

Mysteries of God and Means of Grace

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“Try a personal Communion service to enrich your relationship with God” the article read.

“Supper for One”, an article in a leading evangelical magazine, advocates supplementing private devotions with Communion. “I didn’t have wine or unleavened bread around the house, but I did have water or juice and crackers....Communion helped me focus blurry thoughts in the morning. The writer recalled the hatred she was harboring toward a friend. Yet as I crunched the cracker in my mouth, I remembered the breaking of Jesus’ body and prayed, Lord, please break this hatred in my heart. After several days, something inside me changed. It seems that the Supper for One worked, and on this basis it is commended to the rest of the church.”

No attempt is made to derive support from Scripture or even from tradition for this astonishing practice. But this woman would probably, as an evangelical, criticize Rome’s Sacraments as being unscriptural. Doubtless, the writer is a convinced evangelical who accepts the Bible’s authority, but yet seems to have no test for what is a means of grace beyond its pragmatic usefulness.

Unlike the Supper instituted by Christ, this new practice is private rather than public, subjective rather than objective, and does not even require the specific material elements commanded by Christ! Evidently the spiritual and moral effects are all that matter. “After three months of daily remembrance, I wondered if Communion would make the same difference for others. The Communion Project was born. Pastor Mac tried “private” Communion for three months. Mac used juice and graham crackers (he has kids, too).” The article offers testimonials from those for whom this new Sacrament worked. “Each person focused on a different spiritual need and envisioned Jesus as the answer. Alma, mother of five, began to focus on portraying the Spirit of Jesus and His humble service while taking Communion. As a result, Alma saw changes in the way she spoke to and served her children. I’m still enjoying Communion on a regular basis, says the writer, although not every day (the carpool changed again).” 1

For a group that is often fond of denouncing Rome’s additions to Scripture, evangelicals have done a fairly radical job of liturgical and sacramental

innovation. (Like a new exercise for losing that spare tire, getting in shape spiritually is a matter of finding the right technique.) Most evangelicals wouldn't call them Sacraments, but they believe that their innovative techniques do convey God's grace. Ironically, the same would probably not be said of the Sacraments that our Lord actually did establish.

Even in more traditional days, we would try to prepare our heart for Jesus, making sure that we had surrendered all. Each summer at camp in my youth, we would do penance, as the final night would lead us through the stages of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Thus prepared, we would write our sins on a piece of paper or wood and throw them into the fire, promising never to do them again. No, I was not reared a Roman Catholic, but as an evangelical Protestant.

And we would return to camp the next summer, after passing a number of sacramental seasons in between, to get back lost grace and keep our reservoirs as full as possible. Instead of seeing the Christian life as one long experience of being simultaneously justified and sinful, fully accepted by God in Christ, and yet always striving against my sinful heart, my practical theology resembled that of my Roman Catholic friends. Even the central event in worship was called the altar call. While we would never have referred to the place where God speaks and acts in Word and Sacrament as an altar, we had no trouble calling this other place the stage around which we gathered as we came forward to receive Christ by that name.

To this day, I hear Christian brothers and sisters defend this practice by saying, Surely you wouldn't deny that many people are saved by coming forward! In other words, the altar call is regarded as a means of grace. In fact, the medieval view of the Sacraments as working *ex opere operato* (i.e., just by performing the act, one is saved) finds a Protestant parallel in this new Sacrament. After all, doesn't the pastor declare, Now, if you prayed that prayer after me, you are a Christian? (In fact, if you pray that prayer at the end of some tracts, there is even a place to sign your name and the date of your new birth!) While the ancient church condemned as Pelagian the idea that grace is conferred by saying a prayer (the Council of Orange, 529 A.D.), it is now regarded as a guarantee of saving grace in many circles. Although few evangelicals would be comfortable hearing a Lutheran or Reformed minister announcing God's forgiveness in connection with Baptism or the Lord's Supper, they do not seem to mind when the same grace is linked to receiving Christ in an altar call, a Promise Keepers' meeting, a small group, in spiritual disciplines, or at summer camp.

It is so easy to set aside God's ordained means of grace and to create our own private and public rituals. We can turn a means of grace into a Sacrament of penance as easily as the next fellow. Even if we are anti-ritualistic, a praise band becomes a means of grace, or testimony time becomes sacramental. In a recent issue of Christianity Today, Richard Foster lists numerous Sacraments, from physical labor to spiritual disciplines, actually calling them means of grace. Yet Foster belongs to the Quaker tradition, a religious group that repudiates Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In reality, we are an individualistic and self-assured lot. We believe that the Christian life consists chiefly in finding out what needs to be done, and doing it. Inveterate Pelagians by birth, we do our best to climb the spiritual rungs into God's hidden presence, but he has plainly warned us against this strategy. For he has come near to us, through the Incarnate Word, the written, and especially, preached Word, and the visible Word (i.e., the Sacraments).

If we really believe that we are helpless to save ourselves, as Christians any more than pagans, **the Sacraments become for us not a means for attaining grace, but for receiving grace. They are not rituals through which we proclaim our willing and running, but through which God proclaims his willing and running.** But how seriously do we take the two Sacraments instituted by our Lord? Contrast our contemporary pictures with the answer of Reformed theologian Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629): The visible church is a fellowship of people called to the state of grace by Word and sacrament. In fact, although the Church often considers other activities ministries that reach the world for Christ, the Church, as Louis Berkhof reminds us, is not instrumental in communicating grace, except by means of the Word and of the sacraments (emphasis added).

