

CHAPTER 7.

USING THE SACRAMENTS

“How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” Those were the rhetorical questions of the apostle Paul in Romans 10:14. On the basis of this truth we confess that faith comes from the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel (LD 25). The preaching of the Word is the primary means of grace. We explored this in detail in the previous chapter.

Toward the end of that chapter, though, we noted that to keep this primary means of grace as the centrepiece in our worship services is a challenge. We live in an age where people are more eager to watch a video clip on YouTube than to listen to a sermon from a minister. Drama is preferred over discourse. And what about children? They like to see and touch things. Listening to a sermon can be taxing on the younger ones . . . and on their parents as well. All things considered, preaching is not as popular as it once used to be.

However, lest we think that this is a new challenge, a quick look at the Old Testament indicates otherwise. Before he died, Moses clearly warned the people, saying, “Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure . . .” (Deut 4:15–16). Keeping this command would be a challenge. After all, the

other nations all had gods that they could see: beautiful idols of gold and silver, perhaps even encrusted with precious gems. So why couldn't God's own people have those visual elements in their worship? In many ways, it all comes down to trust. Learning to simply take Someone at his Word and fully expect that he will do what he has promised to do is the kind of spiritual exercise that builds trust. Moreover, this is precisely what the means of grace are designed to do: cultivate faith. So, yes, listening without the assistance of all kinds of visual elements is difficult, but it also builds faith. And that, after all, is what it is all about.

But is there no room whatsoever for any visual elements in worship? What about the Old Testament? Think, for instance, about the layout of the tabernacle, the altar for burnt offerings, the bronze laver for ceremonial washing, and so much more. Each of these visual elements in the tabernacle was a carefully constructed picture that spoke a thousand words. True enough, but the crucial point here is that all the visual elements in the tabernacle were ones that the Lord himself had commanded to be there. So, the take-home message is this: God decides which visual elements are to be included in the worship service, and we do not.

This brings us to the whole matter of the sacraments, which will have our attention in this chapter and the next two. The sacraments, as the secondary means of grace, appeal in the first place to our sense of sight, and to a certain degree also to our senses of touch and taste, especially in the case of the Lord's supper. We will begin in this chapter with a general introduction to the sacraments. In the next chapters we will focus on baptism and the Lord's supper.

Along the way, though, we need to remember three keys points. First, the LORD understands our human need to have at least some visual confirmation of the promises that he makes to us verbally. Second, from our side, we must be careful that we remain content with the visual symbols that the LORD gives us. Let us not be so brash as to think that we need to augment God's symbols with some of our own personally or communally designed visuals. Third, in an age which lives by the motto "I'll believe it when I see it," we must remember the words of our Saviour,

who purposefully blessed those who do *not* see and yet believe (John 20:29). In other words, sacraments are an immense blessing, but they must also be kept in their proper place.

WHAT ARE SACRAMENTS?

If you look in the Bible, you will not find the word *sacrament*. Some may find this disconcerting, and may even question whether we should speak of sacraments at all. However, there are times when we use terms not found in the Bible which summarize well a truth that is in Scripture. In this regard the most well-known examples are the words *Trinity* and *triune*. Neither word is found anywhere in Scripture. Yet they capture in an excellent way what the Bible teaches in many passages, including Matthew 28:19. For this reason the church rightly makes use of these helpful terms.

The word *sacrament* comes from a Latin word that means *pledge*. It speaks of some particular action or special symbol by which a person indicates that he is truly committed to follow through and do what he said he would do. For instance, a pledge was used in the army when soldiers vowed to remain faithful to their commanding officer, no matter how tough the battle might become. As another example, in certain weighty legal matters, the parties involved would sometimes set aside a sum of money as a way of assuring the judge that they were genuinely serious about the transaction in question. In some ways this kind of pledge, or sacrament, could be compared to what we today call a deposit or a retainer.

