cites Exod 24:6-8 and Heb 9:18 to justify his understanding of the Mosaic covenant being sealed with blood.

¹⁹⁴ *Collected Writings*, Vol. 2, 376.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 377. Murray repeats this idea when he says that the Lord's Supper is the Christian's seal of forgiveness and remission of sins because the covenant sealed is Christ himself, and therefore in the sealing the Christian receives the oath-guarantee of the covenant. *Collected Writings*, Vol. 3, 280-281.

In summary, the Princetonians built upon the work of the Divines, and grounded the label “seal” in the nature of covenants in the OT. Both Charles and A.A. Hodge, as well as Murray, emphasized that the Lord’s Supper sealed a covenant that was already in place through the blood of Christ rather than brought a new covenant reality into existence. Charles Hodge and the early Princetonians were influenced by the modern Puritans, and Nevin challenged them on what he saw as the despiritualization of the sealing of the Lord’s Supper. Charles Hodge focused extensively on the sealing work of the Holy Spirit as a correspondent to the sealing of the Lord’s Supper, and with his son used the general understanding of the sacraments to describe the sealing of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Murray relied heavily on the covenant form in order to make the case that the Lord’s Supper is a seal. The Lord’s Supper, because of its covenant-form nature, is a seal of the mutual obligations of both participating parties, on the part of the church these include trusting and serving God. The initial question, “how was the term ‘seal’ in relationship to the Lord’s Supper justified and understood biblically within Reformed theology?” is best answered by pointing to the covenant forms of the OT and Christ’s words of institution at the passover meal before his death. Paul’s use in 1 Cor 11 of Christ’s words of institution and his reference to the covenantal setting of the meal help validate this understanding, with A.A. Hodge emphasizing 1 Cor 5:7 as central to his understanding of how the Lord Supper truly seals Christ and his benefits.

5

Analysis and Application

We have now seen that the Westminster Tradition through Princeton used the term “seal” to describe the role and function of the Lord’s Supper as the meal of the New Covenant. We have asked how the use of this term to describe the Lord’s Supper is biblically justifiable, and seen that Rom 4:11 is the text relied upon to establish the semantic-sacramental connection. Here Abraham receives “the *sign* of circumcision *as a seal* of the righteousness he had.” Rom 4:13 adds, “the promise to Abraham and his offspring...did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” Circumcision was the seal of the promise given to Abraham (Gen 17:1-14). The particular promise that Paul has in view that was received by faith, was that Abraham would be the father of a multitude of nations (Gen 17:4-6), that the covenant would be established with not only Abraham, but his descendants (Gen 17:7), that God would grant as an everlasting covenant to Abraham and his descendants that he would be their God (Gen 17:7), and that God would deliver the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:8). This covenant promise follows Abram’s calling and faithful response to walk blamelessly before God (Gen 17:1-3). Circumcision is the sign of this covenant (Gen 17:11), which Paul argues establishes it as the seal of Abraham’s righteousness by faith, (expressed in Gen 17:3).

Gen 17:10-11 identifies circumcision as both the covenant itself and as a sign of the covenant. In Gen 17:13 circumcision is expressed as a covenant in the flesh. As the sign of the covenant, circumcision is so closely identified with what it signifies, that the sign itself is called the covenant. The covenant established with Abraham *is* circumcision, which serves as sign of that covenant promise. Therefore the physical token of a covenant used to signify it (circumcision in this case) is so closely associated with the covenant that the covenant can be called by, and identified

with, the physical element used to signify it. This is what Jesus does in the institution of the Lord's Supper in the gospels. There he identifies the elements of the meal so closely with the covenant he is establishing that he calls them, particularly the cup, the covenant. He thus identifies the elements of the Lord's Supper with the new covenant he is establishing in the same way circumcision was identified with the covenant given to Abraham. And since Paul distinguishes between circumcision as a sign and a seal, even as it corresponds to the same single covenant and its promise, the same is true by implication for the sign of the New Covenant in Christ's blood. Since the Lord's Supper is the physical token that can be called by the same name as the covenant, and treated as the covenant it signifies, it can also be called the seal of that covenant and its promises. So the fact that first Paul identifies circumcision as the OT sign of the covenant that corresponds to baptism as the NT sign of the covenant,¹⁹⁶ and second that Jesus identifies the physical elements of bread and wine with the covenant in his blood, implies that the the same language used to describe circumcision as it relates to the covenant promises (sign and seal) can be applied to the Lord's Supper. This is why WCF 27.2 cites Gen 17:10 and Matt 26:27-28, as well as 1 Cor 10:16-18,¹⁹⁷ as evidence that the Bible attributes the names and effects of the sacraments and the covenants to each other.