The goal of this article, and this issue, is to try to recover the force of this viewpoint. During the Reformation, the church recognized that the recovery of the radical God-centeredness and grace-oriented apostolic message was not only a matter of orthodoxy, but doxology; that is, not only sound doctrine, but sound praise and worship that was shaped by the mystery of Christ revealed. Liturgical reform was necessary. Something parallel is going on in our day, as a new generation largely consisting of converts to the evangel in evangelical circles cries out for the Bread of Life in the place of stones. Burned out after years of hopping from one spiritual bandwagon to another, they are looking to churches that believe it's more important to feed the flock than appease the goats. They are beginning to understand

that when the Savior calls the unbelievers to himself, it will be only here that they will hear God's gracious call, however strange it may sound at first. As we learn to become less ashamed of the Gospel, we are beginning to recover our own voice again, our own divinely-taught language.

In the light of that, this article will introduce the Reformed perspective on the Sacraments.

What Are the Sacraments?

Sacrament: the very term may perplex some people. However, it is quite clearly derived from Scripture, as the Greek word for mystery (mysterion) is translated into Latin as sacramentum. In the Roman world, a sacramentum was the oath of a secret society, especially of soldiers, for whom military interests and religious rituals were virtually indistinguishable. Not surprisingly, then, when the ancient church wanted to talk about the ways in which God confirmed his promise to Abraham and his seed by an oath (Heb. 6:13-18), they adopted this idea. Not only is the Gospel referred to as a mystery, hidden under types and shadows until Christ's advent; ministers are to be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God_ (1 Cor. 4:1).

In the early church, adult catechumens would study the teachings and practices of Christianity and then be initiated, with their children, into the church by the mystery of Baptism, instituted by our Savior in his Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). The Holy Supper was regularly celebrated along with the preached Word (Acts 2:42). However, before the service of the Supper began, the general public was dismissed with the announcement, "Ite, missa est", meaning, Go, it is dismissed. Over time, the missa in that formula gave us our word for the Mass.

We simply cannot say that we take a literal approach to the text while interpreting these clear passages as allegorical of a spiritual reality detached from the obvious reference to physical sacraments. But eventually, the human temptation to invent new forms of worship, as Israel had done at Mt. Sinai with the golden calf, expressed itself in the medieval proliferation of additions to the ancient Mass. (Seeker-worship is, after all, not all that new!) Medieval theologian Peter Lombard defined a Sacrament as a sign of a sacred thing, which was so broad, of course, that it is little wonder that as many as thirty Sacraments were suggested! Eventually, the magisterium settled on twelve and then reduced the number finally to the

seven that stand to this day in Roman Catholicism.

Again, for the reformers, theological reform led to liturgical reform. This, of course, did not mean a wholesale abandonment of the first fifteen centuries, since the church had not in every respect abandoned God's Word. Instead, Luther, Calvin, and the other magisterial reformers insisted on reforming the Mass. Far from ignoring the ancient forms of the church, they carefully studied Scripture and realized that if the layer of medieval accretions in the Latin Mass was peeled away, the resulting service was both more biblical and more ancient. Calvin expressed the criterion employed: It is certain that all ceremonies are corrupt and harmful unless through them men are led to Christ...As to the confirmation and increase of faith, I should therefore like my readers to be reminded that I assign this particular ministry to the sacraments (Institutes 4.10.15 and 4.14.9).

Thus, to qualify as a Sacrament, an act had to be instituted by Christ and it had to strengthen faith in Christ rather than undermine it. First, the reformers considered a Sacrament to be a divine act. Just look at the alleged Sacraments that Rome had adopted: Many not only failed to be sanctioned by Christ, but were recent in origin (dating officially from the 13th century). Further, they did not offer grace, but merit. Was marriage a divine action, or a human pledge? Is God rewarding me by making these vows or is he bestowing unmerited favor? It is quite strange to think of marriage as the bestowal of the Gospel, a means of grace rather than a Christian vow. How could penance be a Sacrament, a means of grace from God to us, when in fact it consisted of three human acts (contrition, confession, and satisfaction that is, making restitution)? **Like many of the new Sacraments we invent as Protestants, medieval Rome had confused human actions (good and important as they are in the Christian life) with divine grace.** The indicative and imperative were confused. Contrition and confession are Christian duties, but they are our response to grace, and the effect of grace, not a means of grace from God. Rome had even taken the Lord's Supper and turned it into our act of re-sacrificing Christ instead of promising us that because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross he graciously grants us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Heidelberg, Q. 66).

The Reformers found another problem with the medieval notion of even those Sacraments instituted by our Lord. In Rome, one brought a worthy disposition or habitus to the Sacraments, and obstacles could prevent the effective flow of grace into the soul. Where the Scriptures portray grace as God's unmerited favor toward us, medieval theology had taught that grace

was a spiritual and moral quality within the believer. Like water filling a bathtub, grace could leak out of the soul due to venial sins and be entirely lost by committing a mortal sin. Thus, Rome's Sacraments (especially penance) served to merit new infused grace. In contrast, Calvin says that Christ's Sacraments are instituted so that believers, poor and deprived of all goods, should bring nothing to it but begging (Institutes 4.14.26). The Sacrament's force and truth do not depend on the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary (ibid). So for Calvin, as for Luther, sacramenta conferunt gratiam (Sacraments confer grace). They are not rewards for the strong, but mercies for the weak.

Not only did the Reformers oppose Rome's meritocracy; they fiercely opposed the opposite tendency to subjectivize the Sacraments by making them mere signs or tokens to evoke piety. For this, too, would only lead the struggling believer to look for help within himself. From the mid-sixteenth-century confessions to the Westminster Confession of 1647, the entire confessional testimony of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches defends the objective character of the Sacraments as means of grace.

