

# SEEING IS BELIEVING

## SIGNS AND SEALS OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Pastor Kevin C. Carr, M. Div., D. Min.

First Presbyterian Church (PCA)  
Hinckley, Minnesota

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.  
Copyright c. 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission  
of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

2006

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

[Sacraments] put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world, and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) XXVII.1.

It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that [a sacrament] is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.<sup>1</sup>

Two things are requisite to complete our happiness: first our being absolved from our sins, and [second] washed from our pollution: that we may be regenerated...and then nourished...Both these are sufficiently confirmed to us by these two sacraments. Our first engrafting into Christ, and our regeneration by his Spirit, are set forth by baptism; and the nourishment of our spiritual life by the holy supper.<sup>2</sup>

Sacraments function as a means of grace on the principle that, literally, seeing is (i.e., leads to) believing.<sup>3</sup>

### Two Unchangeable Things

People thrive on promises. A promise as simple as, “I’ll be over for dinner at 6:00,” sets in motion a series of preparations that presume its truth. Promises move mountains. Influential leaders make promises to arouse vision and unite passions around a common cause. Promises inspire and keep hope alive.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1277; Book IV. Chapter xiv. Section 1.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, Vol. 2, trans. William Crookshank (1822; rpt., Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 421.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to the Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 210-211.

Nevertheless, we are not particularly good at keeping our word. We forget appointments or don't show up on time. Circumstances frequently thwart our good intentions. Much of life is out of our control. Sometimes we simply do not take our own promises very seriously.

However, the Christian faith depends on the certainty of its promises. The Bible is God's book of divine pledges. Among the most fundamental are these: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Heb.8:10); "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12); "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5); "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). Indeed, St. Peter said, "He has given us his very great and precious promises" (2 Peter. 1:4) and St. Paul adds, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20). When the Lord gave the children of Israel rest in the Promised Land, Joshua said, "Not one of all the LORD'S good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled" (Joshua 21:45). There is nothing more certain than the promises of God. The Lord can never renege on them.

Still, holding on to these divine promises is a struggle for us. Our faith waxes and wanes throughout our lives. There are times when we doubt his love and faithfulness. But the Lord also understands our frailties. The Psalmist says, "For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psa. 103:14). Besides our obvious physical limitations we also have spiritual and emotional limitations. We often experience fear and doubt when it comes to trusting the Lord. Yet, he regularly and graciously condescends to strengthen us in our faith.

In Genesis, Abraham is presented as the quintessential man of faith. Through him we learn what it means to walk by faith in the promises of God. But we also learn that the Lord repeatedly confirmed his promises in visible and tangible ways in order to encourage Abraham in his faith.

In Hebrews we are told, "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendents.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised" (Heb. 6:13-15). This is a direct reference to the Lord's deliverance of Isaac on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22:16) when Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his only son. In the end, the Lord offered a ram in his stead, leaving a powerful image of divine deliverance and thus confirming his promise that Abraham's son would survive to be as a blessing for all nations.

The author of Hebrews doubtless had in mind the Lord's night vision to Abraham in Genesis 15 as well. Here God appeared to Abraham as a "smoking firepot with a blazing torch" (Gen. 15:17). As the Lord passed between the pieces of mutilated animals, he entered into an oath-making ceremony exposing himself to the same penalty should he ever go back on his promise. This unusual but vivid ritual fixed in Abraham's mind the Lord's absolute faithfulness to his word.

The Lord did not have to do these things. His word was sufficient. But the Lord graciously condescended to Abraham's propensity to doubt by confirming his promise with this ceremonial vow. The Book of Hebrews continues, "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb. 6:17-18). God's own word is unchangeable and should be sufficient. But he graciously offers visible symbols through which our faith can be strengthened and we can be encouraged on our way.

This two-fold witness is fundamental to Reformed sacramental theology. The demoniac boy's father cried to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). It is this very human tendency that the Lord graciously seeks to address. The Lord makes promises to his people regarding his care and

provision. He offers eternal salvation to all who by grace through faith rest in Christ alone. His promises stand firm and are the source of great joy and comfort to those who receive them. However, as a bride and groom lovingly give each other rings to seal their promises, so the Lord offers tangible tokens to assure his beloved of the certainty of his love. These tokens are called sacraments. They are among the church's most precious possessions, not only reminding her of the Lord's love, but also leading her to commune with him who gave them.

## Signs of the Covenant

Reformed Christians define a sacrament in part as a "sign and seal of the covenant of grace" (WCF XXVII.1). This designation was used by Paul as he argued for the truth of the gospel, saying of Abraham, "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith" (Rom. 4:11).

Signs are visible, tangible, and sensible things by which an invisible, intangible, and insensible truth is confirmed. As a highway sign points to an unseen restaurant or a hidden museum at a particular exit, so a sacrament points to the reality and truth of a promise that God has made but cannot be seen. The Bible records the Lord's use of many different signs. The tree of life in the Garden of Eden is a good example. Here the Lord made a promise to Adam to give him life for his obedience. The Tree served as a sacramental sign to confirm the promise (Gen. 2:9, 16). Furthermore, when the Lord assured Abraham that he would give birth to a nation, he was led outside and shown the stars of the heavens. The Lord said, "So shall your offspring be" (Gen. 15:5). The Lord also acknowledged that the Sabbath functioned as a sign for his people when he said, "You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy" (Ex. 31:13). The blood of the Passover lamb painted on the doorframe of the house was a sign of which the Lord said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Ex. 12:13).

The first time the words "sign" and "covenant" are associated is with regard to the pledge God made to Noah. When the Lord promised, "Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood," he appointed a visible sign to establish his words: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9:11, 13). Later, the Lord confirmed the promises he made to Abraham and his descendants with the sign of circumcision. He said, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gen. 17:11).

As these Abrahamic promises were partially fulfilled in the emergence of Israel as a nation, the Lord gave further signs to strengthen Israel's faith. Most importantly, Passover was added to circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Fathers were to instruct their children with these words, "[Passover] will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand" (Ex. 13:9, 16).

The birth of Christ as Immanuel was seen by Isaiah as sign of the certainty of God's prophetic word (Isa. 7:14). Not surprisingly then, the life and ministry of Jesus was characterized by signs and wonders. The miracles of our Lord served as signs to visibly verify his claims and promises as the Son of God. To the paralytic Jesus said, "That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:10-11). The visible miracle confirmed Jesus' "invisible" ability to forgive sins. St. John routinely refers to the miracles of Jesus with the Greek word *semeion*, which means a miraculous sign. The stated purpose of his Gospel is this: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

It is important to keep a couple of things in mind regarding Biblical signs. First, a sign must bear some resemblance to the

thing that it signifies. The tree of life relates to eternal life. The rainbow comes with the passing of the storm. Circumcision speaks of the removal of sinful flesh. Water reminds us of cleansing. Bread and wine show us the suffering of Christ. Second, signs are primarily objective testimonies to God's promises, rather than subjective testimonies of our experiences. God said to Noah, "I have set my rainbow in the clouds....I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant" (Gen. 9:12, 16). Similarly baptism, one of the New Testament signs, is not our sign to the world that we have accepted Jesus. It is God's sign to us of his ownership by virtue of our relationship to Christ and his church.

Of all the signs mentioned in the Bible, the Lord Jesus instituted two in particular to be observed by his church: baptism (Matt. 28:19-20) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-28). Such sacraments St. Augustine called, "a visible sign of a sacred thing," or "a visible form of an invisible grace."<sup>4</sup> Although baptism and the Lord's Supper are not specifically called signs in the New Testament, it is clear that they indeed are from the relation they bear to their Old Testament counterparts. Baptism is related to circumcision and both served to initiate individuals into the covenant community (Col. 2:11-12). The Lord's Supper was born out of the Passover, both of which served to confirm God's promises to covenant members (Matt. 26:17).

## Seals of the Covenant

A police officer has stopped you on the highway. You were speeding and now you must give account. Worn prominently on his uniform is a badge. That badge is his authenticating mark. It proves that he is the real thing. It represents the authority conferred upon him by the public to hold us accountable. But it also represents promises to which he has sworn. He must serve and protect. His badge assures you his intent is not to spoil your day, but to keep you safe.

A badge is like a seal because it sets the bearer of it apart. A rancher marks his cattle with a brand or a seal to distinguish them from other herds. A blender receives the good housekeeping seal to grant assurances of product reliability. The presidential seal represents the status of the highest office in our land (1 King 21:8; Esther 8:8). A seal on a public document authenticates the words written therein (Neb. 9:38; Jer. 32:44; John 3:33).

Reformed Christians understand the sacraments not only as signs, but also seals of the covenant of grace (Rom. 4:11). French theologian Pierre Ch. Marcel notes regarding sacramental seals that they "serve to confirm and strengthen faith." He continues,

It is the recognition of the worth of this biblical affirmation which gives the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments both its original character and, at the same time, its grand precision.

Seals are distinct from signs in that they not only remind us of invisible things, but also authenticate these things to our religious consciousness by making them more certain and sure to us.<sup>5</sup>

As seals, sacraments distinguish Christians from the world. They are God's marks of ownership. The sacraments assure the faithful that God's promises in Christ are sealed to our hearts and lives. Sacramental seals are marks of the status we enjoy in the kingdom by virtue of Christ's redemptive work. These seals confirm the truth of the gospel as God reveals it to us in his Word.

The relationship between the sacraments and the ministry of the Holy Spirit must not be overlooked. In one sense God's seal upon his children is invisible. St. Paul says, "You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13). The apostle says later on, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). The essential seal

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Calvin's Institutes, IV. xiv. 1.

---

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co. LTD., 1953), 29.

God places upon believers is the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit residing in our hearts. But, this activity cannot be seen by human eyes (John 3:8).