Once this semantic link is established, the use of the covenant-form in the OT can be more confidently appealed to in order to understand the purpose of the Lord's Supper as a seal of the covenant. The arguments previously summarized do just that, particularly in connecting the Passover and the Lord's Supper from the context of the latter's institution.

There are several other examples of covenant sealing in the OT. In Esth 3:12 and 8:8-10 King Ahasuerus seals an edict with his signet ring, followed by Mordecai sealing a royal decree in the

¹⁹⁶ See the argumentation used by Paul in Rom 3-6, and then in Col 2:11-14.

¹⁹⁷ 1 Cor 10:16-18 does identify the cup and bread with participation in the blood and body of Christ (v. 16), but does not semantically identify the elemental components that seal the covenant with the covenant itself, but with what the covenant represents and communicates.

king's name with his ring.¹⁹⁸ This imagery was also employed in the Westminster tradition for God's people being sealed. The immutability of the king's decree once sealed is a prominent aspect of the narrative of Esther 8. By sealing the edict, the ratification and legality of the ruling is conveyed to whomever receives it.

Nehemiah offers an example of this. In Nehemiah 9 the people of Israel, now returned from exile, are reminded of God's covenant promise to them and the ways in which they have deviated from its stipulations. God has no need to rectify his covenant commitments; he has kept them, even amidst the people's unfaithfulness. The people of Israel are sinners needing to recommit themselves to God. They do not need to add to the covenant, but to make a firm commitment to remain faithful to God. This is done by writing a covenant document and then sealing it with the names of the leaders of Israel (Neh 9:38). Here a covenant is specifically said to be sealed and the act of sealing described. The covenant is instituted by humans, rather than God, but is presented as an expression of faithfulness in renewing their commitment to the covenant that God himself had established. There is no other accompanying token to the covenant that signifies what it represents, only the sealed names. The sealing here does not have a sense of conveyance, but of ratification. This is the only time in scripture where a covenant is explicitly sealed, and it therefore should directly inform our understanding of the OT covenant-form as it relates to sealing.

Covenant seals are constituted by the same token as the covenant sign (*e.g.* circumcision) but their roles are distinguished by what they accomplish. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant and the seal of righteousness while still being the same, single token. In the Westminster Tradition the Lord's Supper as a sacrament is appended to the New Covenant in order to validate and affirm its

¹⁹⁸ The sacramental implications of the sealing in Esther 8 are discussed in varying depths by Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, 135-143, Paul Jewett in *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 87, and Herman Bavinck in *Dogmatics* IV, 476-477. All have baptism primarily in view.

terms. But in this model the sealing aspect of the sacraments still appears to be a categorical subset of the sacraments as signs. The illustration of a king's signet ring sealing a document, as in Esth 8:10, communicates that the seal is still a type of sign. The seal is an image, whether of the king's profile in the signet ring, or of the written names of the people acting as covenant representatives as in Neh 9:38-10:1. This coincides with the argument made by Ridgley on the differences and similarities in the Lord's Supper between sign and seal. The covenant feasting throughout the OT that acted as sealing appendages to the covenant, as well as the signet sealing in Esther and the sealing by the people in Nehemiah, were intended to convey or ratify the truth of and commitment to their respective covenants, yet none of that sealing made it effectual. King Ahasueras sealing his edict in Esth 3:12-13 made it legally immutable, but that did not accomplish the actual killing of the Jews. The sealing conveyed the truth of the edict, but was not what made it effectual. Nehemiah and the elders of Israel sealing their name to the covenant renewal does not mean that they never again acted unfaithfully. The sealing was a confirmation of their commitment, but did not actually cause them to remain faithful. This is consistent with the argument of Charles Hodge about the nature of the sacraments as seals: they declare intent and convey that truth, but do not make it so.

However, this draws out one of the greatest limits of relying on the OT form of human covenants to determine the nature of the sacraments as seals of the covenant. The feasting to seal covenants between Isaac and Abimelech, and between Jacob and Laban, is necessary because as sinners they are prone to violate their commitments. The sealing of the covenant by Nehemiah and the elders of Israel is prompted by this very reality. In both cases the sealing does not make the covenant and its terms true or inviolable in practice. Again, King Ahasueras can convey intent by his seal, and because of his royal position has the power to enforce it, but the seal itself is not what makes the edict it ratifies occur. The human sealing the edict is finite, and his will expressed in the sealing does not make it so.

