

SACRAMENTS, THE SPIRIT, AND HUMAN INABILITY

by Alan D. Strange

Introduction

TO ARGUE FOR the recovery of a high view of the sacraments, as is done in the current and previous issue of this journal, is not in any way to diminish the place of preaching as the primary means of grace: The preaching of the Word remains central in the life and worship of the church. The affirmation of the centrality of preaching, however, does not necessitate the devaluation of the sacraments. It has always been the contention of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches that the right administration of the sacraments is to be closely allied, indeed inseparably linked, to the pure preaching of the Word. Therefore, it is erroneous to think that a high view of the sacraments entails a low view of preaching. In fact, it is a false dichotomy to insist on a high view of preaching to the detriment of the sacraments or a high view of the sacraments to the detriment of preaching, though in practice this is often done. Some evangelicals have emphasized preaching to the point of minimizing the sacraments, even as the Roman Catholic Church has tended to exalt—even idolize—the sacraments.

In this essay, having earlier affirmed the centrality of preaching, I would criticize both of these errors and call for a vigorous affirmation of the sacraments in the life of the church.¹

¹Alan D. Strange, "Comments on the Centrality of Preaching," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 185-238.

Furthermore, I will argue that the justification for both a high view of preaching and a high view of the sacraments is simply that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use both of these means to communicate the grace of God to fallen human beings. I contend that God's people, being the sinners that they are, need to receive all the grace that God is pleased to offer. Since he offers grace to his people both in Word and Sacrament, God's covenant people should be eager to receive his grace by both of these means. I will argue in this essay that it is crucial for us to recognize that the power making effectual each and every means of grace is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Word is impotent and likewise the administration of the sacraments. To put it another way, God ordinarily communicates his grace to his covenant people by the Holy Spirit's blessing of the Word and sacrament.² A powerful Spirit-filled proclamation of the Word of God will revive and reform the church. Similarly, a powerful Spirit-filled administration of the sacraments accompanying that proclamation will be an important part of such revival and reformation.

Closely linked to the Reformed understanding that the sacraments are effectual means of grace only by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is the assertion of human inability apart from the grace of God. Thus in this article, I will argue not only for a high view of the sacraments (over against some evangelical low views and Rome's idolatrous view) but also for the vigorous affirmation that the Spirit alone makes effectual the means of grace and that the flesh profits nothing, i.e., that any human "contribution" is the confession of human inability. Only when sinners confess their inability do they experience the enabling power of God by the Holy Spirit. I am concerned then to argue against the Roman position that grace is conferred in the

²J. Mark Beach has a fine brief discussion of what he calls the legacies of Pietism and sacerdotalism in his "Editorial: A Plea for the Recovery of the Sacraments," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 12-18, expressing in different language with some different emphases many of the concerns of this article, calling for the rejection of sacerdotalism and the embracing of a high view of the sacraments as means of grace.

sacraments by the power of the sacraments themselves and against the teaching of Rome that man can of his own power merit the grace of God in any degree. But I also seek to argue against the errors among some who are Reformed that God's grace is in any sense automatic and therefore not utterly dependent upon a sovereign God and that humans by any merit of their own induce and attract the grace of God. The Holy Spirit alone empowers the means of grace, in this case—the sacraments; and humans do not receive grace because of any ability on their part to elicit it from God. This is the burden of this article.

The Evangelical Devaluation of the Sacraments

Sadly, all too few in evangelical and even Reformed churches today see the need for a vigorous affirmation of the sacraments as means of grace.³ To be sure, evangelical congregants regularly bemoan the lack of true spirituality in the church. They sense that worship and body-life is dull, perhaps dead, and lacking in spiritual vitality. But the solution that is offered for the spiritual drought that afflicts the church is often more of the same—more drama, more dance, and more entertainment. What is needed, however, is not more of what ails us. Our disease is sin, rebellion against God and his Word, resulting in a lack of vital communion with God and God's people. We are spiritually moribund because of our sin and unbelief. We do not need to be amused; rather, we need to be revived. What is needed is what God has prescribed as the cure for sin: his grace that is greater than our sin. And God would give us that grace through not only the Word but also through the sacraments.