However, there are corresponding visible seals which the Lord graciously offers to assure us of things invisible. These seals are baptism and the Lord's Supper. To these the world can witness and in these the church can participate. St. Paul elsewhere says, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor. 1:20-22). It is important to note that Paul associates here the work of the Spirit and the seal of ownership. But, he also distinguishes them. The placing of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart, in Ephesians called his seal, is here distinguished from the setting of "his seal of ownership on us." What is the seal of ownership, if not the visible seals by which the Lord marks his own, that is, baptism and the Lord's Supper? Reformer John Calvin insisted,

The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears.<sup>6</sup>

The Old Covenant sign of circumcision is called "a seal of the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith" (Rom. 4:11). It wasn't the applying of the seal that granted righteousness to Abraham; it was his faith in the promise of God. But the seal served to confirm to his heart the certainty of God's faithfulness. That is how sacraments work in us: not by virtue of the work performed or our mere participation in them; but by faith in the One who has given them to us in the first place. It is by virtue of the faithful

promise of God the Father, the atoning work of Christ at Calvary, and the powerful and effective work of the Holy Spirit who applies those saving benefits to our lives. Baptism and the Lord's Supper seal these things to our minds and our hearts.

As signs, the sacraments set before our eyes the finished work of Christ; as seals, the sacraments apply to us who believe the benefits of redemption by the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval" (John 6:27).

### Means of Grace

The topic of the sacraments as a means of grace concerns the question, "What do we receive from the sacraments?" Do we merely receive water, bread and wine, or something more? Do they merely commemorate the blessings of Christ or do they communicate, in some way, the blessings of Christ? Several points need to be made regarding the Reformed position.

As mediator (1 Tim 2:5), Jesus died for sin and offers life to those who trust him. Along with this he grants many other spiritual benefits like forgiveness of sin, peace of conscience, assurance of eternal life, and more (cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism #36). But, how do these benefits come to us? Do they fall indiscriminately from heaven like rain, or do they come to us through specific means or channels? The Westminster Larger Catechism #154 inquires of such things and responds, "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances: especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer." Occasionally the Bible records a conversion that appears outside the scope of such means, such as that of Abraham or Saul. However, we are ordinarily to expect God's grace to come to us through what Reformed Christians call, the means of grace. Specifically these are the Word, prayer, and the sacraments.

---

<sup>6</sup> Institutes, IV. xiv. 9.

There is little dispute among Evangelical Protestants that the Bible has transforming power in the lives of those who faithfully receive the gospel. Peter insists that believers, “Have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). Likewise sincere prayer, whether corporate or private, is universally acknowledged to be a channel through which the Lord’s gracious blessings are brought to our lives. Jesus taught, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7).

Unfortunately, there is less agreement when it comes to the sacraments. On the one hand, there are those who insist that the sacraments are not means of grace at all. They are memory aids. Baptism is regarded as our testimony to the world. The Lord’s Supper is seen as merely a memorial, with commemorative value like the 4th of July. The word “ordinance” is preferred instead of “sacrament,” believing the latter term sounds too “medieval.” On the other hand, there are those who appear to make the sacraments a necessary means of saving grace. This can create a false confidence as one may wrongfully trust the ceremony rather than the One to whom the ceremony points. Reformed Christians believe that both these views miss the mark.

During the Reformation period, John Calvin insisted on retaining the term “sacrament” to apply to baptism and the Lord’s Supper even though the word was not found in the Bible. He argued that the term simply meant “mystery” and claimed that, “in using the word ‘sacraments,’ the ancients had no other intention than to signify that they are signs of holy and spiritual things.”<sup>7</sup> A mystery in New Testament terms is simply a gospel truth, previously unknown, but now revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:2-3; Col. 1:26-27; 1 Tim. 3:16). We do not claim to be privy to all of the details of how God works in our lives (Deut. 29:29). Calvin simply sought to retain the understanding that the sacraments revealed the mysteries of the gospel.

---

<sup>7</sup> Institutes, IV. xiv. 13; cf. IV. xiv. 2.

There are three things in particular that shape the Reformed view of the sacraments. First, the sacraments do not stand alone, but must always be accompanied by the Word. A sacrament without explanation is a symbol without substance. Without understanding, the human heart will turn a sacred thing into an idol. We tend to project our own aspirations and emotions onto symbols that are dear to us and shape them for our own use. However, the sacraments are not ours to shape, but ours by which to be shaped.

Second, the efficacy of the sacraments, that is, their ability to strengthen, confirm, and otherwise bring God’s grace to us, depends solely upon the working of the Holy Spirit. It is not dependent upon any powers in the elements, the ritual, or our participation in them. We do not believe in magic. Pagans believe objects and ceremonies have power to channel spiritual blessings and affect change in and of themselves. Even one’s heartless participation in a sacred ceremony is regarded to have spiritual benefits. However, Hymnist George Atkins has written, “All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down.”<sup>8</sup> We believe the ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential to the sacrament as a means of grace.

Third, as in all matters of receiving God’s grace, faith on the part of the recipient of the sacrament is necessary. Calvin quotes St. Augustine as saying, “The efficacy of the Word is brought to light in the sacrament, not because it is spoken, but because it is believed.”<sup>9</sup> Those who receive without faith, at best receive nothing. Isaiah said, “As when a hungry man dreams that he is eating, but he awakens, and his hunger remains; as when a thirsty man dreams that he is drinking, but he awakens faint, with his thirst unquenched” (Isa. 29:8). Vital to the Reformed understanding of the sacraments is the necessity of faith in Christ

---

<sup>8</sup> George Atkins, “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #381.

<sup>9</sup> Institutes, IV. xiv. 7; Cf. IV. xiv. 4.

on the part of the receiver, along with the ministry of the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Reformed Christians make a distinction between the converting ordinances and the confirming ordinances. We recognize that the gospel alone is the means by which God's Spirit applies saving grace to a person's heart. The Psalmist said, "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7, KJV). The sacraments, however, serve to confirm the faith of those who are trusting Christ. Theologian Louis Berkhoff has observed that when the sacrament is received in faith, God's grace accompanies it. He continues, "As signs and seals they are means of grace, that is, means of strengthening the inward grace that is wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup> J. I. Packer says,

The sacraments are rightly viewed as means of grace, for God makes them means to faith, using them to strengthen faith's confidence in his promises and to call forth acts for receiving the good gifts signified. The efficacy of sacraments to this end resides not in the faith or virtue of the minister but in the faithfulness of God, who, having given the signs, is now pleased to use them....As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means.

Sacraments stir up faith by correlating Christian belief with the testimony of our senses....

Sacraments function as a means of grace on the principle that, literally, seeing is (i.e., leads to) believing.<sup>11</sup>

Our point can be made in the following way. If, by the means of grace we mean the power of God coming to us; and, if the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, as the Scriptures teach (Rom. 1:16); and, if the same gospel that comes to us through the ministry of the Word, is made visible to us in the sacraments; then the sacraments are indeed a means of grace. Following St. Augustine, Reformed Christians regard the sacraments as the "visible word." Indeed, "faith comes from

<sup>10</sup> Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1939), 618.

<sup>11</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology*, 210-211.

hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). But God has also ordained baptism and the Lord's Supper, these two dramatic moments, to be observed regularly and exclusively by professing Christians.

Consider the terms we use to describe these things. We gather for communion. What is this communion if not a real communing with Christ himself who meets us at his table (1 Cor. 10:16, 21)? We celebrate the Lord's Supper. What do we feed upon if not Christ himself who is the Bread of Life (John 6:35). A person is initiated into the visible church through the waters of baptism. What is this baptism if not an emblem of the cleansing blood of Christ (Acts 22:16). Through the sacraments the gracious gospel message is seen, as well as heard. Through the means of his Word, Christ mediates his grace unto salvation. Through the means of sacraments, Christ mediates his strengthening grace which confirms our hearts in his love.

### Sacramental Union

Evangelical Protestantism has rightly stressed that our salvation is grounded in the righteousness of Christ alone and its benefits are received by grace alone through faith alone. However, some verses give us pause. Peter commanded the Jerusalem crowd that had gathered on Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized (*italics mine*), every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Later in his epistle he would say of Noah's flood, "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you (*italics mine*)" (1 Peter 3:20-21). When Paul was converted to Christ Ananias told him, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized (*italics mine*) and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Furthermore, Jesus taught, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life (*italics mine*)" (John 6:53-54). At the last supper he took bread and wine and said, "This is my body....This is my blood" (Matt. 26:26-28).

How are we to regard these verses and others like them (Gen. 17:10; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 5:26)? Does baptism really wash away our sins? Is it the source of salvation or forgiveness? Do we receive the Holy Spirit when we are baptized? And how are we to regard Communion? Is it the source of eternal life? Are the rituals of the church necessary for salvation? Do we really eat the body and blood of Christ during Communion? Some Christians would say a resounding “yes” to all of these. They would insist that the sign and the grace that it signifies cannot be separated. Therefore, when one receives the sign of water, bread, or wine, the grace that it signifies is automatically received with it. Others would insist on little or no relation whatsoever between the sign and the thing signified and see the sacraments as ritual testimonies or memorials.

Reformed Christians, however, see in these verses things that are fundamental to our sacramental theology. Perhaps the most distinctive element is the “sacramental union” of which verses like these speak. The Westminster Confession of Faith XXVII.2 says, “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.” Because of this spiritual relation or sacramental union, we often read in Scripture of various graces being attributed to the sign that signifies them, like baptism washing away our sin, or the life giving properties of eating the body and blood of Christ. J. I. Packer has noted that, “Christ and the apostles not only speak of the sign as if it were the thing signified but speak too as if receiving the former is the same as receiving the latter (Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 10:15-21; 1 Pet. 3:21-22).”<sup>12</sup> The problem lies in the fact that the Bible teaches in no uncertain terms that salvation comes to us by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet these verses seem to imply that the sacraments are necessary as well.

In order to avoid confusion on such verses we must remember

---

<sup>12</sup> Packer, 210.

two things. First we must acknowledge the distinction between the sign itself, and the thing signified. The Larger Catechism #163 says, “The parts of a sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible sign, used according to Christ’s own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified.” In Baptism the sign is water. The thing signified is the cleansing blood of Christ which washes away our sin, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit which applies these things to our hearts. In The Lord’s Supper the sign is bread and wine. The thing signified is the atoning death of Christ in our behalf and our participation in these saving benefits.