The blood of the original Passover was a sign to Israel, and the feast became a memorial to remind them of God's salvation. In that sense the feast was a seal of God's covenant in its confirmation of God's promises and salvation *by* reminding the people of his previous faithfulness and might. The blood of the covenant sprinkled by Moses on the people sealed the covenant with its obligations to them,¹⁹⁹ but did not confer the ability to keep the obligations or make the fulfillment of the covenant stipulations good on their part. Both of these examples have people receiving seals from God as part of the covenant-form present in the OT, but these convey the covenants only insofar as they declare, remind, and obligate fallen humans who nevertheless tend to deviate from their covenant promises. In these examples the sealing of the covenant-form does not convey the reality of covenantal benefits in the sense that the majority of the Westminster Tradition has argued is the case with the Lord's Supper.²⁰⁰ There is not an application of the benefits of the covenant in these instances.

This does not mean that the OT's covenant-form model is used incorrectly in describing the sealing reality of the NT sacraments, or that the sacraments do not convey the covenant by applying the reality of its benefits. There is a limit to placing a priority on the OT covenant-form as the explanation of the Lord's Supper as a covenant seal in its effects. The covenant-form provides context, but its correspondence to the Lord's Supper as the body and blood of Christ sealing the New Covenant is limited because of the examples of the covenant-form in the OT. These involved sealing compacts between two different groups of people, who were either recommitting themselves after failing a covenant, issuing an edict whose sealing did not make it effectual, or reminding people

¹⁹⁹ Exod 24:3-8, cited in Heb 9:18-21. It should be noted that the blood of the covenant is not identified with the covenant in the same way as circumcision in Genesis 17 or the Lord's Supper in its institution.

²⁰⁰ Vines' comment is probably the best, succinct summary of this understanding: "...so really is Christ, and all his treasure passed over unto you that receive him by faith, not in respect of any worthiness or virtue in the very outward Sacrament, but in and by the use it's of [*sic*], by Christ's appointment to seal, confirm and convey." Vines, 57.

of their covenant obligations. None of these examples in their form includes the sacramental token being interchangeable in title and effect with the covenant itself and its benefits, which is what the Lord's Supper is.

It is in this aspect that John 6:22-59 can be helpful in strengthening the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper as seal of the covenant. John 6:27 is the only use of σφραγίς in the New Testament in a potentially eucharistic context, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."²⁰¹

It has been long debated, including within Reformed theology, whether John 6:22-57 has any reference to, or relevance for, the Lord's Supper.²⁰² John 6 has been cited on a limited basis in Reformed confessions in relationship to the Lord's Supper.²⁰³ The Gospel of John is notably lacking an account of the institution, and it has been debated whether the Bread of Life Discourse of John 6 is the gospel's theological commentary on the nature of the Lord's Supper. The lack of explicit statement to that effect in this pericope has played a significant part in the hesitance of the

²⁰¹ John 3:33 occupies a similar, though much lesser position. It does not sit within any sacramental or explicitly covenantal pericope, though it does relate to the nature of sealing. It is only cited twice by the figures herein examined, both as an example of people affirming their commitment to God's truth. "...and they are obliged, at the same time, by faith, as well as in an external and visible manner, to signify their compliance with his covenant, which we may call their setting to their seal that God is true; as we may allude to that expression of our Saviour, *He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true* John iii. 33." Emphasis original, Ridgley, 165. "So it is said that he who receives the testimony of Christ 'sets his seal that God is true' (AV) or 'has certified that God is true.' (John 3:33)" Owen, *Communion with God*, 184.

²⁰² Frederick Bruner provides an excellent summary of the range of interpretations of John 6:22-57 in relationship to the Lord's Supper in his commentary *The Gospel of John*, 437-443, as does Richard Bauckham on John 6:31-59 in *Gospel of Glory*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 94-104.

²⁰³ Chapter 21 of the Second Helvetic Confession relies upon John 6. In the section entitled "Christ received by faith," John 6:35, 56-57 are the only scriptural proofs cited. The following section, "Spiritual food," cites the whole of John 6 as evidence that Christ's body is received not corporally, but spiritually by faith in the Lord's Supper. The original 1563 German and Latin editions of the Heidelberg Catechism include John 6:35, 40, 50-54, 56-58 as part of its scripture proof for Q&A 76 on feeding on Christ, and use John 6:51, 55 for Q&A 79 on Christ calling the bread his body and the cup his blood of the new covenant.

Reformed tradition to rely upon it for informing eucharistic theology.²⁰⁴ Even if there is a eucharistic reference in John 6, it does not automatically follow that John 6:27 should directly inform the theology of the Lord's Supper as seal.

