

§ 12. Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 1

Introduction

Today we begin our penultimate locus in our survey of Christian doctrine. Before we do, let's pause for a moment so as to reconnoiter and to understand where we are. Let me remind you, first of all, of the threefold purpose of our Defenders class. Our purpose is:

1. *To train Christians to understand, articulate, and defend basic Christian truths.* Our goal is to help you to better understand what you believe, to articulate it carefully, and to be able to defend it.
2. *To reach out with the Gospel to those who do not yet know Christ, always being ready to give a defense to anybody who should ask for the reason for the hope that is within us.* So the second purpose of the class is evangelistic – to reach out with the Gospel to those who don't yet know Christ.
3. *To be an incendiary fellowship of mutual encouragement and love.* Defenders is, as it were, our church within the church, so to speak, as we come together to know each other personally and mutually encourage and pray for one another as we grow in our Christian lives.

So those are the basic purposes for which the Defenders class exists.

Our class is structured according to the so-called *loci communes* of classical Protestant theology. The *loci communes* were literally the “common places” (or the chief themes) of systematic theology. Our class is structured in 15 sections, each of which takes one *locus* (or one theme) of Christian doctrine. So we began, for example, with the Doctrine of Revelation and looked at how God reveals himself in nature, in Scripture, and in Christ. We then spent a good deal of time on the Doctrine of God, understanding God's existence and nature as well as the Trinity. We discussed the Doctrine of Creation – including God's providence over the world and his miraculous acts in the world. We talked about the Doctrine of Christ, both the person and the work of Christ. Just recently we've completed a section on the Doctrine of Salvation where we looked at such topics as justification by faith, the new birth, mystical union with Christ, perseverance, and so forth.

Now today we're starting a new section, the second-to-the-last locus of our course. This is on Doctrine of the Church. So we are really rounding the bend now and coming into the home stretch! Following the Doctrine of the Church, we'll look at the Doctrine of the Last Things to complete our Defenders series. That will be the third time since the year 2000 that we have run through the entire series. That averages roughly seven years per series.

We have outlines available. The purpose of these outlines is to help you to take notes so that you can then keep the notes, compile them in a notebook, and gradually build up a very nice notebook covering the whole body of Christian doctrine. I hope that this will serve you well if you are called upon to teach a Sunday school lesson or to lead a Bible study at some point. You can pull out your notebook and share some of this material.

Now I have to confess that the Doctrine of the Church is one of the loci of systematic theology about which I know the least. So we're going to focus on the subject of the church's sacraments or ordinances, and omit other topics with which I am less familiar like church government.

The first thing that we'll want to talk about with respect to the church's *sacraments*, or alternatively, *ordinances* is the definition of these words. What do we mean by a sacrament? A sacrament is a means of grace which belongs to the church. By contrast, an ordinance is not a means of grace. Rather it is a sign or evidence of grace. A sacrament would be an actual channel by which grace is imparted to the believer. So the question is: when we participate in baptism, the Lord's Supper, or perhaps certain other activities, are these means of grace which the church administers or are these merely signs of things that the church carries out?

The answer to that question will largely depend upon your view of what you think the church itself is. Is the church the means of salvation that God has given to mankind? Is the church itself a sort of primary sacrament? Is the church the means of grace that God has given to mankind through which we receive salvation? Or, is the church simply the fellowship of those who, through faith in Christ, are united together? In that case it is not a special channel of God's grace that he has instituted, but rather it is the fellowship of those who have come to know him through faith in Christ.

I hope you can see the difference between a sacrament and an ordinance. Although many times certain Protestants will speak loosely of sacraments, they usually don't actually believe that baptism or the Lord's Supper, for example, are sacraments. They usually think that they are ordinances rather than means of grace.

So what constitutes an ordinance or a sacrament? It will typically be the Word of God conjoined with some sort of visible element. It will be the conjunction of the Word of God and a visible element. For example, water in baptism or bread and wine in the Lord's supper is the visible element that is conjoined with the Word of God that is proclaimed.

We now want to ask how are these sacraments or ordinances to be understood in terms of their efficacy? What do they actually *do*? What actually *happens* as a result of participating in a sacrament or ordinance? Here, as you might expect, Christians have a diversity of views.

On the Catholic view, the sacraments are a means of infusing grace into a person. You'll remember when we talked about justification, we saw that on a Catholic view justification involves the actual infusion of God's grace into an individual person. This happens through the sacraments. By being baptized, going to Mass and taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in certain other sacraments, God's grace is infused into the believer through these sacraments.

The Lutheran view is slightly weaker. On the Lutheran view, the sacraments are a means of grace by virtue of the Word of God which is bound up with the sacrament. Remember we saw that a sacrament is constituted by the conjunction of the Word of God with some visible element. For the Lutheran, these sacraments are means of grace, but it is in virtue of the Word of God that they impart grace to those who partake in them.

The Reformed view is still weaker. It holds that the sacraments are a confirmation of God's grace by means of a visible sign. So when you participate in a sacrament, what you see is a visible sign confirming the grace which God has imparted to you.

Finally, on the Baptist view, which is the weakest of all, the act is simply a confessional act on the part of the believer. In baptism, you give a public confession of your allegiance to Christ and to your conversion to the Christian faith. Or in the Lord's Supper, you confess your faith in him until he comes again and confess your sins. It is simply a confessional act; it is not a means of grace.

What about the number of the sacraments? Again, Protestants and Catholics differ on this question. On the Catholic view, the Council of Florence (which dates from 1439) ratified seven sacraments which are recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. These are: baptism, confirmation (where an individual, typically a youngster, will confirm the decision that was made in baptism), the Eucharist (or the Lord's Supper), penance (which will involve confession of sin and performing some act of contrition), marriage (interestingly enough), ordination (such as when a priest is ordained to the ministry), and finally extreme unction, which you take before you die as the Last Rites are administered to you by the Church to ensure that you die in a state of grace and are therefore ready to meet God.

By contrast, Protestants tend to recognize basically two sacraments or ordinances. Those would be baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Next time we'll look more closely at the rite of baptism. What does baptism accomplish and to whom should it be administered? Those are the questions that I am looking forward to discussing with you the next time we meet.¹

¹Total Running Time: 13:30 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)