Once this meaning is clear, it also becomes obvious why it is used as a summary term to pull together biblical teaching about things such as circumcision and Passover in the Old Testament as well as baptism and the Lord's supper in the New Testament. For instance, circumcision was a special ceremony in which the foreskin of an eight-day-old boy was removed (Gen 17:11–12). This act of circumcision was a visual sign and further confirmation of the covenant that the LORD had already made earlier with Abram (Gen 15:18). The LORD had made a verbal commit-

ment that he would give Abram both descendants (Gen 15:4–5) and possession of the land (Gen 15:7, 18–21). As such, that should have been enough. If the LORD promises something, he will fulfil it. Even Balaam underlined this truth when he asked rhetorically, “Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?” (Num 23:19).

Yet the LORD is not only true to his word; he is also compassionate toward his people, and he gives more. For this reason, the LORD again appeared to Abram, confirmed his covenant, and then also gave circumcision as a visible pledge guaranteeing that he would certainly keep his promise to make Abram the father of many nations (Gen 17:5) and allow his descendants to possess the land of Canaan (Gen 17:8). So, this is the pattern that the LORD follows: he makes promises verbally and then confirms them with some kind of visual pledge. These pledges we now call sacraments.

At this point, it may be helpful to pause and give a more elaborate definition of the sacraments. The Heidelberg Catechism pulls things together nicely when it says that “the sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals” and then adds that they “were instituted by God so that by their use he might more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel” (LD 25, Q&A 66). Let us break this definition down into smaller, more manageable pieces:

Holy

This indicates that sacraments are distinct, special actions that are set apart from common usage. For example, baptism is a washing with water. However, we wash with water all the time, even multiple times each day. Yet the washing of baptism is set apart from all the other washings and is given a special meaning and purpose by God himself. Likewise, the Lord’s supper is a special meal that the Lord distinguishes from all the other meals that we eat.

Visible

As explained above, the sacraments are different from the Word because they appeal to the eye. At the same time, we should remember that sacraments are not merely visual. Baptism is administered with the words, “I baptize you into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19), and at the Lord’s table significant words such as “This is my body” are spoken. Thus, in sacraments the Lord brings audible and visible together in order to bless his people.

Signs

This is another way of saying that a sacrament is a symbol. A sign or symbol by its very nature points you in a certain direction or helps your mind contemplate something else. For example, many electronic devices have a symbol on them that is made up of a small circle with a vertical dash through the top of it. That symbol, in and of itself, is nothing special. Its design is simple and almost minimalistic. However, it draws your attention to the fact that if you push that button, or click that icon, you can either power up, or turn off, your device.

Seals

There are times when a guarantee of authenticity is necessary, or at least very beneficial. Historically speaking, a person might have his own personal seal for this purpose—perhaps a ring, or small cylinder, with a unique design engraved in it. He could then dip his ring in wax or roll the cylinder in ink in order to place his own unique design on a certain legal document, for example. In this way anyone reading the document would receive a strong assurance that it was not a forgery but an authentic document that could be trusted. Today important documents such as diplomas are still stamped with the official seal of the academic institution.

Instituted by God

In the case of sinful human beings, we usually look for a reliable third party to authenticate someone's promise. For example, we look to a reputable bank to issue a certified cheque when someone promises to pay a large sum of money and we want a guarantee that the money is really there. However, with God it is different. There is no one higher or more reliable than he is. As Scripture says, "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself" (Heb 6:13). In a similar way, the visual pledges of God's promises are chosen and instituted by God himself because if we, sinful human beings, designed the pledges, it would only make things less certain rather than more certain.

More Fully Declare and Seal

Sacraments have a two-fold purpose: to declare and to seal. In the first place, they *teach*. Simple, visual illustrations help people understand complex, or even abstract, concepts. For instance, forgiveness of sins, and everything it entails, is clearly, yet comprehensively taught in the simple action of immersion in, or sprinkling with, water. In the second place, sacraments *assure*. Just as one glance at a seal assures you that a diploma is legitimate, so also the symbols of bread and wine at the Lord's supper directly confirm to the believer that he is really and truly forgiven.