Neither WCF nor WLC include any citations of John 6 as scriptural proof for their theology of the Lord's Supper.²⁰⁵ Within the Westminster Tradition examined here there has been limited use of John 6:22-57 in relationship to the Lord's Supper as seal. Bellamy believed that Christ seals the truth contained in the written instrument of scripture through the words of sacramental institution spoken by the minister. He quotes John 6:51, 56 and concludes "But it is therein written in so many words. Thus it is written, and thus it is sealed on Christ's part."²⁰⁶ Bellamy's connection of the Lord's Supper as seal and John 6 is limited to using Jesus' words in the Bread of Life Discourse to describe the Lord's Supper, and as evidence certifying the truth of the sacrament. It is not connected at all to John 6:27, but to the words of institution in the synoptics and 1 Cor 11. Owen does comment directly on John 6:27 in his teaching on the sealing of the Holy Spirit from Eph 1:13, but without reference to the Lord's Supper. "To have the stamp of the Holy Spirit as an evidence to the soul that he has been accepted by God is to be sealed by the Spirit. In this sense, Christ is said to be sealed by

²⁰⁴ There are several other strong objections to understanding this discourse as eucharistic. For example, the discourse takes place before the institution of the Lord's Supper, and would have therefore been unintelligible as a reference to the Supper to the original audience of Jesus (see D.A. Carson *The Gospel According to John*, 278); John uses *σάρξ* (flesh), while the uncontested accounts of the Lord's Supper use *σῶμα* (body), (see Carson, 295; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary*, 240-241); and that the eternal life offered by feeding on Christ appears to be unconditional in John 6, which is not the case for the Lord's Supper (see Ridderbos, 238-241).

²⁰⁵ Revisions to the standard's proof texts in 19th and 20th century American presbyterianism did add several citations of John 6. The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America added several in 1894 and was followed by the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1910. These churches merged in 1983 and continue to use the revised versions of the Westminster Standards. Both the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians have adopted these revised proof texts as well, as has the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, but limited only to WLC. The revised WCF 29.7 cites John 6:53, 58 on the presence of Christ at the Supper and WLC 174 cites John 6:35 as scriptural proof that the church is to receive the Lord's Supper by feeding on Christ by faith.

²⁰⁶ Bellamy, 192.

God (John 6:27). He had impressed on him the power, wisdom and majesty of God.”²⁰⁷ Owen identifies the Father sealing the Son with the Spirit as the seal of John 6:27.²⁰⁸

It is beyond the scope of this project to attempt to solve the millennia-long debate over the eucharistic nature of John 6. However, regardless of whether or not the discourse recorded in John 6 was intended by Christ to be eucharistic, or if it was intended to be a theological commentary on the Lord’s Supper, it does have a bearing on the understanding of the Lord’s Supper as seal of the covenant. Calvin states that it is improper to understand the whole of John 6 as referring to the Lord’s Supper, but that what is stated about feeding on Christ in John 6 is also true about faithful partaking of the Lord’s Supper,

From these words it is plain that it is wrong to expound this whole passage as applying to the Lord’s Supper. For if it were true that all who come to the Lord’s holy Table are made partakers of His flesh and blood, all alike will obtain life. But we know that many of them fall into perdition. And indeed, it would be inept and unseasonable to preach about the Lord’s Supper before he had instituted it. So it is certain that He is now treating of the perpetual eating of faith. At the same, I confess that there is nothing here that is not figured and actually presented to believers in the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, we might say that Christ intended the holy Supper to be a seal of this discourse. This is also the reason why John makes no mention of the Lord’s Supper. And therefore Augustine follows the proper order when, in expounding this chapter, he does not touch on the Lord’s Supper until he comes to the end.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Owen, *Communion with God*, 184.

²⁰⁸ There is some debate over whether the seal of John 6:27 is a reference to a particular moment, such as Christ’s baptism (See Sinclair Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996, 46, 180), or a sense of general approval by the Father of the Son’s mission (See Ridderbos, 225). To treat it as an abstract approval, disconnected from a particular moment, would ignore the very meaning of the word “seal.” While John only alludes to the baptism of Jesus (John 1:32-34), he does mention that the Spirit descended *and remained* upon Christ at his baptism. Identifying the sealing of John 6:27 with this moment is consistent with the narrative of John, the theology of the sacrament of baptism as a seal with the Holy Spirit as the proper seal, the lack of generic nondescript sealing in the NT, the Holy Spirit sealing the church, and connects baptism as the seal of adoption with Jesus feeding his people with the Lord’s Supper as the seal of nourishment.

²⁰⁹ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John, Part One 1-10* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1959), 170. It is interesting to note that this quote from Calvin is taken by some to mean that he rejects a sacramental understanding of John 6 (Bauckham, 104), while others see it as an embrace of latent Johannine sacramental theology (see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Tradition*, Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege Press, 2013, 98-99).