Second, we recognize that these two parts, though distinct, must never be separated. They are united, but must never be confused. On the one hand, we must not be like those who insist that one receives the thing signified simply by receiving the sign. This would attribute to the sacraments effects that were never intended. On the other hand, we must not separate the sign from the thing signified so as to admit to no relation between them at all in which case the sign is all one receives and whatever memory might be brought to mind through it. This undervalues the role that the sacraments play in the believer’s life, perhaps out of fear of misunderstanding or misuse. Calvin has said in his commentary on 1 Peter,

When we speak of the sacraments, two things are to be considered, the sign and the thing itself. In baptism the sign is water, but the thing is the washing of the soul by the blood of Christ and the mortifying of the flesh. Now the sign often appears inefficacious and fruitless, this happens through the abuse of men, which does not take away the nature of the sacrament. Let us then learn not to tear away the thing signified from the sign....

What then ought we to do? Not to separate what has been joined together by the Lord. We ought to acknowledge in baptism a spiritual washing, we ought to embrace therein the testimony of the remission of sin and the pledge of our renovation, and yet so as to leave to Christ his own honor, and also to the Holy Spirit; so that no

part of our salvation should be transferred to the sign<sup>13</sup>

Reformed Christians believe that the sacraments function like the word of God which accompanies them. Christians must receive the sacraments in faith, trusting the Holy Spirit to apply his good gifts to their lives. As with the ministry of the word, the grace received is not necessarily confined to the moment that the sacrament is received. For example the Confession says, “The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered” (WCF XXVIII.6). As in the parable of the growing seed, the word of God that was sown did not accomplish its work until sometime later. Here Jesus taught, “A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain” (Mark 4:26-28). Christians who enjoy the regular life and fellowship of the church also enjoy the regular ministry of the word and sacraments. When these things are received by those who trust Christ, God’s grace and blessing is poured out abundantly in their hearts. They receive assurances of such covenant blessings as forgiveness, the Holy Spirit’s presence, and communion with Christ. It is the sacramental union that acknowledges that the sacraments offer such blessings to God’s people.

## BAPTISM

The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.<sup>14</sup>

Baptism is not the mark of a Christian life which is already completed; it is the sacrament of the promise in accordance with which the Christian life will become more and more complete in the believer, in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, culminating in eternal life.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, Commentary on 1 Peter, 118-119.

<sup>14</sup> John Murray, Christian Baptism (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Marcel, 173.

The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:39).

## To You and Your Children

One of the beauties of the Reformed faith concerns the status of covenant children in the church. That baptism is applied to both believers and their children is testimony to this truth. But can this practice be supported Biblically? Is it a vestigial organ left over from an unfinished Reformation? Or is it a Biblical mandate to which Christian parents must comply? Unfortunately the church is divided over this issue of who gets baptized. It is not enough to say that the baptism of the church’s children was the well established practice up through the Reformation and beyond. Many today presume that the practice is a mere holdover from medieval days.

The children of believers under the old covenant were regarded as members of the covenant, participating in many of its rights and privileges. They bore a special status before God, even before they professed faith. The promises that God made to Abraham were given to him and his children. The Lord told him, “I will establish my covenant...between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). As a surety of this generational promise, the Lord gave the covenant of circumcision to be applied not only to Abraham, but to his entire household (Gen. 17:11-14).

This fundamental pattern of generational solidarity is part and parcel to Old Testament revelation. The children of believers were regarded as members of God’s covenant family. Thus they received circumcision as the sign of that status. Joshua knew that he spoke for more than himself when he declared, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15). The Psalmist assures God’s people, “From everlasting to everlasting the LORD’S love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children” (Psa. 103:17). Ezekiel

speaks of the day when believers, “and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant [that is, Jesus] will be their prince forever” (Ezk. 37:25). Likewise, Isaiah says, “They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendents with them” (Isa. 65:23), and again, “I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendents” (Isa. 44:3).

However, does this same pattern of generational solidarity carry over to the New Testament era? Have things changed under the new covenant? Are we to expect that the fullness of divine revelation in Christ, and the beauty and perfection of the new covenant, brought a reduced status for our children? Are we to suppose that on the morning of Pentecost the children of believers were members of the covenant and afforded the sign of that covenant, while on the evening of Pentecost the children of believers were no longer members of the covenant nor afforded its appending sign? Although the advent of Christ brought fulfillment to divine revelation, Reformed Christians insist nothing essential has changed.

On the morning of Pentecost, after the Spirit descended upon the church, Peter preached the gospel fearlessly to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem. Deeply moved, they inquired, “What shall we do?” Peter said, “Repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:37-38). Remember, baptism was new to these first generation new covenant believers and something that they had never received before. Therefore, it is to be expected that all adult believers would be baptized (see Joshua 5:4-5). However, Peter adds something that is as old as Abraham. “The promise is for you and your children (*italics mine*) and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). In other words, even after Calvary and Pentecost, the children of believers still enjoy the status of covenant membership. The Lord is still interested in families. Nothing fundamental has changed with regard to that.

Jesus embraced children and insisted that his Kingdom “belongs to such as these” (Matt. 19:14; cf. 18:1-6). The Apostles frequently baptized entire households as evidence of the Lord’s continuing generational faithfulness (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16). Paul claimed that the children of just one believing parent are sanctified when he said, “Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). It is often objected that there is no specific command to baptize children. However, if covenant children were no longer afforded the covenant sign we would expect a specific command to change the practice since children of believers always received the covenant sign. There is no such command.

Baptism cannot be understood apart from the covenant. The Reformed faith teaches that there is one Bible, one people of God and, one way of salvation. The covenant attaches the sacramental signs to God’s promises and protects those signs from being reduced either to mere memorials or becoming ends in themselves. They show us how much the Lord loves us and our children. In baptism God marks out his people. It is his sign to us, not our sign to him. In baptism the Lord extends to us and our children the same promises of redemption. He will be our God and we his people.

#### Of Circumcision and Baptism

When we address the issue of infant baptism, it is important to understand that Reformed Christians do not believe in two baptisms, as if there was one for adults and one for infants. Baptism is the sign of initiation into the covenant of grace. Since it means the same thing for both infants and adults, it would be better to speak of covenant baptism rather than infant baptism.

Those who deny the sign of the covenant to the children of believers do not appreciate a basic Biblical truth. The sacraments are primarily objective in nature, not subjective. In other words, baptism confirms God’s promises to us, not our promises or

personal experiences.<sup>16</sup> Marcel says, “A sacrament is not in the first place the sign of an action of man, but the sign and seal of a promise of God and of the word announced.”<sup>17</sup> The Reformed faith teaches that baptism points both young and old alike to the promises of God in Christ as the source of life and hope. As the word of God is received through our hearing, baptism “preaches” the gospel to us through our other senses. Adults outside the church may receive baptism upon profession of faith in Christ as Savior. The children of believers receive it as covenant heirs of the promises.

Abraham for instance believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Some time later he received the appending sign of that covenant promise (Gen. 17:11). Paul raised the question, “Under what circumstances was it [the righteousness] credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:10-11). In other words, since Abraham was justified prior to receiving circumcision, the covenant sign was neither the ground nor the instrument through which salvation was received. It was given rather as an objective confirmation to Abraham of the gospel promises which he had previously received by faith. Abraham received the sign as an adult because he was a first generation believer. However, all his subsequent offspring received the sign as children according to God’s command (Gen. 17:12). In the Bible the initiatory sign of the covenant is placed upon believers and their children.

During Israel’s period of wilderness wanderings, the people of God forfeited the privilege of circumcision and Passover. When

---

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin did not deny the testimonial aspect of baptism. He said, “But baptism serves as our confession before men. Indeed, it is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God’s people” (Institutes IV. xv. 13). However, this was not the matter of first importance. Elsewhere he said, “The first point is that the sacraments should serve our faith before God; after this, that they should attest our confession before men” (Institutes IV. xiv. 13).

<sup>17</sup> Marcel, 140.

Israel once again entered the promise land, under God’s direction these two sacraments were renewed. The practice of circumcision that was denied for some forty years began again with the new generation of believers. Joshua states, “All those who came out of Egypt...died in the desert on the way after leaving Egypt. All the people that came out had been circumcised, but all the people born in the desert during the journey from Egypt had not....They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way” (Joshua 5:4-5, 7). Thus the adult men were circumcised upon profession of faith; their children as covenant heirs.

Has this pattern changed after the coming of Christ? Is the covenant sign now given only to adult believers? Are circumcision and baptism related? The Reformed faith maintains that both signs, although different in form, are fundamentally the same in essence. They are both initiatory rites of entrance into the covenant community, circumcision under the old covenant and baptism under the new. Both speak of purification from sin, one by the removal of flesh, the other by sprinkling with water (Isa. 52:15; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 1:2). Their mutual differences speak of the loftier nature of the covenant now fulfilled in Christ. Circumcision was bloody whereas baptism is bloodless, and baptism is granted all covenant children, not just to the male seed. Paul makes the connection between them in Colossians 2:11-12. He says, “In him you were also circumcised...having been buried with him in baptism.” That which is signified in circumcision, that is “the putting off of the sinful nature” (Col. 2:11), is also signified in baptism.

What’s more, the names and effects of circumcision and baptism are often applied interchangeably. New Testament saints are said to be circumcised “with the circumcision done by Christ (Col. 2:11) and Old Testament saints were baptized as they “passed through the [Red] sea” (1 Cor. 10:1-2). The outcome was that they all “drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). Both signs are fundamentally spiritual in nature. Although circumcision marked one

outwardly, it was the inward circumcision of the heart that really counted (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Rom. 2:28-29). Likewise, as baptism marks one outwardly, it is the spiritual participation in Christ's redemptive work and the inner cleansing of the heart that really counts (Rom. 6:1-4; Titus 3:4-5). In both cases, this inner change of heart is a gracious work of the Holy Spirit, the benefits of which are received by faith alone. Circumcision and baptism do not point to our faith; but the promises of God upon which that faith rests.

Covenant baptism sets before the eyes of God's people a visible display of the gospel. It distinguishes us from the world. It demonstrates God's love for us and our children. It showcases that the ground of our eternal hope is in the cleansing blood of Christ that washes away our sin. The effect is not merely what baptism does for us personally, but what its practice does and says in the life of the church corporately. It is a community event and all of us who bear witness to that blessed event are to recall and embrace the promises God made to us through our own baptism.