The Promise of the Gospel

By mentioning the "promise" the Catechism reminds us of the connection between God's sacraments and God's Word. Moreover, since it describes the content of the promise as the gospel, our faith is drawn to the heart of the matter, namely, the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life that Christ has obtained for us by his atoning work. The sacraments are not meant to pull our attention first in one direction and then off in another direction. Rather, they have a certain laser-like focus on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

Two More Details

In slightly different words, the Belgic Confession also gives a helpful definition of the sacraments: “Sacraments are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Art. 33). Although the phrase “visible signs and seals” is identical to the wording in the Catechism, two distinct elements in this definition are worth highlighting. First of all, the sacraments are signs that point to an *internal* work of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, although the water of baptism is applied externally to our bodies, and although the bread and wine are set out on the table in front of us, we must not concentrate on what is external but on the internal working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

This leads directly into the second distinctive. In even a slightly stronger way than the Catechism, the Belgic Confession emphasizes, twice over, that *God* uses the sacraments *through the power of the Holy Spirit* to work in us. To begin with, please note that in the sacraments we are not the ones acting toward God, but God is acting upon us. That direction is crucial to a proper understanding of the sacraments. In sacraments, God is the one who is giving and we are the ones who are receiving. Furthermore, we should be clear about the fact that the sacraments themselves do not do the work of confirming the promises of the gospel in our hearts, but God’s Spirit, using the sacraments, does that gracious work.

SACRAMENTS: HOW SHOULD THEY BE USED?

In order to use the sacraments properly, we must distinguish carefully between *the sign* and *the redemptive reality to which that sign points*. Those two are obviously connected, even closely connected, with each other, but to equate them is to make a mistake that will lead to various doctrinal and pastoral problems. By way of analogy, wedding rings are closely connected with marriage; indeed, the rings are symbols of a couple’s vows to love each other so long as they both shall live. Yet everyone understands that a ring is not a marriage. Even if the ring is lost, the marriage is still intact. By the same token, even if someone has a

ring on her finger, that does not necessarily mean everything is intact within her marriage. Spouses understand that it is important to distinguish—without dividing—between the symbol and the reality of marriage.

The same kind of thing holds true for sacraments. The following table gives a brief, but incomplete, overview of the signs and redemptive realities to which they point.

| Sign | Redemptive reality | Key passage |
|------------------------|--|--------------------|
| Circumcision | Covenant of the LORD | Gen 17:11 |
| Blood of Passover Lamb | The LORD's gift of life instead of death | Exod 12:13 |
| Water of baptism | Washing away of sins | Acts 22:16 |
| Bread of Lord's supper | Forgiveness of sins through Christ's body | 1 Cor 10:16 |
| Wine of Lord's supper | Forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood | 1 Cor 10:16 |

This naturally leads to another question. Precisely what kind of connection exists between the sign and that gracious truth to which the sign points? For the Roman Catholic Church the two become essentially one. The water of baptism itself washes away sin, and the bread and wine turn substantially into the body and blood of Christ.¹ Thus, for the most part, the Roman Catholic Church teaches a *physical* identity between the two.

The Lutheran Church maintains a greater distinction between sign and the thing that it signifies, but it still tends to maintain a *local*, or *spatial*, connection. The bread at the Lord's table is not the body of Christ, but the body of Christ is miraculously located right there close to the bread. In a similar way, the blood of Christ is located in, with, and around the wine. If this does not sound entirely clear right now, we will look at all of it in more detail in chapter 9.

1. *Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006) §263, 283.

However, for now the important thing to understand is that the Reformed faith maintains a *spiritual*, or perhaps better, *Spiritual*, connection between the symbol and that to which the symbol points. The link is spiritual in the sense that what we see when a New Testament sacrament is administered is most certainly physical; it is simply water, or bread, or wine. However, that to which it points is not a physical, tangible object. You cannot hold forgiveness of sins in your hand and touch it. You cannot put eternal life on a scale and weigh it. It is just not that kind of thing. These glorious blessings are spiritual, yes, at present even invisible, realities. So it is the Holy Spirit himself who, using the sacrament, makes the connection between the two and assures us that just as we see the water or the wine of the sacrament, so surely can we trust that our sins are completely forgiven. Since the Spirit himself makes this connection, we can describe it as being not only spiritual but also *Spiritual*.

