

EDITORIAL: A PLEA FOR THE RECOVERY OF THE SACRAMENTS

WITHIN OUR North American ecclesiastical context, particularly within the context of the evangelical Protestant church, the sacraments do not rank high in the order of important theological topics. Church growth, gender roles, and certain forms of ecumenicity, as witnessed by “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” have captured the attention of most evangelicals. The doctrine of the sacraments, as hammered out by the Reformation, once the subject of intense debate and scrutiny, is mostly met with a yawn today. Other than the continuing polemics regarding infant baptism, little attention is given to this subject. While there is a vigorous discussion of sacraments within Roman Catholic theology, the evangelical church seems mostly bored with the controversies of the past. There seems to be little interest in reinvigorating those controversies through fresh discussion. Indeed, why bother? Among many evangelicals a doctrine of the sacraments does not exist in any case?

Meanwhile, some evangelicals are abandoning the ranks in favor of Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy—perhaps in part because of the sacramental theology that pulses through those ecclesiastical bodies. We are left to query: What about the sacramental character of Reformed theology? Has it been forgotten? Why is Calvin’s sacramental doctrine unknown by many within the ranks of Reformed theology, or simply misapprehended? Why, among so many Reformed and Presbyterian churches, is the divine promise of baptism emptied of its meaningful and comforting content? Similarly, why is the Lord’s Supper regarded as “nice but not necessary,” while the “altar call” is reckoned as non-negotiable and indispensable?

What accounts for this disregard for sacraments? Could it be that a certain species of Pietism, slipping into individualism or a doctrine of the individual believer's direct communion with the Holy Spirit, has come to infect Reformed ecclesiology and its doctrine of the sacraments? I believe that Reformed and Presbyterian churches today are showing symptoms of such Pietism.

Pastors and scholars must be urged to reflect upon the doctrine of the sacraments in connection with the doctrine of the church, for the two belong together. Indeed, if the academy and churches of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions are to regain a reformational understanding of the sacraments, our ecclesiology must change, which is to say, we must recapture the ecclesiology of the Reformed confessions.

Historically and traditionally, the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments has been very much interwoven with the doctrine of the church. The Reformed wished to avoid two errors—sacerdotalism on the one hand, which introduces the notion that the church dispenses grace through divine office; and the conception of Pietism on the other, which makes the church a free association of individuals with a common interest. As the church confronted the issue of “means of grace,” preaching as well as sacraments, she confronted fundamental conceptions regarding how salvation is imparted to God's people. This is still true.

Incarnation as the Culmination of God's Actions in History. If one conceives of the Christian faith subjectively, viewing Christianity as some sort of construct of the human mind, a conjecture about God and religion derived from inner-longings and given shape by reason, so that theology is fundamentally anthropology, that will produce a very different religion than the objective and historical character which are essential to the Christian faith. For Christianity is not human invention; rather, it is the result of divine action, the consequence of God's redemptive labors in human history, which are apprehended by faith. In other words, the supernatural has made itself manifest in the mundane world of daily living, culminating in the saving (God-in-the-flesh) action

of Jesus Christ at Golgotha. Christianity is born of divine revelation, which, in the very nature of the case, is a feat of God.

The Holy Spirit is the chief agent who acts to convey this revelation to the human heart. But God does not address human hearts immediately and haphazardly, as spiritualists and fanatics zealously imagine. Such is, in fact, magic and produces paganism, not Christianity. No, God conveys the supernatural through objective means, with the subjective apprehension of such following upon the proper use of these means.

The Incarnation of Christ, inclusive of *all* his saving work, is God's supreme and definitive act of revelation—God in the flesh, God with us. Christ's work is objective and historical. It is also therefore gospel, undergirding the message of salvation to lost sinners and shaping their own subjective apprehension of this gospel in their lives. However, if Christ remains outside of us, as Calvin observes, his benefits are of no use to us. We must be brought into union with Christ. The gospel of incarnation—and all Christ's saving actions—is thus real, not simply theoretical or imaginary or self-produced. The very objectivity of Christ's incarnational work means that it has irrevocably become a part of human history.

The implications of this are profound: God's salvific actions continue not just as a "memory" of his past wonders and accomplishments but as his abiding way of achieving his saving purpose. This means that although the gospel is supernatural, the supernatural has now attached itself to the natural. The gospel is therefore historical, concrete. It is not a phantom, an indefinite something, a fictitious projection created out of the human heart.