### Baptism, Evangelism, and the Church

Jesus' last words to his disciples have been called the great commission. This charge has provided the foundation of the church's enduring vision for evangelism. Many modern evangelistic practices, however, are not well grounded in Scripture. Such methods as altar calls, emotional appeals, or insistence on immediate decisions are of more recent origin.

The Biblical approach to evangelism is born out of the church's community life. It stresses the sovereignty of God and a clear presentation of the gospel (Col. 4:3-4). It relies on discipleship, sustained Christian education and catechetical instruction, faithful covenant families, and Christians telling their friends the good news that Jesus is Savior, and inviting them to trust Christ and unite with his church. Biblical evangelism seeks more the process of Christian nurturing than a crisis moment in time. It concerns

enfolding people into the membership of the body of Christ and not merely "getting them saved." This is what Jesus meant when he commanded the church to "make disciples of all nations." His methods were clear: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20).

In the great commission, the Lord presented the rudiments of an evangelistic program. The sequence of baptizing followed by teaching indicates that disciple making is accomplished within the context of the church. When the Holy Spirit moves an unbeliever to trust Christ as savior, that person is to be baptized along with his or her children and thus united in the fellowship of the church. In that context the whole family, under the ministry of the means of grace, is taught what it means to be followers of Christ. Adult believers enjoy the regular hearing of God's word and fellowship at the Lord's Table. Covenant children, those who have been baptized but have not yet confessed Christ, nevertheless grow up in the embrace of the church and are taught that they too are sinners in need of a savior. Their baptism, like that of their parents, is held before them as an emblem of God's favor and promise to them that he will freely forgive and receive all who look in faith to Christ. Evangelism is simply leading people to Christ. That is what the church does week after week. We teach adult believers that they must trust Christ moment by moment as they walk in his ways. We teach covenant children the need to trust Christ and walk in his ways. This is truly a blessed position in which the children of believers find themselves.

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that baptism serves as a "solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church" (XXVIII.1; cf. Larger Catechism #165). It marks us as distinct from the world and belonging to the Lord. In effect, from hence forth God has a claim on us. Although we do not believe that baptism in anyway confers salvation upon anyone, we do acknowledge that it is a means of grace.

According to the Confession of Faith, "grace is not only offered,

but really exhibited, and conferred (*Italics mine*), by the Holy Ghost.” However our Confession also establishes two parameters: the grace conferred is not necessarily “tied to the moment of time wherein it is administered,” and it is conferred only “to such...as that grace belonged unto,” that is, to the elect (XXVIII.6). In other words, the value of baptism may be realized years after it is received, and its efficacy belongs only to those whom the Holy Spirit applies it.

Furthermore, as Reformed and confessional Christians, we believe that it is a “great sin” to condemn or neglect baptism for oneself or one’s child (cf. WCF XXVIII.5; Ex. 4:24-26). Nevertheless, we also insist that “grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated” (WCF XXVIII.5). In other words, the ground of our hope lies in the finished work of Christ and the instrument by which the gospel blessings are received is faith. The word and the water both direct us to that end. Pierre Ch. Marcel insists that, “We must beware of attributing to baptism any blessings and effects which cannot be attributed to the Word,” and that, “The grace of baptism exists only as a declaration and a confirmation; it cannot ever be anything else.”<sup>18</sup>

God by his Spirit uses means to bring us to saving faith. However, we must always remember that baptism as a sacrament never stands alone for it must always be seen as an appendage to the word of God. Calvin said,

Now, from the definition that I have set forth we understand that a sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it. By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness.<sup>19</sup>

The word alone is the power of God unto salvation. But, rightly

---

<sup>18</sup> Marcel, 140-141.

<sup>19</sup> Institutes, IV. xiv. 3.

used and understood the two together can be a vigorous one-two punch, so to speak, to conquer a sinful soul for Christ.

### Faithful to His Promise

Criticism of the practice of infant baptism often arises more from its misuse than its perceived demerit. All too many professing Christians go through the motions of baptizing children in a heartless ritual with no intention of fulfilling the obligations under which that baptism places them. When marriage vows are treated in a cavalier manner, people easily become cynical toward that sacred institution. Likewise, when vows taken at baptism are treated with disregard its not surprising that some hold its practice in contempt.

As a result of Abraham’s faith in God’s promises (Gen. 15:6), the sign of the covenant was applied to him and his children (Gen. 17:11-12). Consequently Abraham as a parent was placed under obligation to raise his children in light of those promises. The Lord God said, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19). God is faithful to his promises. But he is not obligated to be faithful to unfaithful parents. This is the pattern of Scripture.

Moses proclaimed the believer’s fundamental commitment when he commanded God’s people to confess the one true and living God and to love him with their whole heart, soul, and strength. Then he said to parents, “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut. 6:6-7). The Psalmist insisted that the scope of this task was multi-generational. Regarding the Lord’s redemptive acts he said, “We will not hide them from our children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob...which

he commanded our forefathers to teach their children so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God” (Psa. 78:4-7). There are at least four generations mentioned here. Furthermore, the Lord said in the Proverbs, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Pro. 22:6). Neither was this responsibility reserved only for Old Testament saints for St. Paul also said, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

At the baptism of a covenant child believing parents are required to affirm their child’s need for the cleansing blood of Jesus, the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and personal faith in God’s covenant promises. Then they are asked this question:

Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before (him/her) a godly example, that you will pray with and for (him/her), that you will teach (him/her) the doctrines of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring (him/her) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?<sup>20</sup>

By affirming this vow, parents take upon themselves the primary task of teaching, training, nurturing, and evangelizing their children (2 Tim. 3:15). They must establish a pattern of family worship to wean them from the world. They must read the Scriptures, memorize the catechism, and sing the hymns of the faith with their children to weave their hearts into the fabric of the church. They must surround their children with their prayers, and correct sinful behaviors and attitudes. They must consistently attend Sunday School and Lord’s Day worship as a family. They must consider godly options for education like Christian school or home schooling. They must always encourage their children to put their trust in Christ, profess their faith before the church, and

---

<sup>20</sup> This is question three in the Baptismal liturgy from the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America, chapter 56 and paragraph 5.

be faithful to their Lord.

Baptism also places our children under obligation as well. Parents must hold baptism before their children as the emblem of God’s promises to them, but the children must embrace those promises as their own by faith when they understand them. They therefore must be warned that the unfaithful may be cut off from the blessedness of Christ’s family. This is what the author of Hebrews meant when he said, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb. 3:12-13; Cf. 3:19-4:2; 2:1-3; 4:11; 10:28-29; 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

### Improving On Your Baptism

Baptism is a simple ceremony held within the context of public worship. After a brief explanation to the congregants, an exhortation to the adult candidates or parents of covenant children, and the affirmation of certain gospel questions, water is either sprinkled or pour upon the head with these words recited: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen” (Matt. 28:20). The ceremony is concluded with prayer. Any further embellishment only detracts from God’s design of the sacrament.

Our tendency is to think of baptism as something we do to an individual and that, once completed, it is over and done with. It’s now a thing of the past for our memory to cherish. This, however, is not the whole of how Reformed Christians view it. Baptism is a sacrament repeated through the years in the presence of the people of God. We do not do private baptisms. Over a lifetime we will witness, hopefully, many baptisms of both new believers and covenant children. The Reformed faith teaches that we continue to be participants rather than detached observers at the baptism of others. As noted above, the sacraments are “the visible

word” and thus the gospel promises are once again set before our eyes for our faith to embrace anew and afresh. In other words, we view baptism as a corporate event in the life of the church as well as an individual event in the life of a child or new believer.

If we have had the privilege of being baptized as children and nurtured in the Christian faith at home and in church from an early age, it is unlikely that we will remember our own baptism. So, what value is it to us? The Westminster Larger Catechism #167 counsels us how to make use of our baptism. It says, “The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in time of temptation, and when we are at the administration of it to others...” The Catechism affirms, first of all, the value of baptism over the whole span of our lives. We grow in our understanding of it and we rejoice in our identity as a child of God. Second, when temptation causes discouragement and doubt to arise, our baptism serves as a surety of Lord’s unfailing promises to us. It urges us to look to Christ as the ground of our eternal hope. Third, as with the Lord’s Supper, baptisms are events of the whole church community. All present are participants in one way or another. Although only one receives the water, we all receive by faith the spiritual washing which the water signifies. The Lord impresses upon us again that his promises are to us and our children. Thus, we need not live in doubt and uncertainty about our future or theirs. Rather we live in light of God’s promises to the baptized. Having baptized our children, we renew our promise to teach them with hope and confidence that the Lord will be faithful as he has promised. Having been baptized ourselves, we rejoice with thankful hearts for God’s grace extended to us, and seek by his grace to walk in newness of life. Calvin has said that,

All pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ’s blood.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Institutes, IV. xvi. 4.

## THE LORD’S SUPPER

Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face;/here would I touch and handle things unseen,/here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace,/and all my weariness upon thee lean. Horatius Bonar, 1855.<sup>22</sup>

Now I saw in my dream, That thus they sat talking together until Supper was ready. So when they had made ready, they sat down to meat: Now the Table was furnished with fat Things, and with Wine that was well refined; and all their talk at the Table was about the LORD of the Hill; as, namely, about what HE had done, and wherefore HE did what HE did, and why HE built the House; and by what they said, I perceived that HE had been a great Warrior, and had fought with, and slain him that had the Power of Death, but not without great Danger to himself, which made me love him the more. John Bunyan, Pilgrim’s Progress, 54.

From every stormy wind that blows,/from every swelling tide of woes,/there is a calm, a sure retreat;/’tis found beneath the mercy seat.

There is a place where Jesus sheds/the oil of gladness on our heads,/a place than all besides more sweet;/it is the bloodstained mercy seat. Hymn by Hugh Stowell, 1828.<sup>23</sup>

He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love (Song of Solomon 2:4).

### Dining at the King’s Table

On the night the Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). With these words and actions, the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was instituted. With its perpetual celebration the table of the King is set for the benefit and enjoyment of his church. The Lord’s Supper finds a striking illustration in the story of David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9).

Mephibosheth was the sole surviving son of Israel’s first king,

<sup>22</sup> Horatius Bonar, “Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #378.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Stowell, “From Every Stormy Wind That Blows,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #631.