The Scots Confession of 1560 declares, "And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted, and also that in the Supper rightly used, Christ Jesus is so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls" (Ch. 21). "The Holy Spirit creates [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the holy Gospel and confirms it by the use of the holy Sacraments" (Heidelberg, Q.65). The Second Helvetic Confession reminds us that what is given in the Sacraments is not merely "a bare and naked sign," but Christ himself, with all of his saving benefits. It warns against the "sects, who despise the visible aspect of the sacraments," exclusively concerned with the invisible (Ch. 19). The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England repeat their sister churches in affirming this point (Art. 25). "The sacraments become effectual means of salvation," according to the Westminster Larger Catechism, "not by any power in themselves or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of him by whom they are administered; only by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ by whom they are instituted" (Q.161).

Moving to our day, most Reformed theologians have upheld the

confessions. Princeton's A. A. Hodge wrote, "Christ uses these sacraments, not only to represent and seal, but also actually to apply, the benefits of his redemption to believers." Furthermore, according to Hodge, while they are not Sacraments, the church ought to retain as ordinances confirmation, absolution, marriage, and ordination. Penance and extreme unction are rejected entirely. Exulting in the biblical and historical evidence, Hodge declared, "We have, on the one hand, the great body of the historical Christian churches, and on the other hand, the Protestants of Protestants, our Baptist brethren. In this point of view the advantage appears to be on our side."

It is important to realize that **the Calvinistic Baptists hail not from Anabaptism, but from English Puritanism.** Unlike the various sects of the so-called Radical Reformation, the Baptists were in other respects committed to the magisterial Reformation, but separated from their Reformed churches over the issue of infant Baptism. What is odd about our day is that the more radical elements of Anabaptism, rather than even the more moderate views of the Baptists, show up occasionally in our churches. It is, therefore, astonishing that so many who go by the name "Reformed" in our day seem to deny, at least in the practical treatment of these Sacraments, the efficacy of these means of grace. As I have attempted to highlight in In The Face of God, the gnosticism (spirit against matter emphasis) of our age seems to pervade evangelical thinking and this has not been without its effect in our own churches. **The hidden assumption appears to be that God works immediately and directly, without means, in bringing us to faith and keeping us there.** Spirit is set against matter; in this case, the material elements of human preaching, water, bread and wine. The Anabaptistic, pietistic, and then revivalistic strains of evangelicalism eventually triumphed over the Reformation's evangelical stance and to the extent that Reformed churches today follow these general evangelical trends, they lose their Reformed identity.

In many conservative Reformed and Presbyterian circles, it is as if the prescribed forms for Baptism and the Supper were too high in their sacramental theology, so the minister feels compelled to counter its strong "means of grace" emphasis. In this way, the Sacraments die the death of a thousand qualifications. The same is true when we read the biblical passages referring to Baptism as "the washing of regeneration" or to the Supper as "the communion of the body and blood of Christ." Why must we apologize for these passages and attempt to explain them away? Our confessions do not do this. Our liturgical forms (if we still use them) do not do this, but we feel compelled to diminish them these days.

We hear quasi-gnostic sentiments even in Reformed circles these days, such as the “real baptism” that is spiritual, as opposed to “merely being sprinkled with water,” or the “real communion” with Christ in moments of private devotion. How can we truly affirm the union of earthly and heavenly realities in the Incarnation? Or how can we regard the Word of God as a means of salvation if it is but ink and paper or human speech? A subtle Docetism (the ancient gnostic heresy that denied Christ’s true humanity) lurks behind our reticence to see these common earthly elements as signs that are linked to the things they signify. **Surely the Sacraments can remind us of grace, help us to appreciate grace, and exhort us to walk in grace, but do they actually give us the grace promised in the Gospel? The Reformed and Presbyterian confessions answer “yes” without hesitation: A Sacrament not only consists of the signs (water, bread and wine), but of the things signified (new birth, forgiveness, life everlasting).** And yet, the experience of Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the odd world of American revivalism has challenged the confessional perspective. In *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Yale, 1940), L. B. Schenck noted, “The disproportionate reliance upon revivals as the only hope of the church...amounted to a practical subversion of Presbyterian doctrine, an overshadowing of God’s covenantal promise.” As Richard Muller has carefully shown in his *Calvin Theological Journal* article, “How Many Points?”, our system has been reduced to a pale reflection of its former self.

Eugene Osterhaven states, “Thus the Reformed tradition, with most of the Christian church, believes it pleases God to use earthly materials ”water, bread, and wine in the reconciliation of the world to God.” But does Scripture teach this? The best way to answer that is to simply read the passages, where Baptism is called “remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), and those who believe and are baptized will be saved (Mk. 16:16). Paul announced, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord_ (Acts 22:16). **The Sacrament and faith were not separated in Paul’s mind, for apart from the latter the benefits of the former were not received although the Sacrament was performed.** In Baptism we were buried and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). Far from viewing Baptism as a human work, Paul said “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit. 3:5-7).

A. A. Hodge writes, "Men were exhorted to be baptized in order to wash away their sins. It is declared that men must be born of water and of the Spirit, and that baptism as well as faith is an essential condition of salvation. The effect of Baptism is declared to be purification (2 Kings 5:13, 14; Judith 12:7; Lk. 11:37-39)." As Hodge observes, in infant Baptism, there are four parties: God, the Church, the parents, and the child, and the only party wholly passive in the affair is the very person being baptized!