The Doctrine of the Church in the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed accents the gospel's historical character—all focused according to a trinitarian formula in Jesus Christ and his acts in human history. Due to the objective and historical character of the Christian faith, of God acting mightily in human history, we discover that the grace flowing from Christ is not unmediated. Christ works through means. Accordingly, grace cannot be individualized or subjectivized. On the contrary, Christ dispenses his saving grace through the channels that he himself was pleased

to establish—that is, he works saving grace by the Holy Spirit through the church, which is his body. Thus the Apostles' Creed, in reminding us of the Triune God, of the centrality of Christ's saving acts, and of the application or impartation of salvation through the Holy Spirit, includes a confession about the one holy catholic church. This article about the church is easily missed, or at least easily misunderstood. Its presence in the third section on the Holy Spirit is deliberate and formative. We believe *the church* is part of God's saving work in history. *The church* is taken up into the divine program of Christ's continuing operations to save and to bless, to announce the way of salvation and to make his voice heard to rebel souls. Christ yet labors concretely and historically. This article in the Creed shows us that Christ is not retired. By the Holy Spirit, *through the church*, he continues *his work* in the world.

We must affirm this, otherwise we place Christ on the shelf, so to speak, and the Holy Spirit acquires a role independent of him. The objective dimension of the gospel is forfeited and the historical foundation of salvation is replaced with mysticism and spiritualism. The church becomes unnecessary, since what counts is the individual's encounter with the Spirit of God. In other words, the article about the church shows us that Christ continues his redemptive project not willy-nilly, not without objective means, not in an unmediated manner, and not according to human subjectivity, but according to the means ordained by Christ through his church.

This is a necessary postulate of the Christian faith—itsself an article of faith. It stands there in the Creed. To be sure, it has its mysterious and incomprehensible side. We do not confess the church because of empirical data. Rather, we believe the church because of divine revelation. We therefore confess that we cannot get along without the church. In our conception of Christianity as pointing to the real, objective, historical labors of Christ in his threefold office as the Mediator, we do not retreat from the real and the objective and the historical when it comes to the appropriation of salvation and the Spirit's illuminating and renovative action. This is to say: we want nothing to do with a

notion of salvation that bypasses “objective means.” We want nothing to do with subjectivism, with magic, with an anti-ecclesiastical doctrine of redemption, for the saving work of Christ—his own birth, death, and resurrection being historical—carries itself forward in the same way. There is (ordinarily) no salvation *outside the church*. The church is the vehicle of communion with Christ, not a vehicle of *mediation*, as with Rome, but a *medium* of communication. Christ addresses us and communes with us through the Word proclaimed by the church and through the sacraments administered by the church.

This medium therefore may not be ignored, bypassed, or superceded in favor of an unmediated working or imparting of salvation, wherein the question of salvation is reduced ultimately to private negotiations between God and the individual. Such a conception, finding its roots in Anabaptism and Pietism, now cut off from its historical roots in our modern setting, has spread its poison throughout North America and constitutes the everyman’s religion of our times. Who needs the church in such a conception? How can the use of “official means” have a place in such a scheme? The church, accordingly, and the use of official means as well, may be jettisoned without loss. Indeed, who needs sacraments?

However, when the importance of the church is brought back into proper theological focus, we arrive at a true conception of “means of grace.” In seeing that God acts through human agency, we recapture the sacramental character of Word and sacraments. Likewise we recognize anew the continuity between Christ’s saving work in human history and the Holy Spirit’s continuing operations of imparting the benefits of Christ. The supernatural and natural find an objective point of contact, if you will.

Thus Word and sacrament cannot possibly be regarded as merely outward instruments, for the Holy Spirit does not divorce himself from these means. Rather, he attaches himself to them according to the command of Christ. Sacraments are therefore not merely outward signs of the realities they represent (they are *that* but not *only* that!). They are also, along the way of faith, seals

of these realities. They are visible signs and *seals* of an invisible grace. Thus the visible and the invisible are distinguishable but not properly separable. They are joined together by the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that through possessing the one we come to possess the other. Truly—spiritually—with faith, the presence of the visible entails the presence of the invisible.

The Theological Legacy of Pietism. Over against the Apostles' Creed and the heritage of classic Reformed theology, the theology of Pietism has left us a different theological legacy. Pietism subjectivizes the Christian faith, finding its focus in an anthropocentric direction, wherein the human mind and heart become pivot points, feelings and notions become as important as redemptive facts or more important than redemptive facts. Rational abstractions serve as “things” which stir the emotions; human recollections of the mind become objects of faith. In this scheme no account is made of “the means of grace,” the divinely appointed channels to impart blessing, for each and every individual must seek a personal, face to face, encounter with God in ways that are neither predicable nor prescribable. The individual experiences fellowship with God apart from and without the use of designated “means.”