Much of what passes for an “exciting” worship experience in many congregations is just the world's way of seeking fulfillment—albeit a decade later and done only half as well—

³There are exceptions, however, as seen in recent articles in periodicals such as *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, published by the Committee on Christian Education for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and *Modern Reformation*, published by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

with a little holy water thrown on to sanctify what is essentially of the flesh. Yes, we do need real communion with our God and with each other as members of his mystical body and this is precisely what the sacraments are calculated to secure. It is only in the Spirit-empowered administration of the sacraments (together with the ministry of the Word) that we discover that for which our thirsty souls long.

Many partisans of the “church growth” movement, or advocates of “seeker-sensitive” worship not only clamor after more entertainment but find the sacraments, in comparison to the church’s rock band, boring and uninteresting.⁴ Certainly many ministers in their administration of the sacraments have failed to bring out their rich spiritual implications so that the sacraments have seemed little more than bare memorials to soporific worshippers. In that respect, many congregations, because they have such a low view of the sacraments, do not know what they are missing in their continual neglect and devaluation of the sacraments. The sacraments are God’s appointed means to testify of his love to his people, proclaiming his love not only to our

⁴I would also note that insofar as the Table of the Lord is fenced in the administration of the sacrament of Holy Communion, there is necessarily an exclusionary element about it: only those who meet the biblical qualifications are to partake of the Holy Supper. Such a notion directly militates against the “seeker-sensitive” model which is in every way inclusionary and calculated to make all comers comfortable. To suggest that there are some present who perhaps should not come to the Table flies in the face of everything that such a movement represents. This allowance of the comfort-level of non-members to be determinative of our worship is certainly a far cry from the early church in which all but communicants were dismissed (coming to a head in the Middle Ages with the *ita missa* dismissal of those not communing by the priest). Certainly we want to welcome all true confessors to the Lord’s Table, yet we should not desist from communion or frequent communion because those who came to the tent meeting might feel excluded in the worship service, a practice that came to dominate during the latter part of the Second Great Awakening. Cf. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

hearing but to our touching, tasting, and smelling, even as a man who loves his wife not only tells her that but signifies and seals his love for her with a kiss.⁵ Even as some evangelicals devalue the sacraments as they clamor for contemporary substitutes, others, generally of the more conservative—and even Reformed—stripe, devalue the sacraments by an exclusive emphasis on preaching. Preaching is indeed central, but it is not the exclusive public means whereby God communicates his grace to us. He also communicates it to us in the sacraments that accompany the Word.

Iain Murray's recent book on contemporary evangelicalism well illustrates what damage has been done to a high view of the sacraments in recent years.⁶ Some evangelicals in the Church of England have moved in a more Anglo-Catholic direction since at least NEAC 1 (1967) and NEAC 2 (1977) and are willing to define as Christian all who are baptized members of the Anglican church.⁷ Murray sees this as problematic because it equates baptism with salvation. I, too, see it as problematic, though not in precisely the same way that Murray does. There is a real sense in which Christian baptism does define its recipients as belonging to Christ. But if one thus baptized never manifests the work of the Holy Spirit in his life and brings forth fruit befitting a Christian, he should not be kept in the fellowship of the church. Without real church discipline the sacraments are turned into empty signs.⁸

⁵See my "Baptism as a Seal," *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 21:7 (July/August 2000): 3-4.

⁶Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000).

⁷NEAC refers to the meetings of the National Evangelical Anglican Congresses in the United Kingdom. Murray argues, 79, *et passim*, that these gatherings reflected a shift from the earlier creedal commitments and soteriological emphases of the Evangelicals within the Anglican Church to one in which Evangelicals found common cause with Anglo-Catholics on the basis of ecclesiology: the doctrine of the church, in other words, became paramount, eclipsing the earlier Evangelical insistence that what made one a Christian was faith in the person and work of Christ.