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Here the Reformed found great assistance in Augustine's terminology, often employed in medieval theology, but later abandoned in Rome's attempt to explain transubstantiation. Especially important in the Augustinian tradition was the relation between "sign" and "thing signified." Analogous to the relation between Christ's human and divine natures united in one person, the earthly signs of water, bread and wine are united with the things signified: regeneration, forgiveness, and adoption. This "sacramental relation" is central to the Reformed understanding of these passages. It helps us to avoid either a ritualism that places the efficacy in the signs themselves and a spiritualism or rationalism that deprives the signs of their efficacy. So when we read that Baptism is "the remission of sins," we embrace neither baptismal regeneration nor spiritualization. The sign is not the thing signified, but is so united by God's Word and Spirit that the waters of Baptism can be said to be the washing of regeneration and the bread and wine can be said to be the body and blood of Christ. To say that Christ is not in the water, bread and wine is not to say that he is not in the Baptism and the Supper, since both Sacraments consist of signs and things signified.

We live in a sensate era, looking for "sensory overload" experiences. Since the Fall, we have always sought that which is "pleasing to the eye" (Gen. 3:6). Hence, the golden calf, the perpetual temptation to idolatry, and the medieval superstitions. The corrupted Mass replaced the Word with colorful and exciting feasts for the eyes and ears, but where was Christ? So too, in our day, we demand visual and aural stimulation, and are being led to idols rather than to Christ. A Word and Sacrament orientation touches our senses, but also fastens us to the reality which they offer beyond themselves. The Word consecrates the Sacraments, not transubstantiating the substances of bread and wine into body and blood, but making these visible signs means of grace. Unlike our own clever

substitutes, the Sacraments lead us beyond the signs to the Lamb. Calvin goes so far as to stress the relationship between the physical character of the elements and our own bodies, suggesting that God “testifies his benevolence and love toward us more expressly by the sacraments than he does by his word” (Institutes 4.14.6).

The Sacraments do not give us something different from the Word; rather, both conspire to give us Christ. We have no trouble when Scripture tells us that “the Word of God is living and powerful” (Heb. 4:12), or that the Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 2:16). When we say that someone was converted by hearing a sermon, we are not attributing saving efficacy to language, or ink and paper in their own right. Rather, we are claiming (whether we realize it or not) that God has graciously taken up these human things and, by uniting them to the heavenly treasures, has made them effective himself. Precisely the same is true of the Sacraments.

If one rejects the Gospel as it is given in the preaching of the Word and in the Sacraments, it remains the Gospel, still the power of God unto salvation, but “...for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and to the Greek.” Apart from faith, one is no more saved by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper than he or she is by the preached Gospel.

Rome is fond of charging the Reformation with subjectivizing the Sacraments by denying their efficacy *ex opere operato* (i.e., “by the doing it is done,” the view that Baptism and the Supper confer grace apart from faith). As Berkouwer points out, Philip Melanchthon’s *Loci communes* (1521) and the Augsburg Confession both condemn the view that the Sacraments grant justification. “That, of course, is an error,” says Melanchthon, “for justification comes only with faith.” Thus, “...belief is necessary for the correct use of the sacraments” (Apology). _It is striking that so much agreement exists between Lutherans and Reformed precisely in the rejection of *ex opere operato*. Both continually point to the relation between Word and sacrament, and therefore to the relation between faith and sacrament (cf. *Institutes* 4.14.14). This is not because they both subjectivize the sacraments, but because they both have a correct insight into them._

It is Rome that subjectivizes the Sacraments by making their effect depend on the moral disposition and worthiness of the recipient. Faith is not a holy disposition within us, but a looking away from self altogether to lay hold of the righteousness of another. I am convinced that evangelicals and Roman Catholics share so many ironic affinities in their view of their respective Sacraments precisely because they share similar views of justification and faith.

The medieval theologian Peter of Poitiers said that we had to prepare our heart to receive Christ, as a guest prepares his house. How different is this

from the Arminian altar calls or similar exhortations to “surrender all” and prepare the heart for Jesus? In Scripture, not even faith is a work of human beings, but the receiving of Christ’s work. And yet in both medieval and Arminian schemes, human cooperation subjectivizes the Word and Sacraments, so that their real efficacy lies in the disposition, will, and activity of the very sinner who finds himself or herself destitute!

On Ezek. 20:20, Calvin replies, “Man’s unworthiness does not rob the sacraments of their significance. Baptism remains the bath of regeneration even though the whole world was faithless; the Lord’s Supper remains the distribution of Christ’s body and blood, even though there was not the slightest sparkle of belief left.” The Belgic Confession points out that the Sacraments, like the Word, are given because of our weakness, not as a reward for our strength (Art. 33). How can the Reformed position be distinguished from Rome, then? For the Reformed, the Sacraments are objective means of grace, but not of infused grace. It is the promise of the Gospel, identical to the proclaimed Word, that is confirmed by the use of the Sacraments. Just as the Gospel proclaimed retains its nature and efficacy whether we believe or not, we do not make the Sacraments effective by our faith, preparation, works, or any other activity. And yet, we must receive Christ in them if we are to profit from them.

I had, without malice but with plenty of ignorance, turned the Sacrament of Christ’s doing and dying into my sacrament of feeling and remembering. Why did I even need bread and grape juice to do that?