This also means that, in order to use the sacraments properly and profitably, we must rely on the Holy Spirit as we use them. To begin with, this means that we must use the sacraments prayerfully. No one should assume that the blessings will automatically flow simply because the symbols of water, bread, and wine are present in the church building and distributed to the congregation. Rather, we must earnestly pray that the Holy Spirit may use the visible signs and seals to work internal miracles of grace within us.

Secondly, this also means that we must keep the Word of the Spirit as an integral part of our use of the sacraments of the Spirit. In Corinth the sacrament of the holy supper degenerated into a carnival of gluttony and arrogance. Among other things, there they forgot what the Lord Jesus himself had said about this supper when he instituted it. The apostle Paul therefore had to remind them of the words he had received from Christ and passed on to this congregation on an earlier occasion (1 Cor 11:23). The sacraments will not be truly *Spiritual* unless we infuse their administration with clear instruction from the Word. For this reason, Reformed churches have typically adopted forms for administering the sacraments. Relevant portions of Scripture are summarized in

these forms. The forms, then, maintain a strong connection between the Spirit's Word and his sacraments.

Finally, acknowledging the Spiritual connection between the signs and the glorious promises of grace that are signified in them means expecting real and powerful benefits from the Spirit through the sacraments. Some Christians experience the sacraments as mere ceremonies that are kept up for the sake of tradition. Then the sacraments become little more than familiar yet hollow routines. However, where the Spirit is working, we should rightly expect great things to happen. The work of the Spirit is powerful (Acts 1:8; 10:38; Rom 15:13, 19; Eph 3:16), not pointless! For this very reason the sacraments are significant, not superficial.

Focusing on the work of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments will also prevent us from misunderstanding certain passages in Scripture. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:16 the apostle speaks in a surprisingly far-reaching manner. He says, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" What exactly does that mean? Is Paul saying that when we drink wine in a cup at the Lord's table we are actually drinking the blood of God's own Son? Or, to use another example, in Acts 22:16 Paul recounts how Ananias told him, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins." Does the water of baptism really have the power to wash away sins? No, but still these servants of the Lord, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke this direct kind of language which seems to erase the distinction between the symbol and the object that is symbolized.

In Titus 3:5 the Holy Spirit himself begins to make things clear. There the apostle is inspired to write, "He saved us . . . *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour." In other words, the water of baptism does not ultimately cleanse us. Instead, the Spirit condescends to our level of understanding and uses the symbol of water to teach us about the forgiveness sins which Christ obtained for us. Let us not forget the means of grace are precisely that: *means*, not sources, of grace. The

source of all grace is God the Father, for the sake of Christ, by the working of the Spirit.

So why is there this surprisingly direct connection in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and Acts 22:16? In short, sacramental language is both *pictorial* and *promissory*. As for the pictorial aspect, you may point to a picture on your living room wall and say, “This is my Uncle John from Europe.” That is an entirely proper use of the language. However, strictly speaking, we all recognize that the picture is not the person named Uncle John. It is only a photographic representation of him. The real person lives an ocean away in Europe somewhere. Still we say “This *is* my Uncle John” rather than “This is a *picture of* my Uncle John.” That is the power of pictorial language, and this kind of language is being used in 1 Corinthians 10:16 when drinking from a cup is described as a participation in the blood of Christ.

At the same time this kind of language highlights the strength of divine promises. To use an everyday example, on a Saturday a father might say to his seventeen-year-old son, “If you finish the yard work this morning, the car *is* yours for the afternoon.” Now, a more cautious individual might ask if the father should not exercise more restraint and say: “If you finish the yard work, you may use my car for the afternoon.” But no, the father wants to convey a strong sense of promise here. His son can count on it: if the yard work is done, he has full use of the car for the afternoon. His father will certainly stand behind his word! It is this kind of strong *promissory* language that, for example, Ananias was using when he said, “Be baptized and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16). Those who want to use the sacraments properly and profitably need to become familiar with this special, sacramental language that is both pictorial and promissory.