Pietism proudly trumpets Christ alone, finding church and outward forms as obstacles or hindrances of true religion. Sacraments likewise are just outward shells, lacking the kernel as such. Therefore Pietism denounces anything that smacks of sacerdotalism and externalism. But this is a tired tune—as tired as the Gnostic and Montanist heresies in the days of Tertullian. John (1 John 4:1-3) bids us to test the spirits, to apply the incarnation-test to those who would preach Christ (indeed, don't all heresies preach Christ?) but give us a phantom-Christ instead. Thus we face a question: Does the divine enter human history only for a season? In other words, did Christ's incarnation amount to a lightning strike, a flash across the sky, entering human history for a moment? Has it now passed away, vanished, with only the “memory” of the moment? Is Christ, then, now retired, unencumbered with flesh-and-blood? Does the divine no longer touch human life through objective means? Or: Is Christ,

by his Spirit, yet manifest? Does he not instead touch us with his presence by Word and sacrament—really and spiritually through these objective means? Indeed, dare we preach a Christ who is a creature of our own subjective thinking—who no more *in reality* enters into human history by objective means? Such a Christ is not the historical Christ of the gospel.

Pietism, by despising the objective and the external, by wishing—*rightly*—to slay sacerdotalism and dead orthodoxy, falls into its own set of errors, giving us a religion of the human soul and little more. The experience of the human heart becomes the litmus test of true religion (“you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart”). A religion with such a center would have us feed on the changing winds of our own feelings—of faith and failure, victory and vice. Consequently, we ever oscillate between feelings of “yes-I-can” and “why can’t I?”. Assurance and doubt are both self-produced. But how often doesn’t the “O miserable, hopeless lost cause that is me” prevail in this interplay? We thus ever try to refresh and quench our parched souls with a “spirituality” we have produced ourselves, instead of looking to the tangible promises of God in Word and sacrament.

This is the great congenital flaw of Pietism—and of course Pietism infects all strands of evangelical religion. In its rationalized form it manifests itself in Liberalism. It has penetrated the religious psyche of church-going and secular America. The consequences of this flaw are grave, for when God’s saving action is not sought in and through the appointed means God himself has established to impart his saving grace, we appoint or invent our own means to serve this purpose. This means that the church’s official administration of Word and sacrament is exchanged for a self-induced spirituality. We can express it this way: when the abiding, historical, and objective work of the risen Savior is divorced from the ministry of the church, there can be no unwavering grasp of the divine program to save fallen people today.

Salvation, according to the Spirit’s internal work in our lives, is never apart from external means. Therefore, in this union of supernatural and natural, the spiritual presence of Christ is

abiding. And we can seek Christ in his Word; we ourselves are found in Christ in baptism; indeed, we can commune with Christ in his Supper. Christ is not far from us, but near. He is not a phantom, but he is concretely, by the Holy Spirit, addressing us, washing and feeding us with himself. We do not need to conjure him up by means of our own subjective feelings—that is, by working ourselves up into a spiritual rapture of joy (repeated mantras, tongues, extended meditation, etc.). He is ever near his people—as near as Word and sacrament.

Pietism thus struggles with the notion of sacraments, for at root Pietism is anti-ecclesiastical. It has no appetite for a doctrine of the church as an article of faith. The words of the Apostles' Creed regarding the church, wherein it functions as the official organ through which Christ works in the world and the medium that communicates his presence, being the outward instrument, is as alien to Pietism as it is normative for the reformation. For Pietism, the church, conceived as an external instrument of salvation, elicits feelings of revulsion and contempt. The consequences are inevitable. Divine offices are unnecessary and unwanted, for every believer is a preacher as fully as the ecclesiastically ordained servant is. Sacraments are, as such, Romish and to be abominated. Water and wine have nothing to do with our salvation and sanctification. At best they function as *signs* to point believers to the gospel of grace. In no wise are they *seals of grace present*. The church is preeminently a human society. What is deemed *necessary* for the believer's wellbeing is not the church and its ministry but private Bible meditation and prayer. Although it would not be wise to withdraw from fellow believers, and there are even certain benefits from associating with a gathering of likeminded partisans, the one thing indispensable for the believer to grow in grace is private devotions. For radical Pietists, the directive role of the Bible is lost in these private exercises.