Making use of the Sacraments is not like turning on a faucet to drink water, but like being given a gift. It is not a moral quality within us that makes the Sacraments effective (as in Rome), but the objective promise, received in faith through the mighty working of the Holy Spirit. This phrase, “received in faith,” does not mean that faith makes the Sacraments effective any more than that faith itself justifies. We know that it is God who justifies us, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness and not our faith, and the same is true of the Sacraments. Sacraments remain Sacraments, just as Christ remains Christ and the Word would be true if nobody ever accepted it as such. But the reality they exhibit and confer must be embraced. John 3:16 remains John 3:16 apart from anyone’s acceptance. If anyone fails to

believe, he has not made Word and Sacrament ineffective; he has simply refused to accept that which was truly offered to him, objectively, by God. G. C. Berkouwer warns against the spiritualizing tendency to see the sacraments as _merely jogs for the memory, whose only effect is psychological._

The Reformed want to emphasize that the Sacraments, no less than the Word, are means of grace, made effective by God, not merely an occasion for grace, made effective by us. Although he sometimes expressed eccentric views on the subject, Abraham Kuyper reminds us, "What you need is the anointing of grace itself," not merely a reflection of it. He refers to Zwingli's "deplorable representation," calling his view of the Supper "intellectual" as well as "barren and mendacious," insisting that he would rather err on the side of Luther than Zwingli's. Berkouwer complains, too, that in Zwingli "the sacrament is reduced to the level of any phenomenon we experience as edifying, such as the starry heaven, a death bed, or a praying child." According to Kuyper, "Even if a person had already confessed before his baptism that salvation is in Christ, and even if he were already incorporated into Christ, he makes the real transition only through baptism." He is quite right when he says, "The Reformed stand with Rome, Luther, and Calvin against Zwingli in their adherence to a divine working of grace in the sacrament." In a classic understatement, Berkhof declares, "There is a very general impression, not altogether without foundation, that Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper was very defective," since "for him the emphasis falls on what the believer, rather than on what God, pledges in the sacrament." Sadly, many churches today calling themselves Reformed and Presbyterian embrace in practice Zwingli's view of Sacraments as "bare and naked signs," even though this view is rejected by every one of our confessions.

But doesn't God communicate his grace in devotions, in personal testimonies, and in similar expressions of piety? Is God bound to only these means of Word and Sacrament? That is the wrong question, from our point of view. Let's say you promised me that you would meet me at the cafe on the corner of Fourth and Maple. There is nothing magical about the corner. You would have been free to select another spot, but that location, especially if my life depends on this meeting, takes on a particular status because of your promise to meet me there. Similarly, God could meet us anywhere on earth. Filling the heavens and the earth, he speaks to us in general revelation every time we climb a beautiful mountain or attend a Mozart concert. But he appears to us there in his role as Creator. We learn nothing from general revelation that is able to save. It can lead us to the Gospel, but it is only in the Gospel given in Word and Sacrament where we see God in the particular act of saving people. The Grand

Canyon can show you God's majesty, but only special revelation, in particular, the Gospel of Christ, reveals God the Redeemer as your Savior. Omnipresent Spirit has met us in the Incarnate Word, and he continues to meet us but only where he has promised to meet us for the purpose of saving us.

A Sacrament is distinct from other important spiritual disciplines not only because it is attached to a definite divine promise, but because it is God's activity. While your testimony might reveal God's work in your life, the preached Word and Sacraments reveal God's work in history for my redemption and that of the whole church. In other words, your testimony tells me about your experience (which is not wrong in itself, of course), but the Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, actually gives me Christ!

There are many Christian duties, and Baptism does mark us with Christ's sufferings, leading us to a life not only of assurance of God's grace, but of opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Far from opposing Christian duties, the Sacraments make them possible. In such duties (prayer, talking to others about Christ, praise, discipline), we are the speakers and actors, but in Word and Sacrament, God is the one speaking and acting. There is a place for our response in grateful praise and obedience, but we can only be thankful after we have been given something and obedient after we are grateful. As the gracious indicative makes way for the imperative in the preached Word, the sacraments give and we bring nothing of ourselves but our cry for grace. Like little birds waiting in the nest with beaks open wide to receive their daily food, we are God's own children huddled together in his church to receive Christ as the food of our souls. As a number of friends in the Reformed ministry have told me, frequent Communion requires them to make Christ central in their preaching as well as in the Sacrament itself. In both forms, Christ is, as Paul said, "placarded" or "posted" before the congregation as crucified. At the heart of the Reformed doctrine, shared also with the ancient (especially Greek) churches, is the eschatological parallelism between heaven and earth: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Or, "Whatever you bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven." Do you see the "as on earth, so in heaven" parallelism? The kingdom is the in-breaking of Christ's new world by the Spirit's re-creation. It is the age to come shooting forth fruit-laden branches of the heavenly Tree of Life into this present age. From the Reformed perspective, the "already" and "not-yet" of redemptive history bars us from a realized eschatology of Christ's physical presence on earth before the eschaton, marking our difference with Rome and Lutherans. But it also sets our view off from the entirely future eschatology of Zwinglians and rationalists who deny the mystery.

Zwinglians and Roman Catholics are the only ones who deny mystery: the former, by reducing the Sacraments to mere signs and symbols; the latter, by arguing that the sign is no longer united to the thing signified, but replaces it! Lutherans and Calvinists embrace mystery, though at different points. While Calvinists ask Lutherans how Christ can be physically present at every altar and still be said in any sense to have a human body, Lutherans ask Calvinists how they can honestly say that they are really feeding on the true body and blood of Christ in heaven, without identifying this with a physical mode of eating. For centuries, the difficult business here for both parties has been accepting each other's claim to be truly feeding on Christ according to his institution. But at least they are both claiming the same act and effect, even if they differ on the mode of eating. Here, both concede mystery, a wonderful exercise of the miracle-working Savior still at work in our world, and this is at least a good place to start. Even with the Word and Sacraments, our feeble-mindedness, willful ignorance, and pride keep us from raising our eyes to heaven as we should. From the Reformed perspective, Roman Catholics and Lutherans fail to take into sufficient consideration the implications of the angelic announcement, "He is not here, for he is risen!" And yet, he promised in his Great Commission that as his church preaches and baptizes, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:10). This finds a more focused elaboration in John's Gospel, where Jesus prepares the Church for his death, resurrection, and ascension. Although he must go, it is good, he says. His absence means that he will send the Holy Spirit, not as a new Savior, but as the one who unites us to Christ now in heaven. He promises that believers will see him in the flesh, but only on the last day. Until then, he is still present but it is the Holy Spirit now who leads us across the Rubicon of this present age into the age to come. "These things I have spoken to you while being present with you," he says. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (Jn. 14:24-26). "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send him to you" (Jn. 16:7).