Colin Brown puts it like this, “John 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper; rather the Lord’s Supper is about what is described in John 6.”²¹⁰ In 6:27 Jesus tells the crowd to seek the food that he, the one the Father has sealed, will give them. In 6:33 and 6:35 Jesus identifies himself as the true bread from the Father, given to the people. Jesus is the sealed one from the Father, who is the source of true life to those who feed upon him (6:50-51, 54-56, 58). This is true because the living Father sent and vivifies the Son, and those who feed upon Jesus receive the life of the Father through him (6:57). The one who is sealed by the Father gives the food of eternal life because he is the food of eternal life. Jesus, sealed by the Father, gives himself, the sealed one, to his people (6:37-39, 65), for their life. This feeding upon Christ comes by faith (6:40, 47) given by the Spirit (6:63-64). Regardless of the eucharistic intent of this passage, John is describing the content of the covenant established by the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus through his flesh and blood provides eternal life to those who believe in him. The Westminster Tradition has argued that the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection are what is sealed in the Lord’s Supper, and that participants only truly feed upon Christ by faith.

In this way John 6:27 should inform the Reformed understanding of the Lord’s Supper as covenant seal. The covenant-form model of the OT should be used to inform the understanding of the Lord’s Supper as covenant seal, but it must be done in light of the content of that covenant. The Supper can be said to seal the covenant because it is administered by the one whom the Father sealed, and it conveys and applies the sealed one, Jesus Christ, to those who feed on him by faith. The Son is sealed by the Father’s decree through the Spirit, who provides life. The Son provides the life of the Father who sealed him by sealing his people with the Spirit he sends. Ahasuerus can seal

²¹⁰ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), 535.

an edict with his signet ring, but that does not accomplish his command. Jesus is the one who is sealed by the Father and presides over the meal where his people receive the covenant seal and commune with the sealed one. Jesus sealed the New Covenant, and as such accomplishes the giving of eternal life. The Lord's Supper is not simply the conveyance of covenant information or reminders, but of the person of Jesus Christ. The divine signet stamp of the Lord's Supper is not an abstract promise, but Jesus himself through his Spirit. The covenant promises of God are Christ himself who places his seal upon his people by his Spirit.²¹¹

The Lord's Supper conveys the benefits of Christ's mediation because it conveys Christ, not merely the promise of Christ and his work.²¹² John 6:27 strengthens the covenant-form model of the OT used in the Reformed tradition. Jesus is sealed by the Father and he presents himself in the Supper. The conveyance and application of Christ's covenant benefits are made so, because it is Christ the sealed one being presented at the feast.

John 6:27 also brings trinitarian theology to the forefront of the Lord's Supper as seal of the New Covenant. Jesus presides over the sacrament and gives life to his people by giving them himself. This he can do because he receives life from the Father (6:57), who sealed him with the Holy Spirit (6:27). The people receive Christ because they were given to him by the Father (6:37, 43, 65) and feed upon him by the Spirit (6:63) who applies Christ as the seal of the covenant. The

²¹¹ Owen's observation that the seal of the Holy Spirit in Eph 1:13 is not on the promises of God, but on his people, is consistent with this idea. When the Holy Spirit seals, it is not the covenant terms, but the covenant community that is being sealed by Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22). Owen, *Communion with God*, 184-185.

²¹² This application of John 6:22-58 also rules out the Lord's Supper functioning *opus operatum*, because while Christ is conveyed and applied in the Supper, this is done by him presiding over the table and feeding his own, who receive him by faith. So the Supper does not provide eternal life in absolute terms to whoever eats it, but provides life to those whom Christ feeds by faith. This also eliminates the possibility of considering the Supper appointing an ongoing "extra-salvation" apart from the work of Christ. The Lord's Supper, by divine appointment, is the instrument by which Christ's people are nourished by Jesus himself in light of his finished work. The sacrament is not separated from the death and resurrection of Christ as if it were an independent source of grace.

covenant feast of spiritual friendship, as Edwards put it, is then not just a sealing of that friendship between the people, but a communion with God in a trinitarian way.²¹³ The fellowship of the saints in their union with Christ reflects the trinitarian nature of communion and union with Christ; the Lord's Supper sealing the New Covenant is a sealing of the covenant community as the people of the Trinity. The joy and communion of the Trinity, expressed in the Father sealing the Son with the Holy Spirit so that the Son may offer the life of the Father to his people through his sacrifice, should inform our understanding of the sealing that takes place in the Lord's Supper. The church is bound together in its union with Christ because of his sealing by the Father, and his sealing of his people.

Implications

Several practical implications for understanding the Lord's Supper arise in the light of John 6:27. These build upon the theological foundation of the Westminster Tradition, with its observations on the piety associated with the Lord's Supper, and are additions, not alternatives to them.

The first implication is that the Lord's Supper is not simply about individual nourishment and growth, but communal activity.²¹⁴ The sealing of the Supper as the sacramental signet ring is about sealing to a community the promises of the Trinitarian God: the Father sealed the Son, who then seals his people with his Spirit as the guarantee of his church's inheritance, which is Christ himself.