It is not surprising, then, that church discipline loses its place as well. Church discipline is merely an external affair, a human act prone to error and afflicted with “planks in the eye.” What the church has to say about one's spiritual status and communion

with Christ is not reality, as such, for only God can excommunicate the sinner, and of course that does not take place via the medium of the church. Instead, the sinner—individually and independently—negotiates and settles things between God and self with regard to his or her salvation.

Baptism, according to the Pietist scheme, functions as the public testimony believers make to the world (and to themselves) that they are born again. It symbolizes one's regeneration and serves as an unmistakable witness to one's conversion. This ordinance is practiced not because *God* does any thing by means of it. No. It is practiced because Christ commands us to practice it; that's all. The Lord's Supper serves as a reminder that the Lord is present and available to lost sinners. Its benefit may be likened to the blessing of a sermon, which likewise is not a vehicle of grace per se, but affords believers the opportunity to use the sermon in a way that is beneficial to them.

The Legacy of Sacerdotalism. If Pietism is an error on one end of the spectrum, then sacerdotalism is the error at the other extreme. According to Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, the word *sacerdotalism* did not appear in the English language till the middle of the nineteenth century. It has been used in both a positive and negative sense. The Reformed have used the term consistently in the negative sense as describing churches that so identify the *outward* ministry of the church through its officially ordained servants with the *inward* working of God in the operation of salvation as to transfer God's agency and operations of salvation to the church and its ordained priesthood. In fact, the powers of Christ are conceived as being transferred to the human instrument in such a way that the Holy Spirit is no longer understood to be the agent of salvation but is displaced by the church. Thus "the means" possess a power within themselves, such that grace is automatically conveyed through the exercise of the means. Sacerdotalism views the ecclesiastical ministry in dispensing sacramental graces as imparting grace through the act itself. In other words, through the deed done—*ex opere operato*—grace is conveyed to sinners.

In line with this, in sacerdotalism the ordained servant is lifted to a mediatorial role. Within sacerdotalism the church is not merely a medium and a secondary, outward agent; the church attains a genuine saving role. Thus human agency manifests itself within sacerdotalism at a different level than in the Reformed conception.

In opposing sacerdotalism, some Reformed writers have spoken of it in such a way as to suggest that human agency of any kind is an unwanted and harmful intrusion into the divine work of salvation. B. B. Warfield (*The Plan of Salvation*), for example, writes that God, in working salvation, operates upon the human soul directly, without instrumentalities—that is, immediately, without the mediation of the church. This is true in the sense that the Holy Spirit is the true author of faith. His remark, however, requires more nuance and distinction, otherwise we must jettison the whole notion of “means of grace.” I don’t believe Warfield intends such an inference, however. To affirm that God employs the Word and sacraments as *means of grace* in order to perform his salvific work in human lives, is to affirm the necessity of human agency of some sort, to some degree, in this work. Of course, God could act directly or use angels as his instruments. The New Testament witness is clear, however, about the role the church plays in making disciples of the nations and teaching those disciples to obey all that Christ has commanded.

Again, the Holy Spirit is the author of faith. However, in doing his mighty and mysterious work of saving and sanctifying human lives, he employs as the visible, outward instrument the church through the ministry of Word and sacrament. Warfield appropriately notes that sacerdotalism falsely conceives of the church as Jesus Christ himself in his earthly form. In this way the church is substituted for him as the proximate object of the faith of Christians. This helps us come to clarity regarding the Reformed conception of the means of grace and the perversion of sacerdotalism. Warfield wishes to make clear that it is Jesus Christ who saves sinners, not the church. Sacerdotalism views the ordained priesthood as acting in the name of God and clothed with the powers of Christ. Consequently, sinners look for their

salvation not merely through the ministry of the church and within the circle of fellowship of the church, but in the church itself. In other words, sacerdotalism identifies Christ and the church. Christ is the church. The church is Christ.