This two-age model ("this present age" and "the age to come") forms the horizon of the New Testament and our own Christian experience. Jesus presents this model (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 20:34), and it is found throughout the epistles. Hebrews 6 warns lapsed believers from committing apostasy by returning to Judaism and Gentile paganism. These are people who _were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come..._ (Heb. 4-5). In the ancient Church,

“enlightened” was a term for the baptized, while tasting of the heavenly gift most likely refers to Holy Communion. Through these means of grace, says the biblical writer, especially “the good word of God,” the members of the visible Church have actually tasted the powers of the age to come. This is the “already” aspect of the kingdom. And yet, it is the age to come in all its fullness when Christ returns physically in glory. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). The Reformed view wants to avoid the tendency to deny the future of this face-to-face encounter, but it also insists that we do see in a mirror, however dimly. That mirror or looking glass in which we see our Redeemer is Word and Sacrament.

It is the Spirit who makes the connection between these two ages, and it is through the instruments of the preached Word and Sacraments that the “already” and “not-yet,” this present age and the age to come, converge. Here Christ meets with his people before his final return in judgment and consummation. For here we are seated with him in heavenly places even before we are physically raised.

Having briefly sketched the Reformed view of a Sacrament, let’s take an even more cursory look at Baptism and the Supper particularly, and try to ascertain some agreements in spite of our differences.

Baptism: The Sacrament of Initiation

While Reformed theology has historically agreed with the Law-Gospel distinction of Lutheranism (while leaving a larger place for the positive role of the Law in the Christian life), the system increasingly organized itself around that key biblical motif of diatheke or covenant. In creation, God established a covenant of works with Adam: If he would perfectly obey, he would earn for himself and his posterity the right to eat from the Tree of Life and enjoy eternal happiness without the possibility of falling away. Having broken this covenant, God was not obligated to redeem his image-bearers, but he chose to do so. And from eternity past, Christ was appointed as the Mediator of the elect. After the fall, therefore, God established a covenant of grace with Adam and Eve, and all believers with them. The Gospel was preached by God himself to the guilty race in the announcement of the woman’s Seed who would triumph over the serpent. The whole of biblical history then becomes an outworking of this plan of redemption, this covenant of grace. In the Old Testament, believers place their faith in this Redeemer to come. Abraham is called out of the world to be the father of many and after he is justified by grace through faith in this Coming Son, he is circumcised by divine command. But God also commands him to circumcise his children. All children of Abraham henceforth are to be circumcised on the eighth day, to separate them from the covenant of

works and place them under God's protection in the covenant or treaty of grace.

Just as Adam and Eve were redeemed from God's avenging wrath prefigured by the sacrificial skins they wore in the place of their own fig leaves, and Abraham was called out, justified, and circumcised, the Israelites were spared by sprinkling the blood of a sacrificial lamb on their doorposts. God leads his people out of Egyptian bondage through the Red Sea after the event of the passing over of the avenging angel. Along with Circumcision, Passover is divinely instituted as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. But God's people rebel in the wilderness journey toward the Promised Land. On the verge of crossing over, they express their unbelief in the promise and God bars that generation from entering his rest.

Joshua leads Israel into the Promised Land and God establishes in the earthly Jerusalem (City of Peace) a figure of "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). But even in this land of promise, Israel repeatedly turned to idols and to her own righteousness for salvation. Again and again, the church is threatened with extinction, either by internal apostasy or by external oppression, often the latter a divine punishment for the former. There is always a remnant, a true Israel, a faithful seed that still holds onto the promise and looks for redemption from Zion.

Finally, the Messiah arrives and is announced by John the Baptist as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He declares that the kingdom has come in his very person. He is the Second Adam who will fulfill the covenant of works, earning for us the right to eat from the Tree of Life. By fulfilling the covenant of works, we are able to receive eternal life in the covenant of grace. He is Abraham's son and so are all believers, Jew and Gentile together, one flock with one Shepherd. Now he replaces the Sacraments of Circumcision and Passover with Baptism and the Supper. This narrative summary does not require proof-texts, as it follows the familiar biblical story. We might only encounter strong objections when we reach that last claim: that our Lord replaced Circumcision and Passover with Baptism and the Supper. And yet, this is not only the most obvious interpretation of the events; the comparisons are drawn by the apostles themselves. Paul tells the Colossians, Greeks and Jews alike, "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" so far, so good. Instead of a physical circumcision done by human hands, New Testament believers are actually circumcised spiritually. Christ's circumcision counts as ours, as we are in him. Yes, but Paul has not finished his sentence: "...buried with him in baptism, in which you also

were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11). Paul does not merely link Circumcision (promise) to the New Birth (fulfillment), but to Baptism as its sign and seal. But Paul not only makes a correspondence between Circumcision and Baptism; he does the same with Passover and the Supper. “For indeed, Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast...” (1 Cor. 5:7-8). Later, he tells the Corinthians, “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:1-5). Peter, too, makes the parallel between the baptism through the Red Sea and New Testament Baptism (1 Pet. 3:21). But Paul’s remarks here are in the context also of his discussion of the Lord’s Supper. Far from marking a contrast between the Old and New Testaments, Paul insists that our Jewish brothers and sisters, when they drank from the rock in the wilderness (Ex. 17:5-7), were actually receiving Christ under the figure of a broken rock. To be guilty of the bread and the cup is equivalent, says Paul, to being guilty of Christ’s body and blood (1 Cor. 11:27): this underscores the relation of the sign to the thing signified. While the bread is not transformed into a physical body, nor the wine into blood, the sacramental union enables us to refer to the one as the other. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).