²¹³ The abiding of John 6:56 is reflected in Christ's prayer for his people in John 17:22-24.

²¹⁴ James Dunn's words are very helpful. "The point of the Lord's Supper is to feed and sustain the relation with Christ, precisely as a communal/corporate relationship. Any move in eucharistic practice to isolated celebration (as though the Lord's Supper were intended simply to feed the individual with spiritual food) or which detracts from it as a shared experience runs counter to Paul's emphasis and detracts from his christology of the body of Christ." James D. Dunn *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2006), 620.

The liturgy of a church should be designed in such a way that it emphasizes the communal nature of the meal. While Paul instructs individuals to examine themselves in 1 Cor 11:28-29 this moves into a communal self-discernment in 11:31. The feast of the Lord's Supper is to involve individual discernment of the body of Christ within the corporate community of the body of Christ. Christ has been sealed to the individual believer as a member of a believing community; an individual is partaking of the meal not in isolation, but as a member of a fellowship. An individual examination should be done in a way that reflects the communal aspect of the covenant. Liturgical corporate confession of sin can encourage this understanding, followed by a time for individual examination.

Corporate discernment in the Lord's Supper must also be tied to corporate understanding of its sealing, covenant function. The Supper is the sacramental seal of the believer's union with Christ, who bore our sins and continues to bear our burdens. Therefore the interpersonal relationships of the covenant community should extend beyond meeting on the Lord's Day, and should be such that believers are open to each other in bearing each other's burdens and welcoming one another with mutual forbearance and forgiveness.²¹⁵ A covenant community that encourages this, encourages honest examination at the Lord's Supper. To partake in the Supper as Christ's community is assent to cleanse out the old leaven of sin, and together celebrate Christ's redemption with the new leaven of sincerity and truth (1 Cor 5:6-8). Let us keep the feast of Christ, and feed on the true Paschal lamb.

²¹⁵ WCF 15.6 on repentance cites Gal 6:1-2 and James 5:16, as does WLC 183 on prayer. Part of repentance and covenant fellowship is bearing one another's burdens in prayer, confessing sins to one another, forgiving sins, and so helping each individual believer to "bear his own load" (Gal 6:5).

The words of institution²¹⁶ and explanation of the sacrament are repetitions of the covenant form of Christ's establishment of his sacrament. The minister repeats them in order to remind the gathered body of the covenant ramifications of the Supper. However, the minister has discretion to explain that as a church, called by the same name as the sacrament,²¹⁷ those gathered have the obligation as a unit to discern their standing as the covenant community of Christ's body formed by his death and resurrection. Reminding those gathered of their union with Christ, and therefore to each other, of which the Lord's Supper is a seal, strengthens corporate ties in the sacramental feasting, as well as establishing grounds for individuals to assist and encourage one another in their faith.

The second implication is that the judgment involved in the Lord's Supper should not be taken lightly. The Supper seals judgment to those who participate in it unworthily for all the reasons laid out by the Westminster Tradition. The Lord's Supper is properly participation with Christ.²¹⁸ Those who partake of it without being privy to the covenant, while not participating by feeding upon Christ and his benefits, are nevertheless engaging with a righteous God. In this sense there is a participation with Christ for the unbelieving partaker. Such engagement with the covenant seal, who is Christ, apart from abiding in Christ, is tantamount to rejection of Christ, and therefore brings judgment.²¹⁹ This judgment motif exists in the sacraments as part of the covenant-form in the OT²²⁰

²¹⁶ WCF 29.3 and WLC 169 require the officiating minister to repeat Christ's words of institution in the administration of the Lord's Supper. The *Directory for Public Worship* states, "Let the words of institution be read out of the Evangelists, or out of the first Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, Chap. 11:23. *I have received of the Lord, &c.* to the 27th Verse, which the minister may, when he seeth requisite, explain and apply." The directory allows ministerial discretion in the explanation of the words of institution.

²¹⁷ That is, the body of Christ. Eph 1:22-23.

²¹⁸ 1 Cor 10:16.

²¹⁹ This is not to suggest a magical aspect of the Lord's Supper for the unbeliever, but since Christ is the seal of the Supper over which he presides, the seal of condemnation that unbelievers receive when they partake of the Supper comes from interacting with a righteous God while lacking the justifying righteousness of Christ. If the participation of the Supper on the part of the believer precludes a participation with demons that

and continues into the NT.²²¹ To try to feed on Christ by faith, while living in a way that does not conform to the covenant terms, is to invoke them as judgment upon oneself.