Saul. That made him heir to Saul's dynasty and a potential threat to King David who was Saul's successor. But Mephibosheth was also a paraplegic. At the age of five his nurse accidentally dropped him and he became crippled for life (2 Sam. 4:4). Consequently, he was not a serious contender for the king's throne. Nevertheless, the ancient world was unkind to any royal competition, real or perceived, and his life was at risk. Thus he remained in hiding for years.

When David discovered his whereabouts, Mephibosheth was summoned before the king. The sentence of death would most certainly have been expected. But, for the sake of the late Jonathan—Saul's son, Mephibosheth's father, and David's friend—the king showed kindness to the young crippled man. He called him by name, restored his inheritance, and granted him the privilege of the king's table for the rest of his life. As if for emphasis, this promise of the king's table is rehearsed four times in 2 Samuel chapter 9: "You will always eat at my table;" "Mephibosheth...will always eat at my table;" "So Mephibosheth ate at David's table;" "Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet" (2 Sam. 9:7, 10, 11, 13). Mephibosheth could only say in response, "What is your servant that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (2 Sam. 9:8). This sentiment would later be echoed in the words of an unworthy tax collector, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

I am not suggesting that this episode is directly related to the Lord's Supper. Yet, there are remarkable parallels which are hard to overlook. There is something incongruous about a "cripple" in a king's court, and, yet, how Christ-like! Here is the Lord's anointed, the Messianic King, graciously offering as a free gift to a broken man, what he could not gain on his own. Here is a man without assets or standing, yet he is afforded the privilege of the king's table. That which was granted Mephibosheth by David is precisely what David's son, Jesus, grants us. He calls us by name, promises an inheritance in glory, and grants us the privilege of his table all the days of our lives.

The Lord's Supper was born out of Biblical soil. That soil included the Lord's promise to nourish his people, both physically and spiritually. The Psalmist recounts, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Psa. 37:25). In the creation ordinance the Lord promised, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food" (Gen. 1:29). Yet he also provides for spiritual sustenance in the sacramental sign of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9). In his apocalyptic letter to Ephesus, the Lord promised him who overcomes, "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). The Psalmist says, "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry" (Psa. 146:7). Again, he says, "He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things" (Psa. 107:9; cf. Luke 1:53). And once more, "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth" (Ps. 104:14). Yet he also offers what satisfies the soul: "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" (Psa. 34:8).

In the wilderness the Lord God provided for his people by giving them manna. Moses said, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3). Yet, Jesus saw in this miraculous provision a hunger of far greater consequence and a food of greater, more enduring, satisfaction. "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread of heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world....I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John. 6:32-35).

As Jesus took bread and offered it to his disciples, he provided a perpetual moment for the spiritual nourishment of his people. All

of us are the Mephibosheths of this world, “crippled,” if not in body, certainly in heart and soul. Sin has taken its toll. We have neither right to, nor status at, the table of the Lord. But our gracious King has invited us nevertheless. Indeed, he has prepared a table before us in the presence of our enemies (Psa. 23:5). He invites us with these words, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the water; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (Isa. 55:1-2). He calls us by his grace to trust him, and feed upon Christ who is the bread of life.

### Promises Sealed in a Meal

One of the most notorious stories of the Old Testament was when Jacob deceived his father Isaac and stole his birthright from his brother Esau. Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau, however, was firstborn which meant, according to ancient custom, that he would receive the power, properties, and position as family head after his father died.

As Isaac was growing old, Rebekah overheard him saying to Esau, “I...don’t know the day of my death....Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die” (Gen. 27:2-4). Rebekah quickly devised a scheme, taking advantage of her husband’s blindness and love for wild game. She fixed a succulent stew, covered Jacob’s arms in animal skins to fain the hairy Esau, dressed him in Esau’s clothes, and sent him to his father to receive the blessing due his older brother. Isaac was cautious and perplexed, but in the end he gave Jacob the blessing.

What seems baffling to the modern mind is the irreversible nature of this blessing ceremony. Why did Isaac not simply invalidate his decision? Why didn’t he say to Jacob, “You cheat! I’m taking the blessing back and giving it to whom it belongs”? The reason

was this: promises made and blessings bestowed, once sealed with a covenant meal, were inviolable. When Isaac decided to bless Jacob and requested the “game to eat,” regardless of the deception, it could not be retracted. We are told, “Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank” (Gen. 27:25). The deal was done.

There are other occurrences in Scripture of covenant meals. In Isaac’s earlier days he nearly came to blows with the Philistine King Abimelech over water rights. Peace was restored between them with a mutual agreement sealed with a covenant meal: “Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank....Then Isaac sent them on their way and they left him in peace” (Gen. 26:30-31). Jacob also would later have to settle differences born out of years of distrust with his father-in-law Laban. Wishing to retain some measure of goodwill for his daughter’s sake, Laban said to Jacob, “Come now let’s make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us” (Gen. 31:44). After Jacob swore an oath, “he offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal” (Gen. 31:54). Again the parties departed in peace. One other example occurred when Abraham returned from battle after defeating the coalition of five kings from the north. Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of God Most High “brought out bread and wine...and he blessed Abram” (Gen. 14:18-19).

The Lord’s Supper is also a covenant meal. Through it the Lord seals his irrevocable covenant promises to our hearts and lives. We receive his blessings and are assured of our status as children of God. Goodwill is fostered within the church and with the Lord above. What is implied in the examples mentioned above is true in an even greater way at the Lord’s Table.

However, the Lord’s Supper has precedent in two other events. First, when God made his covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai, this covenant was confirmed in a ceremony. After many preparations, Moses sprinkled the people with animal blood and said, “This is the blood of the covenant, that the LORD has made

with you in accordance with all these words” (Ex. 24:8). The priests and elders then ascended the mountain as representatives of the people where, we are told, “They saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex. 24:11). That Jesus had this event in mind is without question when he took the cup at the last supper and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Jesus was acknowledging in his last supper the permanency of the covenant he was inaugurating and the superior blessings received by those who partake of him by faith.

Second, that the last supper occurred on the occasion of Passover is also not an accident. The Passover, as a national covenant meal, was that perpetual sign (Ex. 13:8-10, 16) to be observed annually in remembrance of the grand redemptive moment in Israel’s history, that is, their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Jesus told his disciples, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover” (Luke 22:8). It was this occasion that Jesus broke the bread and offered the cup of remembrance as a seal of an even greater deliverance from a more insidious bondage. St. Paul said, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). The Lord’s Supper is a sign and seal of our union and communion with Christ and will continue to be until he returns.

When we consider the larger Biblical context of the covenant meal and how it was regarded in Scripture, the Lord’s Supper takes on added significance. If the covenant meal affirmed and confirmed promises made and blessings conferred, then how much more the Lord’s Supper which is enjoyed by those who have received the promises of forgiveness and life eternal through faith in Christ. As the elders of Israel “saw God” and “ate and drank” (Ex. 24:11) so we today may experience the presence of Christ in the sacred meal. As Isaac could not renege on his promise to Jacob, so God assures us that his promises to us will never fail.

What Happens at the Table?

When Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper, something happens

in the here and now. Trying to understand what that something is has been one of the great labors of the church since its very early days. There are of course those who don’t believe anything happens. The Lord’s Supper for them is simply a reminder of something that happened a long time ago. But this has never been a widely held view in church history until more recent years. Christians have always believed something mysterious and wonderful happens in the Lord’s Supper.

The Corinthian Church, in its immaturity and foolishness, had profaned the Lord’s Supper by gluttony and drunkenness. St. Paul harshly rebuked them. But he also pointed out that there were dire consequences to their abuse. Participating in an “unworthy manner” was tantamount to “sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). Consequently, those who ate and drank “without recognizing the body of the Lord,” brought judgment upon themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). Many had become weakened, sickly, and some even died as a result (1 Cor. 11:30). Although this is a negative example, it illustrates that there is more to the Supper than a mere memorial. If, through its misuse, the Lord’s Supper may be a spiritual bane, may we not also expect spiritual blessing through its proper use? If the impious receive judgment, may not the faithful receive grace? If it is only a time of commemoration, why would the consequences for irreverence be so severe?

On the road to Emmaus Jesus appeared to two disciples and opened the Scriptures to them. Arriving at their destination they ate together. Luke says, “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight” (Luke 24:30-31). This was not a communion service. But neither was it coincidental that Luke chose the very words of the institution of the Lord’s Supper to describe this meal (Luke 22:19). The effects were profound. The disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem and reported, “How Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread” (Luke 22:35).

Furthermore, as Luke relates the feeding of the five-thousand, he again used words akin to those describing the Lord's Supper. "Taking the five loaves...he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people" (Luke 9:16). We are told that twelve full baskets of fragments were left over. Some have seen here the symbolism of Israel and the twelve tribes. If so the Lord indicates that in feeding his people, there is food enough for all. This miraculous event may well form the canvas upon which the Lord's Supper is painted.

John chapter 6 brings us to the crux of the issue. Here we find a sermon preached by Jesus at the Capernaum synagogue in the aftermath of the feeding of the multitude. The crowd wanted more food. Jesus said that he was the Bread they must seek after (John 6:32-35). Then Jesus expounded these puzzling words: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (John 6:53-56). Commentators are divided on the meaning of this chapter. Some see it merely as a metaphor for receiving Jesus by faith claiming that the sermon came well before the institution of the Lord's Supper. Others see Jesus as anticipating the Lord's Supper and representing some kind of life giving reality which occurs in its celebration. It is these words and others like them that have led the church to see the Lord's Supper as a means of grace.

From its very early days, the church fathers had seen the Lord's Supper as the vehicle by which Christians fed upon Christ and received grace through him. Apologist Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), for instance, wrote of the Lord's Supper, "For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but...that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word...is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh."<sup>24</sup> There were no attempts to explain what this meant beyond simply stating what

---

<sup>24</sup> Justin Martyr, Apology, 1.66.