How seriously are we going to take these passages? I remember how foreign they were to me years ago and how suddenly they transformed my view of the Sacraments. How could I possibly have claimed to interpret the Bible according to its ordinary, literal sense, and end up with a rationalistic and spiritualistic understanding? It was a classic case of assuming a perspective and expecting the Bible to conform to it, and here, I submit, is an example of how easy it is for us to evade Scripture even if we claim to practice a straightforward hermeneutic.

Eugene Osterhaven notes, “Within Protestantism there were those who saw Baptism as little more than a badge indicating belief or sign of the covenant. But most Reformed people, including the Church of England, believed that Baptism was a real means of grace with multiple significance: the acknowledgment of sin, of cleansing through Christ, union with Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Baptism as a sign of covenantal status.” Calvin observed that in Scripture Baptism is “a token and proof of our cleansing” and “in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts” (Institutes 4.15.2). In drawing the parallel with Circumcision,

Calvin emphasized the covenantal status of children of believers. They receive Baptism not in order to be made worthy of the kingdom, but because they are already the seed of the Lord. In other words, as Isaac was a child of promise at birth, Baptism does not make children Christians, but seals them in the covenant to which they are already entitled by Christ's mediatorial work. "Through baptism, believers are assured that this condemnation has been removed and withdrawn from them" (Institutes 4.15.10).

Parents are given confidence in God's promise to their children "because they see with their very eyes the covenant of the Lord engraved upon the bodies of their children...Finally, we ought to be greatly afraid of that threat, that God will wreak vengeance upon any man who disdains to mark his child with the symbol of the covenant; for by such contempt the proffered grace is refused, and, as it were, forsworn (Gen. 17:14)" (Institutes 4.16.9).

"But how (they ask) are infants, unendowed with knowledge of good or evil, regenerated? We reply that God's work, though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled" (Institutes 4.16.18). Rather than sharply dividing between an external and internal covenant of grace, as some have done in American theology, Calvin simply concludes that infants "receive now some part of that grace which in a little while they shall enjoy to the full" (Institutes 4.16.19). Of course, not every baptized infant is confirmed and not all confirmed members of the visible church exercise faith, which alone is the instrument of justification. But this was true in the old administration of the covenant of grace as well. Further, it is as true in bodies that do not practice infant Baptism, as not all baptized adults persevere to the end. Louis Berkhof treats the question of baptismal regeneration in his *Systematic Theology* (pp. 627 ff), providing a helpful summary of the various Reformed positions within the spectrum (p. 639). "Some would proceed on the assumption that all the children presented for baptism are regenerated, while others would assume this only in connection with the elect children," while still others regarded Baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant and differed somewhat on how to interpret that. He points out the Belgic Confession's comment: "Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when water is poured upon us, and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life" (Art. 34). Berkhof appeals to the Conclusions of Utrecht in 1908: "...Synod declares that, according to the confession of our Churches, the seed of the covenant must, in virtue of the promise of God, be presumed to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until, as they grow up, the contrary appears from their life or doctrine...." The Reformed tradition veers away from *ex opere operato* (again, the view that the application of water in Baptism necessarily effects regeneration) on the one hand and a mere symbolism on the other. In Baptism, God does

confer grace, special grace, not merely common grace, but its effect is often that of planting a seed that will grow, not creating a full-grown plant. “Not all who are descendants of Israel are Israel” (Rom. 9:6), so that apart from faith there is no regeneration even for the baptized any more than there was for the circumcised. And yet, this view also stands opposed to the other extreme, according to Berkhof: “Under the influence of Socinians, Arminians, Anabaptists, and Rationalists, it has become quite customary in many circles to deny that baptism is a seal of divine grace, and to regard it as a mere act of profession on the part of man.” This is calculated, of course, to make the point that those who hold this non-Reformed view within Reformed churches are keeping bad company.

The Lord’s Supper: The Sacrament of Communion

Called to belong to Christ, his Church is sustained along the way by that same Christ. Calvin borrowed from Augustine the reference to the Word preached as the *verbum audibile* (audible word) and the Sacraments as the *verbum visibile* (visible word). “For as in baptism,” he writes, “God, regenerating us, engrafts us into the society of his church and makes us his own by adoption, so we have said, that he discharges the function of a provident father in continually supplying to us the food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word” (Institutes 4.17.1).

If Baptism is seen as the announcement of our decision and testimony, the efficacy of the Lord’s Supper will also be found in our remembering and in our recommitment. I recall how, on those rare occasions in my youth when the bread and little plastic cups of grape juice were passed down the rows, my focus was on trying to make it really “work.” Was my self-examination real, or was my heart in it? The preacher tried to vividly portray the nails going into Christ’s wrists, but I still wasn’t sure how I was supposed to remember an event at which I was not present. Was I sad that Jesus died? And what if I had some unconfessed sin that I could not recall: that could make whatever was supposed to happen not happen, couldn’t it? It seemed that so much depended on the combined imaginations of the preacher and my own, along with the special music that accompanied the distribution. Was God doing anything at all?