These important implications that the Lord's Supper as seal of the covenant has for the church should affect its posture in worship. Taylor spoke of the sacrament eliciting solemnity and awe, and that is how the church should approach the covenant seal. The Lord's Supper is a seal of the covenant in Christ's blood, commemorating his death. Yet it should not be partaken of *somberly*. Too often in churches the Lord's Supper is taken with a sense of depressive heaviness, as if the commemoration of Christ's death was a dirge made visible. The Supper is indeed a memorial of Christ's death, and should be approached with seriousness and sobriety, without flippancy. But it is seal of the covenant by conveying and applying the benefits of Christ, because it *gives Jesus*, the one whom the Father sealed, and he is the source of true life and joy. The joy of salvation is exhibited and sealed in the Supper, because the risen Jesus presides over the Supper and comes to feast with his own through his Spirit (Rev 3:20). The Lord's Supper is a commemorative feast to be celebrated in the light of the resurrection, not a funerary memorial. *A joyful solemnity* should characterize the church in its partaking of the sacrament, because Jesus is the object of adoration and source of nourishment the Supper conveys. The Supper is a seal of the covenant of Christ's death, but only until he should come again. The spiritual feeding by faith in the Supper is a faith encouraged by the

comes from sin and idolatry (1 Cor 10:12-14, 20-22), then this is the basis for precluding pagan participation in the Lord's Supper. Those participating with demons in sin cannot participate with Christ in the Supper without incurring the judgment that it seals in the covenant. To remain in unbelief is to remain in sin.

²²⁰ Gen 17:14 concludes with condemnation for those who break the covenant of circumcision. The original Passover in Exod 12 brings death to those not sealed by the blood of the lamb.

²²¹ It is possible that Heb 6:4-8 is speaking of the consequences of apostasy after baptism, and 1 Cor 11:30-32 explicitly speaks of judgment for unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper and condemnation for the world, looking forward to the coming judgment of Christ when he returns, the end in view in the Supper (1 Cor 11:26). See C.F.D. Moule "The Judgment Theme in the Sacraments." *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (eds. W.D. Davies, David Daube, C. H. Dodd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 464-481.

visible elements of the covenant seal, and looks towards the joyous time when Christ shall return and nourish his people.

The Lord's Supper is a seal of the New Covenant in Christ's blood. Christ himself presides over the meal, where he seals all of his promises to his people in their partaking of it. It seals by confirming the covenant promises of God made through the work of Christ. It does this by providing Christ to his people, who receive him by faith. They in turn seal their commitment to Christ as his followers, and to each other as the covenant community of Christ. This is all done through the agency of the Holy Spirit, who applies Christ's seal. To participate in the Supper is therefore to seal acceptance of the covenant terms, which for the unworthy brings judgment, and for the faithful brings obedience and joy, because it brings Christ.

Appendix

A Sample Liturgy

Clear catechesis and preaching are necessary elements in communicating the importance of the Lord's Supper as covenant seal. However, there are a number of other liturgical steps that can be taken to communicate and demonstrate this truth.²²² The Reformed tradition has embraced flexibility to set forms and prayers in the church's liturgy, and these recommendations are designed to respect and sit within that tradition.²²³ The Westminster Assembly's guide to worship was the *Directory of Public Worship*, and this liturgy will reflect its basic structure. While the majority of this proposed liturgy deals with the Lord's Supper directly, other relevant elements will also be addressed.

Public Prayer Before the Sermon

As an element of the service laid out in the *Directory*, the Public Prayer incorporates the content of traditional prayers of confession and assurance²²⁴ in earlier Reformed liturgies, such as in those of John Calvin and John Knox.²²⁵ This prayer can serve as a reminder to congregants about who and what the Lord's Supper seals, and of the sin of violating the covenant terms.

²²² I am indebted to Hughes Oliphant Old's work *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Tradition* for providing multiple examples from the Reformed tradition on liturgical theology and practice for the Lord's Supper.

²²³ In the *Directory for Public Worship* instructions on the content and wording of prayers and exhortations often end with the phrase "to this effect" in order to allow the minister flexibility and discretion.

²²⁴ "The minister who is to preach, is to endeavour to get his own and his hearers hearts to be rightly affected with their sins...by proceeding to a more full confession of sin"

²²⁵ Old, 23, 243, and Nick. R Needham "Worship Through the Ages" in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice* (eds. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2011), 400-404.

Public Prayer²²⁶

Our Lord God,
 continue to sustain us in your life through your Son, Jesus,
 whom you have sealed by your Spirit.
 May we continue to grow in our faith
 and union with your Son,
 sealed by him through his blood and Spirit.
 May your Spirit who has sealed us as the guarantee of your Son's return
 equip
 and strengthen us
 to live as those for whom the blood of Jesus was poured out as the New Covenant
 for the forgiveness of our sins.
 May we live and proclaim as your covenant children the death of Christ,
 given for us, until he should come again.
 We confess, O God,
 that too often we have sinned against you.
 We who have been sealed and nourished by your Son
 have chosen fleeting pleasures
 and looked for life in places other than him.
 We confess that we who have been sealed by Jesus
 with the Holy Spirit of God for the day of redemption,
 have broken your covenant,
 pursued sin, and grieved you.
 Forgive us Lord, for the sake of your Son,
 who has borne the judgment we deserved.
 We thank you Lord God,
 that you are faithful and just through the work of Christ
 to forgive us our sins
 and pardon us on his behalf.