⁸This is why the Reformers linked discipline to Word and Sacrament. Word and Sacrament without real discipline, which provides the accountability

Murray himself, though, in rightly rejecting the view of the sacraments of some Anglican evangelicals (that the sacraments confer grace virtually automatically), runs into an opposite extreme. He speaks highly, and properly, of a high view of preaching. But he does so in a way that leaves one with the impression that preaching is the only public means whereby the Holy Spirit communicates grace to God's people. In criticizing the "high view of sacraments" among Anglicans, it becomes clear that Murray has an altogether "low view of the sacraments." He places all of his eggs in the preaching basket.⁹ The Reformed confessions, however, remind us that both the Word and the sacraments are necessary.

For Murray, soteriology utterly eclipses ecclesiology and only the former retains importance. I would maintain, however, that soteriology is not to be divorced from ecclesiology. Salvation is by grace; and grace comes through means; and those means are committed to the church as an institution. And those public means include not only preaching as some evangelicals seem to indicate but also the sacraments. More than a few evangelicals, though, have a high view neither of preaching nor of the sacraments but clamor after the smoke and mirrors that sometime serve as ministry these days in an apparent attempt to render Hollywood as Holy-wood.

Rather than the thin gruel of worldly entertainment that some evangelical churches pass off as nourishment, though with a thin veneer of Christianity, we need the real solid food that God

that so many today recognize that we need, is ineffectual and serves to mock God and his grace. While Luther did affirm the *excommunicatio minor*, ecclesiastical discipline ultimately proved problematic in Lutheran lands. Cf. James Estes, "Johannes Brenz and the Problem of Ecclesiastical Discipline," *Church History*, 41 (Dec. 1972): 464-5. Martin Bucer and John Calvin gave larger roles to church discipline in their work than did Luther, with Bucer's emphasis exceeding Calvin's; see Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 80-1. See also Calvin's *Institutes*, IV. 12 and R. N. Caswell, "Calvin's View of Ecclesiastical Discipline," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 210.

⁹Murray, 272ff.

offers in the sacraments. And what we need is not the Word exclusively but also the sacraments with all they are calculated to impart.¹⁰ First we need to have all of our sins washed away, the very thing symbolized in baptism and sealed to God's people by the power of the Holy Spirit. We also need to be nurtured by God's Word and its proclamation so that in faith we can come to the Lord's Table and there commune with him and with each other as members of his mystical body. These are the pictures and the drama that God gives us in worship. We need no other pictures or drama to draw us up into the life of our Triune God. The Word and the sacraments are sufficient. In baptism God claims us as his own people. In the Lord's Supper we receive Christ and all his benefits, even as he freely gives himself to us. A real affirmation of the sacraments as means of grace highlights our utter dependence on God. We are as dependent on God for grace as a babe is dependent on its mother for milk. Being washed in baptism, we need the Word to instruct us in the way of faith and we need the Lord's Supper to feed and nurture our faith with Christ's body and blood.

Inasmuch as the sacraments spotlight our absolute and unqualified dependence on God for the salvation of our souls, they witness to the glorious truth that salvation is all of grace. Salvation is not in any sense about what we do, but about what the Triune God does: the Father in electing us, the Son in securing redemption for us, and the Holy Spirit in applying redemption to us.¹¹ Salvation is a divine gift from its initiation to its completion. The sacraments testify to that reality. We do not wash ourselves; rather, we are washed by another; we do not feed ourselves but we are fed by another. The sacraments, then, are not in the first instance about our faith but about God's grace. As

¹⁰Cf. B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). In my judgment, perhaps no theologian has more fully and correctly grasped what is offered to us in the Holy Supper than John Calvin. Gerrish insightfully elucidates Calvin's Eucharistic theology. See also Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953).

¹¹Alan D. Strange, "All of Grace," *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 22:7 (July 2001), 6-7.

such, they speak of the Holy Spirit's powerful work in us, even as they speak of our own fleshly inability.