Jesus had taught at Capernaum. However, the middle ages gave rise to the doctrine of transubstantiation which became the official position of the Roman church by the thirteenth century. This view taught that the substance of the bread and wine were literally changed into the physical substance (appearances remained as they were) of Christ's body and blood when the words *hoc est corpus meum* (Latin for "this is my body") were spoken by the priest. The focus became the physical presence of Christ in the elements at the Lord's Table, their life giving properties, and consequently the worship of these things. It was this doctrine that Protestants objected to most during the Reformation.

Martin Luther searingly criticized the mass in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Although he rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation and all of its attendant implications, he nevertheless continued to insist on the physical presence of Christ at the table, as he said, "in, with, and under" the elements. Although his view corrected many things in the mass that Protestants objected to, like the worship of the elements and its propitiatory nature, Reformed Christians had problems with insisting on the physical presence of Christ at the table. Unlike Luther, as well as the Roman church, they saw the "is" in Jesus' words "this is my body" (Luke 22:19-20) as figurative rather than literal. After all, when Jesus first spoke those words he was sitting right there at the table with them.

Reformed Christians, however, see a more serious problem and that with regard to the doctrine of Christ. All Christians claim that Jesus was truly God and truly man. The church has furthermore been careful not to confuse his human nature and divine nature so as to suggest that one is changed or altered by the other. Our Shorter Catechism #21 states that Jesus is, "the eternal Son of God, [who] became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures (emphasis mine), and one person, forever." At the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, the church summarized its belief regarding the person of Christ in what has been called the Chalcedonian Creed. Touching upon the issue of Christ's dual nature it says, "We...teach men to

confess...one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of the natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved (emphasis mine).” The Westminster Confession of Faith echoes this same concern: “So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion (emphasis mine)” (VIII.2). Here is the point: Christ’s human nature must remain human, unaltered by his divine nature and vice versa. He cannot physically be everywhere present at the same time because omnipresence is a divine attribute. Reformed Christians believe the Lutheran view and the Roman view present a Jesus whose physical nature is not truly physical anymore because it has been altered by his divine nature. This is the issue that still separates Reformed Christians from Lutherans to this day.

### The Meaning of the Lord’s Supper

The question, “what happens in the Lord’s Supper?” is of interest to all Christians. But not all Christians agree on the answer. For the Reformed Christian, the question is not so much what the Lord’s Supper does to us, but what God does for us through its observance. One way of presenting the Reformed view is by considering what we call the sacrament.

The most basic label is the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42, 20:7). The focus here is on the Supper’s activity. As believers gather to break bread they both commemorate and proclaim the Lord’s death. All Christians agree that the Lord’s Supper is a memorial. Jesus was clear when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25). Regular observance of the Lord’s Supper in the life of the church holds before us the centrality of the cross as the ground of our hope. When the table is central the church is protected against imbalance and passing fancies. Believers are employed in devotional reflection on the death of Christ. Through it we “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor.

11:26). John Calvin said of the celebration that, “With a single voice [we] confess openly before men that for us the whole assurance of life and salvation rests upon the Lord’s death, that we may glorify him by our confession, and by our example exhort others to give glory to him.” He furthermore insisted that, “The purpose of the Sacrament is made clear, that is, to exercise us in the remembrance of Christ’s death.”<sup>25</sup>

But it is more than simply a recall of events. It is a participation in them in some measure. As the Passover enabled future generations of Israel not only to recall, but to relive that great redemptive moment, so, the Lord’s Supper enables new covenant believers to participate in the benefits of Christ’s redeeming work.

The Reformed faith, however, teaches that the Supper is more than a mere memorial. It is also designated the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 10:21). The table is a fundamental symbol of feasting. In fact Calvin saw the Lord’s Table as a “spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality.”<sup>26</sup> The banqueting metaphor is a rich image used throughout Scripture to picture the Lord’s promise to feed his people. Isaiah says, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest wine” (Isaiah 25:6). The Proverbs personifies Wisdom as having “prepared her meat and mixed her wine” and having “set her table.” Then she offers this invitation, “Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding” (Pro. 9:2-3, 5-6). David reminisced, “How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights” (Psalm 36:7-8). The Shepherd’s Psalm says pointedly, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies....My cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5).

---

<sup>25</sup> Institutes, IV. xxvii. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Institutes, IV. xvii. 1.

Charles Spurgeon's communion hymn says,

What food luxurious loads the board, when at the table sits the Lord!  
The wine how rich, the bread how sweet, when Jesus deigns his guests  
to meet!<sup>27</sup>

The Lord's Supper builds on images like these and sets our hopes on yet another banquet. It is a foretaste of the great marriage supper of the Lamb. Here the bride of Christ is united with her bridegroom; the church is joined to Christ at the end of the age (Rev. 19:6-9). Indeed, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do so, proclaiming his death "until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). If a banquet is anything, it is an occasion where we are fed and nourished, we enjoy fellowship with the host and his guests, we gratefully receive his gracious generosity and gifts, and we commemorate great and past events.

The table is also called the Lord's Supper. If words have meaning then we must insist that here at the Supper we are fed. Of what do we partake if not Christ who is the bread of life (John 6:35). But this is a spiritual or sacramental feeding enjoyed by Christians, and that only by those who do so by faith. Reformed Christians insist that the grace is not in the elements, but in Christ to whom we are joined. Our Westminster Standards are clear on this:

Worthy receivers outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses (WCF XXVII.7, emphasis mine).

Scottish Presbyterian Pastor and Poet Horatious Bonar wrote in

---

<sup>27</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Amidst Us Our Beloved Stands," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #427.

his communion hymn (1855):

This is the hour of banquet and of song/this is the heavenly table  
spread for me/here let me feast, and, feasting, still prolong/the brief,  
bright hour of fellowship with thee.

Here would I feed upon the bread of God/here drink with thee the  
royal wine of heaven/here would I lay aside each earthly load/here  
taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven.<sup>28</sup>

The essence of the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper is bound up in the term Communion. Unlike other traditions, the focus of the Reformed view is not on the physical presence of Christ, but on the spiritual communion or fellowship that believers enjoy with Christ and each other (1 John 1:6-7) at the table. St. Paul said, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). The Greek word for "participation" is *koinonia* and may also be translated as "fellowship" or "communion."

Communion with Christ is a result of our union with Christ. The sixteenth century Scottish Pastor and Theologian, Robert Bruce (1590), said,

There is nothing in this world, or out of this world, more to be wished by everyone of you than to be conjoined [united] with Jesus Christ, and once for all made one with Him, the God of glory. This heavenly and celestial conjunction is procured and brought about by two special means. It is brought about by means of the Word and preaching of the Gospel, and it is brought about by means of the Sacraments and their ministrations (emphasis mine). The Word leads us to Christ by the ear; the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye.<sup>29</sup>

Jesus taught in his allegory of the vine, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain

---

<sup>28</sup> Horatius Bonar, "Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #378.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Pub., Ltd., 2005), 30.

in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (John 15:4). This benefit of union with Christ and its attendant blessings is achieved only by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and not merely the eating or drinking. But the Holy Spirit uses the sacrament as a means of uniting us to Christ. Thus the Reformed liturgy always includes a prayer of invocation for the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying presence called the epiclesis. A worshiper must come to table with a faith-filled heart, looking to Christ and his righteousness as the ground of his or her hope. The mouth by which we receive Christ is the faith of our heart, not the orifice of our body. It is the Holy Spirit that unites us to our ascended and glorified Savior.

We do not view Communion as a means of bringing Christ physically to the elements, but rather lifting believer’s hearts to heaven where Christ remains seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1-3). This important idea finds expression in the communion service in what liturgists call the *sursum corda*.<sup>30</sup> The phrase, which is Latin for “lift up your heart,” is either part of the pastor’s exhortation or prayer of consecration, or it is found in the following classic litany:

Minister: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.

Minister: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up unto the Lord.

Minister: Let us give thanks unto the Lord our God.

People: It is meet and right so to do.<sup>31</sup>

St. Paul reminds us, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:1-3). Calvin insisted that, “people should

---

<sup>30</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 292-293.

<sup>31</sup> Book of Common Worship, 36.

be told in a loud voice to lift up their hearts.” He furthermore said, “We ought rather to have adored him spiritually in heavenly glory than to have devised some dangerous kind of adoration, replete with a carnal and crass conception of God.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the Communion is regarded as a Eucharist because it provides for the communicant’s response of gratitude to God. Every record of the Lord’s Supper mentions that Jesus “gave thanks” as he broke the bread and offered the cup (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). St. Paul even calls the wine “the cup of thanksgiving” (1 Cor. 10:16). Thus the Lord’s Supper is often called a Eucharist or thanksgiving after the Greek word from which it is transliterated.<sup>33</sup> B. A. Gerrish, in his yeoman’s work on Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper notes that, “The father’s liberality and his children’s answering gratitude [is]...perhaps the most fundamental theme” in Calvin’s theology. For Calvin, Gerrish continues, “The cardinal role of grace and gratitude is not surprising, since piety or godliness, as Calvin understands it, is grateful acknowledgement of the father’s gifts....The holy banquet is simply the liturgical enactment of the theme of grace and gratitude that lies at the heart of Calvin’s entire theology”—thus the title of his book, *Grace and Gratitude*.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the Lord’s Supper also provides the means of fostering among God’s people desirable graces and responses. Calvin recognized that, “The Lord intended the Supper to be a kind of exhortation for us, which can more forcefully than any other means quicken and inspire us both to purity and holiness, and to love, peace, and concord.”<sup>35</sup> The Lord’s Supper promotes

---

<sup>32</sup> Calvin is referring to the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s physical body and the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation. *Institutes*, IV. xvii. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24 use the Greek word *eucharistia* which means “a giving of thanks,” while Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22 and 1 Corinthians 10:16 use the Greek word *eulogia* which means “blessing.” In both cases the classic Jewish Passover prayer is in view: “Blessed art thou O LORD our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Institutes*, IV. xxvi. 38.

holiness of life, as well as, love for God and others. It advances the church's efforts toward peace and unity in the midst of division and discord. St. Paul recognizes that, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10:17). The Lord's Supper should create in us a longing that Jesus' high priestly prayer be fulfilled: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have love me" (John 17:23). Our table should be as open as our doctrine will allow.

