

LESSON 26

Belgic Confession Articles 33-35 The Sacraments (I)

General:

In this lesson we examine the significance and purpose of the sacraments, and note how these function in the life of the Church.

1. The Necessity of these Articles

It need not surprise us that the Confession devotes such ample space to defend and explain the Scriptural doctrine concerning the sacraments. During the time of the Reformation, the matter of the sacraments formed a major issue in which the basic points of the Christian Faith were at stake, and such is, today, still the case.

In these articles, the Confession battles on two main fronts:

- a) against Roman Catholic "sacramentalism," personified in the "accursed idolatry" of the Mass (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 30)
- b) against the Anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism and their abhorred practice of re-baptizing.

Since in the sacraments we receive a visible instruction and a personal confirmation regarding Christ's work for us, we must have a clear understanding of the significance and purpose of these sacraments.

2. The Significance of the Sacraments

The word "sacrament" (coming from the Latin, "a holy act") originally denoted some kind of initiation-ritual (e.g. the oath of allegiance in the Roman army). In the Christian Church the word was used for Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, possibly because of the notion of being "dedicated or committed" to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible does not use the word "sacrament" at all, but the word does find a prominent place in the writings of the early Christian Church.

In the Scriptures we read of a "sign and seal," e.g. in reference to the *circumcision* of Abraham.

Romans 4:11, "He received circumcision as a *sign* or *seal* of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

Sacraments are meant to be *seen* (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, "visible signs and seals"). In the sacraments, the Lord visibly presents before our eyes what we otherwise *hear* in the preaching. The sacraments, therefore, do not bring us any *new* or *added* revelation, but simply portray and confirm what has already been said. Sacraments always follow the preaching, and lose their significance without the preaching. Therefore, the

sacraments are administered only in a worship service where the Word is also preached.

Sign: "to represent better to our external senses," so that *hearing* is combined with *seeing* (audio-visual). A sacrament *portrays* in simple yet unmistakable fashion what we have in Christ.

Seal: "Thus He confirms to us the salvation which He imparts to us." A seal lends official authentication to an act or document, is a sure *pledge*, so that our trust has a solid basis.

We conclude, then, that the sacraments are simple, outward signs and seals, not magic formulae, yet they portray and confirm to us a basic *reality*: the promises of God, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the renewal by the Holy Spirit. The Confession therefore stresses that "the signs are not void or meaningless so that they deceive us. For Jesus Christ is their truth; apart from Him they would be nothing."

It is important to note that the sacraments must be *received* in humble faith, otherwise their positive effect is nullified. Yet even then, the sacraments themselves retain their truth, and we use them to our condemnation. Regardless of our attitude, the Lord *means* what He signifies and seals in the sacraments. The sacraments stress both God's certain promises and our definite obligations.

3. The Purpose of the Sacraments

Since the sacraments are instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, they are of great importance. Yet we must be very careful not to place undue emphasis on the sacraments as if they are absolutely necessary for our salvation (the Roman Catholic heresy of "sacramentalism"). Sacraments are given by the Lord, "mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity" (see also: Psalm 103:14) with only one *purpose*: "to nourish and sustain our faith." The faith which the Holy Spirit works by the preaching of the Word of God, must be strengthened by the use of the sacraments, so that we do *not doubt* the promises of God.

Neglect with respect to the sacraments would mean gross *self-overestimation* and a spurning of the grace of God. *Overemphasis* on the sacraments would mean a denial of the fact that God's Word is, in itself, sufficient for our salvation. We must keep a balanced perspective on these things.

4. The Number of the Sacraments

It is clear from Scripture that there are only *two* sacraments, in the Old Testament Circumcision and Passover, corresponding in the New Testament with Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In these two sacraments lies assurance for our whole life, both the Lord's initial confirmation of His promises (Baptism) and His ongoing confirmation of the same (Lord's Supper). We must be "satisfied" with these two sacraments.

If one overemphasizes the sacraments (as the Roman Catholic Church does) and makes them into a *condition for salvation*, one has opened the way

for additional sacraments. In that case, the more sacraments, the more assurance of salvation, and the more power to the Church which administers these sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church has instituted no less than seven sacraments. We should not be wiser than God, but suffice with what He has so excellently given us.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 26):

1. Why does the Confession devote such ample space to the doctrine concerning the sacraments?
2. What is the meaning of the word "sacrament"?
3. How does the Bible speak of the sacraments?
4. What is the relationship between the sacraments and the preaching of the Word?
5. Explain how the signs in the sacraments are not "void and meaningless."
6. How must we receive the sacraments?
7. Do the sacraments lose their truth if we do not accept them in faith?
8. What is the purpose of the sacraments?
9. What is "sacramentalism"?
10. How many sacraments are there?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25.