Of the Celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord's SupperExhortation and Invitation²²⁷

The exhortation and invitation include the minister providing a brief explanation of the meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper.

²²⁶ Based on the *Directory's* template in *Of Public Prayer before the Sermon*, "That the Lord would vouchsafe to shed abroad his love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost; seal unto us, by the same Spirit of adoption, the full assurance of our pardon and reconciliation... that they also may receive forgiveness of sin, and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in Christ Jesus."

²²⁷ All of the following subheadings come from the content of the *Directory's* section *Of the Administration of the Sacraments, Of the Celebration of Communion, or Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*.

The benefit of partaking of the Lord's Supper is being nourished by Christ himself. Here, the one whom the Father sealed, seals his own again by his Spirit.

We who are God's children come to this feast to receive a reminder that the New Covenant in the body and blood of Christ is sealed by this Supper.

Here, the covenant is ratified for us again. Here, the benefits of the covenant are confirmed for us. This meal is a seal of all of the promises of God to his covenant people, because all of the covenant promises are found in the person of Christ, who offers himself to us.

Through his Spirit we have been sealed as Christ's own, and here we reaffirm in joyful and solemn celebration our love and fidelity to God, and to each other, as the covenant body of Christ.

This meal seals the benefits of Christ's redemption and grows us in grace.

For those who are weak in their faith, this meal is for you.

You are invited to the table, where Christ feeds you.

Here, your faith can be strengthened by what this covenant seal supplies: assurance that all that Christ accomplished in redemption is for you.

This meal is a divine means by which God seals his covenant to his own.

Come forward to the feast in joyful faith in Christ's work of salvation!

Here we pledge to follow Christ in holiness; to eat and drink the meal in an unworthy fashion is then to seal God's judgment.

It is for God's covenant people alone: here we in turn seal our commitment to God as we discern Christ's body.

I invite you to take a moment to examine your own hearts, to see and repent of sin that would lead you to partake in an unworthy manner of the body and blood of Christ.

I invite you therefore to keep the feast in faith, feeding upon the meal of the New Covenant, sealed for us by Christ.

[Allot a moment of silence].

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Following the words of institution, but before the elements are taken, there is to be a prayer of thanksgiving or blessing of the bread and wine.²²⁸

²²⁸ Based upon the *Directory's* "[A]nd for this sacrament in particular, by which Christ, and all his benefits, are applied and sealed up unto us...are admitted to eat and drink at his own table, and are sealed up by his Spirit to an assurance of happiness and everlasting life."

We thank you for the Supper of your Son, who gives himself to us here and through his Spirit seals us as your covenant people;

We thank you for the benefits of his redemptive work are applied and sealed to us, so that we, who receive life through the Son just as he receives it from you, Father, may be united to him by faith, and to each other as his body.

Following the Prayer of Thanksgiving the minister may lead the congregation in either singing or quoting 1 Cor 5:7-8. The format would look like this:

Minister: Alleluia! Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us.

Congregation: Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia!²²⁹

Prayer of Dedication

The final element, following partaking of the Supper, is the prayer of dedication.²³⁰

Most merciful Father, we thank you for providing us with life through Christ.

We thank you for receiving us into your fellowship with your Son, who gave himself for us in death and has provided life to us through his resurrection.

We thank you for nourishing us with Jesus, the bread of life.

We pray Lord, that this meal you have given as a seal of your covenant love in Christ would strengthen our faith, encourage us in our fragility, and build us in love for you and for each other.

We pray that we who have been sealed as your people would faithfully follow you, and that you would grant us this request:

that we would forsake sin and the life of the old man,

that we would continually bear the fruit of your Spirit in the life of the new man,
Jesus Christ.

Lord, we pray that as you have expressed your covenant faithfulness to us in love,
we would be faithful to you.

Confirm us as your people, bearing each other's burdens, so that we may better glorify you.

²²⁹ The *Pascha Nostrum* is not included in the *Directory*, but as 1 Cor 5:7-8 is cited by WCF and WLC and in the Westminster Tradition as a biblical warrant to understand the Lord's Supper as covenant seal, corporately singing or quoting it as part of the liturgy of the table is appropriate.

²³⁰ *Directory*, "The minister is to give solemn thanks to God"

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