Admittedly, the Lord's Supper is a mystery. The Reformed emphasis on the above themes defies further human explanations. However, they do provide the Biblical way we are to think about the Supper. Reformed Christians reject the idea that the Lord's Supper is only a memorial service because it greatly diminishes its purpose and value. We agree with Puritan Thomas Watson (1655) who said, "Such as make the sacrament only a representation of Christ do aim short of the mystery, and come short of the comfort."<sup>36</sup> But they also reject the notion of the physical presence of Christ bound to the elements because of the harm it does to the doctrine of Christ's person. Our hearts and minds ought not to be fixed to this world, but should be raised up to heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Our emphasis is on communion with Christ and his people, spiritual feeding and nourishment, and the sacrifice of praise and gratitude for God's covenant faithfulness received through Christ. Indeed, we remember his death. But the Supper is much more. We receive Christ who is the Bread of Life. Hymnist Thomas Hastings (1832) added this suggestive verse to Thomas Moore's 1816 hymn, "Come, Ye Disconsolate":

Here see the Bread of Life; see the waters flowing/forth from the throne of God, pure from above:/come to the feast prepared; come, ever knowing/earth has no sorrows but heaven can remove.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 19.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hastings "Come, Ye Disconsolate, Where'er Ye Languish," in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #615.

Perhaps Calvin's words should serve as a fitting summary:

Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it (emphasis mine). Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink [John 6:53ff]. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them.<sup>38</sup>

Why We Do What We Do?

When St. Paul addressed the chaos and confusion over worship practices in the church at Corinth, he rendered this admonition: "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14:40). Reformed Christians take this seriously, particularly with regard to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. We do not advocate innovation or human creativity. We seek only to be faithful to the Scriptures with regard to this practice.

Consequently our liturgy of the table tends toward simplicity rather than embellishment. Because it is our conviction that the Lord's Supper is an "appendage" to the Word of God, its observance always follows the ministry of the Word. It must be accompanied by the Word and subservient to it. Augustine said, "Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament."<sup>39</sup>

One authoritative standard for Reformed worship is the Westminster Assembly's *Directory of Public Worship*. Here it declares that Communion is "frequently to be celebrated," but how frequent is left up to individual Sessions. It also notes that it

---

<sup>38</sup> *Institutes IV. xvii. 32.*

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in the *Institutes IV. xvi. 3.*

is celebrated most conveniently “after the morning sermon.” Acts 2:42 sketches the fundamentals of worship practiced in the early church: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” By all accounts the Lord’s Supper was observed on a weekly basis in the Apostolic Church (cf. Acts 20:7).

The Lord’s Supper is always celebrated in the context of public worship which includes prayers, confession of sin, and the reading and preaching of Scripture. If you are present in a Reformed church during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper you will notice a number of common elements. Many begin with the recitation of the Apostle’s or Nicene Creed as a demonstration of the church’s unity of faith. St. Paul regarded the bread as symbol of this common bond when he said, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor. 10:17).

The liturgy of the table begins with a short exhortation which includes an explanation of its benefits, a rehearsal of warnings, and a defining of its boundaries. The latter, referred to as fencing the table, explains who is eligible to participate. The sursum corda, or the call to “lift up your hearts,” recognizes that the communicant is to seek Christ in heaven, and not to form attachments to the physical elements which are only signs and seals. This may come in the form of a prayer, a litany, or a declaration. Following this exhortation, the words of institution are read in their entirety from either 1 Corinthians 11:23-32, or one of the accounts of the Supper’s institution given in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

The prayer of consecration acknowledges a number of important aspects of the Reformed view. First, it recognizes a memorial aspect to the Supper. Through it we wholeheartedly commemorate the atoning work of Christ in our behalf, acknowledging with gratitude his gift of grace. Next, it acknowledges the offertory nature of the sacrament. We do not view the table as an altar, nor the occasion as a sacrifice for sin.

Rather, the offering is our sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15) and the consecration of our very lives (Rom. 12:1-2) in service to the One who is author of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). The Book of Common Worship (1946), often used as a guide in Reformed churches, offers this prayer,

We beseech Thee to accept this our spiritual oblation of all possible praise for the same. And here we offer and present, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice, acceptable unto Thee through Jesus Christ Thy son.

Finally, it acknowledges the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit’s ministry to use the occasion as a means of grace. The prayer, known as the epiclesis, invokes the gracious presence of the third person of the Trinity, and calls upon him to sanctify the bread and wine for their intended holy use. It recognizes that through the sacrament the Holy Spirit may unite us to Christ and enable us to commune with and feed upon him who is the Bread of Life.

The actual celebration of the Lord’s Supper is simple and without fanfare. We are concerned with replicating as precisely as possible what Jesus did. Thus we notice the elements he used, the actions he performed, and the words he spoke. Jesus used bread and wine because their basic and universal character speaks to all peoples of his body and blood given for us. Bread and wine have precedence and are fundamental to covenant celebrations (Gen. 14:18; 1 Kings 7:48; 19:6; Psalm 104:14-15). We are not at liberty to use substitutes of any kind. All accounts agree that Jesus, “Took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples” (Matt. 26:26). These actions are visibly displayed during the Supper and regarded as part of its celebration. Thus a minister will break the one loaf in the presence of the congregation. We are not at liberty to adorn these actions so as to draw undue attention to the elements. Our Confession of Faith warns against such things when it says, “Worshiping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of the sacrament, and to the institution of Christ” (WCF XXIX.4).

The distribution of the elements is accompanied with the very words of Scripture. We offer the bread by repeating what Jesus said, “Take and eat; this is my body” (Matt. 26:26). We offer the cup by repeating what Jesus said, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27). After all have received and partaken a final exhortation reminds congregants of the grace of God in Jesus Christ held forth in the sacrament and encourages them to walk worthy of it. With a solemn prayer of thanksgiving the service is concluded as the first Lord’s Supper—with a hymn (cf. Psalms 113-118). A collection for the needy is customary.

### Fencing the Table

When the Lord gave Israel the Passover meal as a sign of their deliverance from Egypt, he also provided the following boundaries: “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’S Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you” (Ex. 12:48-49). Only those who had received circumcision as the sign of the covenant could participate in Passover. In other words, a person had to be identifiably marked as being a member of the people of God. Circumcision was that identifying mark. An alien, or outsider to the faith, would have had to profess faith in the God of Israel and receive the sign of the covenant along with his household. Then he and his family would no longer be regarded as aliens to the faith but members of the people of God. Simply put, there was a fence built around the Passover meal which included some and excluded others.

In the New Testament, the corresponding covenant signs to circumcision and Passover are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When it comes to the question of who may participate in the Lord’s Supper, Reformed Christians believe a similar pattern to that which Moses taught in Exodus is to be followed. Thus we

observe a practice known as fencing the table. By this practice we seek to identify who may participate and who may not. This is a significant reason why we believe membership in a local church is important.

The Lord’s Supper is a great privilege, but it is only for the church. It is not an evangelistic tool nor is it a means of overcoming serious doctrinal error. Reformed Christians do not believe that a person is a member of the church until they have submitted to a basic process which includes baptism (Acts 2:38) and profession of faith (Rom. 10:9). These two are formal and official actions in the life of the church. A person may claim to believe in God and insist that they are trusting Christ as savior. They may even be truly born again in the eyes of God. However, until they confess their faith before the duly appointed elders or leaders of the church where their profession can be examined and questions asked, and until they receive the sign which marks them as distinct from the world, they may not be regarded as Christians in any official capacity. We are not saying that you have to join a church to be born again, nor are we saying that all church members are truly saved. We are saying that the church is called to gather the elect through the preaching of the gospel. Then through its elders it strives to formally identify them in as much as is humanly possible. The sacraments are a function of this visible church and through their use Reformed Christians seek to make the invisible church visible.

Reformed Christians do not believe that the Lord’s Table belongs to them alone. It is the Lord’s Table. Thus our manner of fencing the table seeks to affirm the catholic or universal nature of the church. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we invite all those who sincerely profess faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior, and are baptized members in good standing at any evangelical church to participate in the communion service (Cf. BCO 58-4). Church members must be those who are “in good standing,” that is, not under discipline. Membership must be held in an evangelical church, that is, a church that professes the true gospel in its fundamental integrity, administers the sacraments

faithfully, and provides discipline for its members. The onus of responsibility is thus placed upon communicants to examine themselves (1 Cor. 11:28).

The main communion text, besides the gospel accounts of the Lord's Supper, is 1 Corinthians 11. It is here that we find two other reasons why we recognize that the Lord's Supper is offered only to faithful and professing Christians. First communicants are to be prepared for the Lord's Supper. They must have the whereabouts to "examine" themselves before they eat of the bread and drink of the cup (cf. 1 Cor. 11:28). They must know that they are sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and they must know that Jesus Christ is their only hope. They must also know how to flee to Christ to find forgiveness and reconciliation in him. In other words, they must have confidence in the death of Christ as a full atonement for sin. Second, communicants must possess spiritual discernment for they are to commune by "recognizing the body of the Lord" lest they eat and drink "judgment" on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). They must be of age and ability to apprehend some measure of the significance of the holy mystery of the Lord's Supper. They must appreciate their share in the body of Christ of which Jesus is the Head, that is the church and they must see the body of Christ in the signs of bread and wine.

There are some today who believe that infants or children should be admitted to the table merely on the basis of their baptism regardless of their profession of faith. But the Reformed church has largely resisted this so-called paedocommunion view for the very reasons mentioned above. Despite the fact that young children may have participated in the Passover with their families, under the New Covenant there is this greater requirement of self-examination and discernment. This is not ultimately an issue of age. A covenant child may be relatively young or well into his or her teens. The Larger Catechism simply renders this counsel: the Supper is only for those, "as are of years and ability to examine themselves" (WLC #177). In other words, when an individual is ready to sincerely and knowledgeably confess faith in Christ, the

elders are to hear that confession and when satisfied may admit him or her to the table. We should not bar anyone needlessly from the table by establishing an arbitrary age or creating artificial standards of spiritual maturity. A simple, yet sincere, childlike faith is what we seek (Matt. 18:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:2).