I had, without malice but with plenty of ignorance, turned the Sacrament of Christ’s doing and dying into my sacrament of feeling and remembering. Why did I even need bread and grape juice to do that? After all, even as a youngster I knew it was pretty silly to go through all of this to provide an object lesson. And what of this warning about eating and drinking unworthily? I could not quite put my finger on what that meant, and since the pastor was fairly vague about it, too, my accusative conscience often made this a quasi-rededication ceremony. In other words, it was an act of

penance. Eating and drinking worthily required intense response, feeling sorry for Jesus and sorry for my sins. But was I sorry enough? If you can identify with these experiences, you will find the following words from Calvin concerning his experience of medieval practice intriguing:

Commonly, when they would prepare men to eat worthily, they have tortured and harassed pitiable consciences in dire ways; yet they have not brought forward a particle of what would be to the purpose. They said that those who were in state of grace ate worthily. Then they interpreted _in state of grace_ to mean to be pure and purged of all sin. Such a dogma would debar all the men who ever were or are on earth from the use of this Sacrament. For if it is a question of our seeking worthiness by ourselves, we are undone; only despair and deadly ruin remain to us...To heal this sore, they have devised a way of acquiring worthiness: that, examining ourselves to the best of our ability, and requiring ourselves to account for all our deeds, we expiate our unworthiness by contrition, confession, and satisfaction... On what ground are we confirmed in the assurance that those who have done their best have performed their duty before God? For by their immoderate harshness they deprive sinners, miserable and afflicted with trembling and grief, of the consolation of this Sacrament; yet here we have all the delights of the gospel set before us...Therefore, this is the worthiness...the best and only kind we can bring to God..to offer our vileness and our unworthiness to him so that in his mercy we may be taken as worthy; to despair in ourselves so that we may be lifted up by him; to accuse ourselves so that we may be justified by him (Institutes 4.17.42).

Even some Protestants, he said, put in the place of the worthiness of works the worthiness of their faith. This can be attained no more easily than perfect personal holiness in this life. "For it is a Sacrament ordained not for the perfect, but for the weak and feeble..." (Institutes 4.17.42).

The liberating news of Scripture is that even here, even now, God is acting for my salvation. Just as the Gospel is about God doing everything in Christ for my salvation, not giving me any place to boast, the Sacraments have the same message. It is because Christ is truly present in the Sacrament that I can turn from myself to the one outside of me. Although the signs (bread and wine) remain what they are, and Christ is received by faith and not by the mouth, the thing signified (Christ and his benefits) is so united to these earthly elements by Word and Spirit that I can raise my eyes to heaven and receive the food and drink of eternal life.

Reformed people are sometimes unfairly regarded by Lutherans as holding that Christ is only spiritually present in the Supper. But in fact, the confessional Reformed position is that Christ is physically present in the

Supper, at the right hand of God in his ascended body. Who are we to pull Christ down or, by an act of will, climb up to him? This is Paul's rhetorical question in Romans 10. For Christ is brought near to us by the preached Word, he says, although Paul surely did not believe that he was brought bodily to us in the sermon. Instead, the Reformed maintain that the Holy Spirit, in this Sacrament, raises us to Christ where, mysteriously, we feed on his true body and blood. It is not a spiritual or symbolic presence of Christ, as if he were only spirit and no longer flesh, but the manner of eating is spiritual rather than physical. This is a key difference from the caricature. It is the mode, not the substance, that is spiritual.

It was Zwingli, however, who advocated the view that is often taken for the Reformed position. Allowing merely for a spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, Zwingli denied that Christ is present in his human as well as in his divine nature, and this was repudiated by Calvin (and even by Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger), and by all the standard Reformed and Presbyterian confessions. It is a real presence of Christ, according to both natures, but the mode of the eating is by faith and not by physical eating. The Zwinglian view is not on the spectrum of possibilities within a Reformed confession. And yet, neither is the Lutheran view acceptable to the Reformed, although Calvin did sign the unaltered Augsburg Confession. As Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629) expressed it, "It is one thing to say that Christ is present in the bread, and quite another to say that he is present in the holy supper." It is not that Christ is only present in the Supper according to his divine omnipresence, but that he is truly and really present according to both natures (even physically present) in the Supper, but not in the bread.

Because of its importance, said Wollebius, "The holy supper ought to be observed often." As is often noted these days, Calvin argued that the Supper should be observed whenever the Word is preached, but at least weekly. It is delightful, surely not for that reason alone, that many Reformed and Presbyterian churches are restoring this practice.

Lift Up Your Hearts

Historically, the Reformed have emphasized this line in the ancient liturgy of the Eucharist, the so-called *sursum corda*. It is the invitation to be lifted mystically into the presence of our faithful heavenly Shepherd. We have touched briefly on the eschatological thrust of the Sacraments in Scripture, and will conclude here with these thoughts. In Baptism, we have been swept into the new creation and in the Supper we are actually fed with the body and blood of Christ as pilgrims on the way to the Promised Land, and yet, by promise already living there. How all of this actually happens, we cannot say exactly. Like the man born blind, we can only exclaim, "I once

was blind, but now I see.” In this inner sanctuary of the Triune God, the Holy One whose mere voice sent terror into Israel’s bones clothes himself in humility, as he did two thousand years ago. Then as now, the unclothed God would destroy us, but he has become flesh of our flesh. And even though he is ascended, to return physically in glory at the end of the age, he invites us now to come boldly into his Most Holy Place through his body and blood, the Temple’s torn curtain.

Believing sinner, behold, Eden’s Tree of Life, Noah’s Rainbow, the divine Flame walking alone between the sacrifice’s severed halves, Abraham’s Circumcision, the blood on the doorpost, the true Israel’s Pillar of Cloud by day and Fire by night, the water and blood flowing from the Messiah’s side!

Perhaps you have heard in God’s Word marvelous things, but you still doubt whether all of this was done not just for others, but for you. So God has placed his gift not only in your ears, but on your head and in your hands. “Oh, taste, and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps. 34:8).

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