SACRAMENTS: WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

Can a child of God be saved without sacraments? The short answer is: yes, it is possible. The criminal on the cross beside Jesus was not baptized, and he never participated in the Lord’s supper either. Yet Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Par-

adise” (Luke 23:42). This man died and was received into glory without ever having received a single sacrament. The same may be true today for completely different reasons. A child of believing parents may die shortly after birth, before it was even realistically possible for that child to receive the sacrament of holy baptism, let alone being able to celebrate the Lord’s supper. Therefore it is true that sacraments are not *absolutely* necessary.

Yet we would be both foolish and arrogant to conclude from this that sacraments are not that important. In this regard it is instructive to note the context in which Christ instituted both New Testament sacraments. First, we read that when the apostles saw the risen Christ, just before he set in place the sacrament of baptism on the Mount of Olives, “they worshiped him, but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). How many doubted? We do not know. Still, those who doubted were apostles, yes, *apostles* of the Lord Jesus Christ who had even been told beforehand that Christ would arise on the third day, and yet they doubted.

Likewise, during the last Passover with his disciples, Jesus began his Upper Room Discourse by saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1). Questions, uncertainties, doubts, and anxieties: these things were all plaguing the disciples that evening. Certainly we should be able to understand, at least to a degree, what they were going through. We, too, have doubts, questions, anxieties, and uncertainties. Our Father in heaven knows this full well, and he deals with us patiently and tenderly. In order to shore up our faith, he supplies us with sacraments. The Belgic Confession puts it this way:

We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments to seal his promises to us and to be pledges of his good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and strengthen our faith (Art. 33).

For this reason it would be not only foolish but also arrogant for us to dismiss the sacraments as minor, let alone unnecessary, add-ons in our ecclesiastical life. The truth of the matter is that if our heavenly Father has wisely determined that we need them, we should accept his judgment

and gladly use these unique gifts of baptism and Lord's supper. After all, faith is also the assurance that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted the blessings of salvation, both present and eternal (LD 7). The Holy Spirit has designed the sacraments to be specialized tools precisely for the assurance of faith, and that in a truly personal way. So, are sacraments absolutely necessary? No. Do all of us have a pastoral need for them? Absolutely yes!

Suggested Reading: Exodus 12:1–20

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Despite many similarities between the Old Testament sacraments (i.e., circumcision and Passover) and New Testament sacraments (i.e., baptism and Lord's supper), there is at least one striking difference. What is that difference? Why did God put that difference in place?
2. There are three different views on how the sign, such as the wine, is connected with the redemptive reality, namely, the shed blood of Christ: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed. Describe the different views and explain why the differences are much more than theological quibbling.
3. Explain what sacramental language is, referring to both its pictorial and its promissory aspects.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. People today love visuals. Their lives are filled with icons and video-clips. Every day they have hours of screen time with TVs, computers, tablets, and smartphones. We will not be able to turn back the clock and retrieve a less video-oriented society. So, are the preaching of the Word and two visuals, baptism and Lord's supper, enough? Defend your answer and explain how you would convince others. How would you explain your position to a group of fourteen-year-olds?
2. Give two concrete examples of how we underestimate the importance of sacraments in our personal and ecclesiastical lives.

Also give two concrete examples of how we might overestimate the place of sacraments in our personal and ecclesiastical lives. How do we find just the right balance? To be more concrete, how do we value our own baptism enough so that it is truly a source of assurance for us, while at the same time ensuring that our baptism does not lull us into the idea that we can be lazy Christians who sleep in our sin?

3. The Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments. Beyond the most well-known ones, holy baptism and the mass, what are the other five sacraments in this church? Why do Protestant churches teach that these things, even if some may be valuable, are not sacraments?
4. A close, personal friend of yours is having serious doubts about whether she really is a child of God. You try to comfort her by pointing her to her baptism. In her despair she blurts out, “My baptism was just a five-second ceremony with a little bit of water. How does that help me with my doubts?” What is your friend missing in her understanding of the sacraments? How can you show her that in times of doubt, God’s sacraments really do help?
5. Why are the sacraments administered in a public worship service and not in private ceremonies? Could a minister administer a baptism in a family gathering during the week? Why or why not?

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