### Let Us Examine Ourselves

It is the custom in Reformed churches to announce the observance of the Lord's Supper at least one week in advance. Some even practice a service of preparation. The reason for this is found in St. Paul's call for self-examination prior to the partaking of communion (1 Cor. 11:27-29). Part of this admonition was specifically directed to the Corinthians for the reprehensible manner in which they celebrated the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-22). However, the issues of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord by partaking in an "unworthy manner," and eating and drinking "without recognizing the body of the Lord" raise universal and timeless concerns. Thus we take seriously the words, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."

What do these words mean? What is worthy partaking? What are we to recognize about the body of the Lord? How are we to prepare ourselves for the holy supper? First, it is important to point out that no one ultimately is worthy for the Lord's Supper. We are all sinners in God's sight. It is offered to us graciously, not as a reward for our piety or merit. Calvin has rightly said,

How could we, needy and bare of all good, befouled with sins, half-dead, eat the Lord's body worthily? Rather, we shall think that we, as being poor, come to a kindly giver; as sick, to a physician; as sinners, to the Author of righteousness; finally as dead, to him who gives us life. We shall think that the worthiness, which is commanded by God, consists chiefly in faith, which reposes all things in Christ, but nothing in ourselves; secondly, in love—and that very love which, though imperfect, is enough to offer to God, that he may increase it to

something better, inasmuch as it cannot be offered in completeness.<sup>40</sup>

Jesus alone is worthy (Rev. 5:1-5) and any worthiness we might have is only in him. The Lord's Supper is not given to those who are good enough. We must not use the Supper in such a legalistic fashion.

The emphasis rather is on the "manner" of receiving. The Corinthians celebrated in drunkenness, gluttony, and divisiveness. It had become an occasion for selfish posturing. This was unworthy of the Lord. In our day, we must not turn the Supper into a circus of entertainment or add unbiblical practices under the pretense of making it more appealing or meaningful. We must not replace the bread and wine with coke and cookies on a whim. All of these constitute eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner" and thus "sinning against" the Lord. If Paul was concerned here only with our piety, who would ever be worthy enough?

The admonition for self-examination is not primarily concerned about personal worthiness, but with "recognizing the body of the Lord." Our Lutheran and Romanist friends at this point insist that proper recognition consists of affirming Christ's bodily presence in, with, and under the elements, or as the elements themselves. Thus recognizing the Lord's body is seen as recognizing the physical presence of Christ in the Supper in some way. Reformed Christians view it differently. Since we believe Christ remains seated at the Father's right hand in heaven, then recognizing the Lord's body when we eat and drink is altogether different.

St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is often viewed as a catalogue of unrelated abuses that the apostle addressed in sequence. However, the issue of sinful disunity is the common thread that ties them all together. Paul pleads, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you

and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10). Later he chides them for their behaving as "mere infants in Christ," and acting like unbelievers when he said, "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?...For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men?" (1 Cor. 3:1, 3).

This internal discord was seen in bold relief at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. He compared their behavior at the table to the pagan revelry in which the Israelites indulged at the golden calf incident (1 Cor. 10:6; Ex. 32). These old covenant "believers" were people who enjoyed a common baptism (1 Cor. 10:1-2; Ex. 13:17-14:31). They ate and drank a common food (1 Cor. 3-5; Ex. 16; 17:6). Yet, they fell away. The same was happening to the Corinthians. Their sharing the bread and the cup was a common participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). The one loaf was an emblem of their unity. Paul said, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." Yet, their profane brawling and posturing made a mockery of this sacred truth. He continued, "Your meetings do more harm than good [for] when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you" (1 Cor. 11:17-18).

When we are admonished to recognize the "body of the Lord" at the table, it is not our Lord's physical presence that is in view, but how we relate to the body of Christ, that is, the church. The church is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23) and believers must recognize their vital role in its membership. Immediately following his discussion of the Lord's Supper, Paul addresses the nature of the church. He said, "The body is a unit, though it is made of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:12-13). Does our sense of belonging, our common baptism, our mutual faith, and our shared inheritance instill in us a feeling of responsibility to strive for the peace, purity, and unity of the church (cf. Eph. 4:1-6)? When we come to the table do we recognize the brotherhood

---

<sup>40</sup> Institutes IV. xvii. 42.

and sisterhood mutually enjoyed as members of the household of God? Do we commune “recognizing the body of the Lord”? If not, we may be eating and drinking judgment upon ourselves (1 Cor. 11:29).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, using old covenant temple language, addressed the issue of brotherly discord. He said, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). Self-examination prior to the Lord’s Supper is concerned with this same issue. Professing believers and church members are to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” because of our common faith (Eph. 4:3-6). With David we confess, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” (Psa. 133:1). We are charged to “make every effort to live in peace with all men” (Heb. 12:14), but especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yet having stressed this ecclesial aspect of “recognizing the body of the Lord,” we must not deny the Supper’s use in personal piety. Much of the Corinthians’ internal discord was due to flagrant sins on the part of individual members. The author of Hebrews calls us not only to “live in peace,” but “to be holy” (Heb. 12:14). The unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace are broken by scandalous behavior on the part of church members. The Supper also serves as an opportunity to take stock of our lives before the Lord. Certainly it is not wrong to “shake the foundations” of our faith, so to speak, to see if they stand firm. Paul wrote, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter said, “Make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10). The Westminster Larger Catechism is perhaps the best summary of the Supper’s use in personal reflection and self-evaluation in this regard. Questions #171 through #175 touch on such topics as how we are to prepare for the Lord’s Supper, partake of it, and preserve its benefits. It also

addresses those who struggle with doubt, as well as, the ignorant and scandalous, and the propriety of their participation. We will conclude our remarks with the Catechism’s question #171, “How [are members] to prepare themselves” for the Lord’s Supper?

They that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience; and by renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer.

## Conclusion

We live in a visual age. Thus, conventional wisdom insists that if the church is to survive we must appeal to the visual interests and demands of our culture. Since we live in a world of television and movies, glossy magazines and billboards, we must approach ministry and worship in a similar fashion. Churches must make greater use of visual media like power point, videos, drama teams, “sacred” dance, and the like. Verbal communication that is sequential, sustained, and logical is said to be a thing of the past. People are moved by impressions and visual imagery rather than a “lecture”—so it is claimed.

Arthur W. Hunt III has defined our postmodern times “as a turning from rationality, and at the same time an embracing of spectacle.”<sup>41</sup> Building on the work of the Russian born scholar, Pitirim Sorokin, Harold O. J. Brown calls this the “sensate culture” for its propensity for “the imposing, the impressive, the voluptuous,” and the encouraging of “self-indulgence.”<sup>42</sup> He regards as symptomatic of a disintegrating culture, “the replacement of quality by quantity” and “the burgeoning of

---

<sup>41</sup> Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 226.

<sup>42</sup> Harold O. J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture: Western Civilization Between Chaos and Transformation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 9-10.

colossalism<sup>43</sup> in every area of life.”<sup>44</sup> He notes, “Sadly, as the experience of ancient Rome showed and as modern sensate cultures are again coming to see, a culture cannot long endure when there are no higher standards for human behavior than the appetites and tastes of the moment.”<sup>45</sup>

The city of Rome in the time of the Apostles was certainly no less visual and sensual than any city today. Witness the colossal architecture, pagan pageantry, sensual statuary, excessive games, and extravagant theater. Yet, St. Paul declared to the church in that city in no uncertain terms that, “Faith comes from hearing (emphasis mine) the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Now, as then, the primary means of grace for the conversion of sinners and encouragement of the saints is to be the Word of God proclaimed in the public assembly.

Nevertheless the Lord Jesus did leave his church two ceremonies to engage the other senses: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These ordinances are regarded by Reformed Christians as “the visible word.” They speak the gospel to us through our sense of sight, touch, taste, and/or smell. We are not at liberty to adorn these sacraments beyond their Biblical patterns nor to create others more to our liking. We are not at liberty to turn Christian worship into a visual extravaganza beyond the use of these sacraments. The only visual imagery the Lord has left his church is the imagery of the “washing of rebirth” (Titus 3:5) through baptism and the feeding upon Christ (John 6:53-58) at the Lord’s Table. Both these ceremonies are simple, straightforward, unassuming, and sufficient to satisfy our longing that other senses be engaged with the gospel. They do not overshadow the preaching of the Word, but rather support it. They are thus regarded as “appendages” to the Word. Any embellishment of these two ceremonies or additions of other visual aids departs from

---

<sup>43</sup> That is, everything must be bigger, better, and extravagant.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, 152.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, 112.

Scripture, fosters spiritual imbalance, and creates appetites for things God never intended.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the means God has employed to signify, seal, confirm, and confer his promises to his church bound up in the covenant of grace. Through his Word, God sets before us his gracious promises of rebirth, forgiveness, family solidarity, and life eternal, all because of Jesus. Through the sacraments, he impresses the same things upon our minds and hearts so that we might be greatly encouraged. Seventh century Dutch theologian, Herman Witsius, has said,

Two things are requisite to complete our happiness: first our being absolved from our sins, and [second] washed from our pollution: that we may be regenerated...and then nourished...Both these are sufficiently confirmed to us by these two sacraments. Our first engrafting into Christ, and our regeneration by his Spirit, are set forth by baptism; and the nourishment of our spiritual life by the holy supper.<sup>46</sup>

As Robert Bruce has said, “There is nothing in this world, or out of this world, more to be wished by everyone of you than to be conjoined with Jesus Christ, and once for all made one with Him.”<sup>47</sup> It is through the Word and sacraments that the Lord accomplishes this for us. But, as Bruce continues, “Every Sacrament is a mystery. There is no Sacrament but contains a high and divine mystery. Because a Sacrament is a mystery, then, it follows that a mystical, secret and spiritual conjunction corresponds well to the nature of the Sacrament. Since the conjunction between us and Christ is full of mystery, as the Apostle shows us (Eph. 5:32), it is a mystical and spiritual conjunction that is involved.”<sup>48</sup> After exploring in great depth the meaning of the sacrament, Calvin could only say, “I rather experience than understand it.”<sup>49</sup> Let us also make use of these

---

<sup>46</sup> Witsius, Economy of the Covenants, 2:421.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Bruce, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Institutes IV. xvii. 32.

gracious gifts of Christ to his church by receiving them with the same simplicity of faith and humility of heart to our everlasting joy.