When we conceive of the mode of the divine operation in working salvation in human hearts and lives, we must be careful not to intrude a human element that becomes *decisive* for the *effectual* operation of salvation. In arguing for the instrumentality of the church and the means of grace in the work of salvation, we do not conceive of that instrumentality as functioning apart from the Spirit's freedom, the call to faith, and certainly not as the determining factor in salvation. The Reformation in all its parts—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist—raised its passionate protest against this sacerdotal error. However, here we must proceed with care. On one level we wish to affirm that salvation is not dependent upon human instrumentality—as though the Lord's grace must ride the chariot of Word and sacrament—confined by, chained to, and dependent upon human achievement. On another level, we must insist that this chariot is indispensable by reason of divine appointment. Whereas human agency is not decisive for the *effectual* operation or conveyance of divine grace, it is God's appointed means without which the ordinary efficacious operations of the Holy Spirit may not be expected. Thus we are taught to look to the official ministry of the church in its exercise of the means of grace as the indispensable means for the Holy Spirit to perform his blessed, saving work. Consequently, on one level human instrumentality must be safeguarded and affirmed. On another level it must be distinguished from the divine work of salvation in the sinner's heart.

We oppose therefore two errors: the Spiritualists who minimize and denigrate the role of Word and sacrament, thereby severing God's gracious action from the external means; and the Sacerdotalists who so exalt sacrament and the church's agency that they thereby confuse God's gracious action with the external means themselves. The first error denies the necessity of the church in its exercise of external means as God's chosen

instrument to effect his saving blessing; the second error turns the external means themselves—the church and officiant—into the subject of the action of grace.

As an addendum, we note that Calvin, for his part, was not at all squeamish about accenting the role of human agency. He was insistent, however, that Christ's honor not be transferred to the human agent. Likewise, even when he identified the human agent with the divine agent in the work of redemption—in the act of preaching, for example—he insisted that the glory belongs to God, for the preacher remains an instrument of God.

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If the reformational doctrine of the sacraments is to be recovered by Reformed and Presbyterian churches today, those churches will need to reconsider their own confessional documents and reflect anew on the Scriptures. This issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* seeks to encourage such a recovery by following up last year's volume on preaching with a theme issue on "The Sacraments."

This volume opens with an article by Cornelis Venema on the doctrine of the sacraments as articulated and stipulated in the Reformed confessions. This article is a continuation of his examination and explication of the Reformed Confessions on Word and Sacrament (for his article on the doctrine of preaching in the Reformed confessions, see *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 [1999].) His analysis of the nature of the sacraments, and of baptism in particular, is a helpful reminder to the churches of the Reformed tradition of their confessional heritage and the rich theology of the sacraments that once prevailed as a consensus among Reformed and Presbyterian churches. While Venema urges readers to read the confessions, if not his article, I would implore readers not to overlook Venema's synthetic analysis of the confessions, a most helpful corrective to the current sacramental anemia afflicting the church.

C. Trimp offers a fresh biblical analysis of the doctrine of the sacraments in general and of baptism in particular. This material, translated by Nelson Kloosterman, responds to contemporary

polemics against the Reformed doctrine of baptism. Sadly, the baptism of infants remains a point of sharp contention and division in the church. Trimp returns to the biblical materials and offers a helpful analysis of, among other things, the divine character of baptism as the work of God, the Christocentric nature of baptism, its institution by Christ, and the nature of the covenant in relationship to baptism. This material comes from his book *Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal* (*Word, Water, and Wine: Reflections on Preaching, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper*).

Michael Horton offers us an article urging more frequent, preferably “weekly,” celebration of the Lord’s Supper. He demonstrates how one’s theology of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper shapes its use, contrasting Zwingli’s conception with that of Calvin. He also interacts with some nineteenth-century Presbyterian notions of the Supper. Horton concludes his article with a brief exegetical defense of the frequent use of this sacrament.

The article by Peter Wallace delves into the heated nineteenth-century controversy between John Williamson Nevin of Mercerberg and Charles Hodge of Princeton. Although Nevin’s analysis of Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord Supper is highly regarded by many scholars, his own theology of the sacrament is another matter. Hodge, for his part, was not without foibles of his own, and in this debate did not show himself to be Nevin’s equal in historical theology. Wallace’s article demonstrates how philosophical commitments shape our very forms of thought, constraining us to see matters in a particular way. Wallace gives us a fine piece of historical scholarship. In this debate, we discover how subtle shifts in doctrine can creep into even a highly regarded confessional tradition.

This issue of the journal also contains a selection of book reviews devoted to the subject of baptism.

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Space-limitations necessitate that we divide this theme issue on the Sacraments into two parts. With this issue (Volume 11,

2000) we take up “Part 1.” Our aim is to publish “Part 2” as Volume 12, 2001. That next issue will, like the present one, include articles on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, with book reviews focused primarily upon the Lord’s Supper.

Finally, my apologies to John R. Sittema, whom I failed to include in the list of contributors to our last issue. Dr. Sittema is the pastor of the Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Dallas, Texas.

—J. Mark Beach