The flesh, that is, our fallen and sinful human nature, profits nothing. Only the Spirit's working is profitable, as he (ordinarily) works blessing in us through established means. This defines the heart of Christian soteriology. God is able to save to the uttermost and sinners have no ability whatsoever to save themselves.¹² Any biblical doctrine of the sacraments must then have this at its core—God comes to helpless and hopeless sinners and does for them what they can never do for themselves. That is just what the sacraments signify and seal. Thus a genuine affirmation of the sacraments as means of grace speaks of God's ability to save sinners by the power of the Holy Spirit (seen in the washing of baptism and the nourishing of communion) and of sinners' inability to rescue themselves. Any teaching on the sacraments that departs from this does damage to what the Scriptures and confessions teach about the sacraments.

The Roman Catholic Over-Valuation of the Sacraments

The Roman Catholic Church departs from what the Scriptures and confessions teach about the sacraments, particularly running afoul of the reality that the sovereign Spirit must empower the sacraments and that we bring no spiritual ability to the sacraments but must come confessing, at every point, our native inability. Such an assertion is no surprise to those who affirm the Reformed confessions. Yet is important to distinguish clearly the Reformed conception of the sacraments from that of Rome, for the Reformed confessions and catechisms take pains to do this very thing.¹³ The Reformed

¹²This is the heart of the concern in the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort, with Article 3 particularly highlighting our inability and Articles 11 and 12 the utter necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in our regeneration/conversion.

¹³For a thorough treatment of the teaching of the Reformed Confessions

affirmation of the sacraments as means of grace is quite distinct from Rome's sacerdotalism. A high estimate of the sacraments does not entail cozying up to Rome.

Therefore, in distinguishing the Reformed confessional view of the sacraments from Rome's position, it is useful to examine what Rome actually teaches in this regard. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* has a full treatment of the sacraments, with an extended article on the "theology of the sacraments." That article opens with a brief definition of sacraments. Sacraments are "visible signs chosen by Christ to bring to mankind the grace of His paschal mystery."¹⁴ This definition recalls Augustine's classic definition of sacrament as a "sacred sign" (*sacrum signum*) and as "the seen form of unseen grace" (*invisibilis gratiae visibilis forma*).¹⁵

The emphasis on the "sign" function of the sacraments was the predominate model until overtaken in the Middle Ages by the doctrine of the sacraments as developed in the Schoolmen and the Medieval ecclesiastical councils.¹⁶ In Lombard's *Sentences*, in the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), and particularly in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the emphasis shifts from the sign function of the sacrament to the sacrament as producing grace. The notion that the sacrament causes grace is developed especially in the doctrine of transubstantiation—the teaching that a miracle occurs in the Eucharist so that the bread and wine, though retaining the accidents of bread and wine, become, in essence, the real, physical body and blood of Christ.¹⁷

on the sacraments, see the informative articles by Cornelis P. Venema, "The Doctrine of the Sacraments and Baptism according to the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 21-86 and "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (2001): 81-145.

¹⁴*The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, v. 12, 806.

¹⁵*De Civitate Dei*, X. 5 and *Ep.* 105, 3. 12.

¹⁶Richard McBrien, *Catholicism: New Edition* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 790. The sign function of the sacraments has again been gaining popularity within Roman Catholicism post-Vatican II.

¹⁷Many Protestants regard the doctrine of transubstantiation along with Rome's doctrine of the perpetual sacrifice of Christ in the Mass as Rome's chief Eucharistic errors. While I would agree that these are serious, egregious errors and merit extended consideration in their own right, in this essay, I have

The high water mark of sacramental theology is, of course, Trent. At Trent, transubstantiation is re-affirmed and the seven sacraments are said to be the New Law directly instituted by Christ and authorized by his Word. These are baptism (Matthew 28:18-20), Eucharist (Matthew 26:26), penance (John 20:21-23), matrimony (Matthew 19: 3-9), anointing of the sick (James 5:24-25), confirmation (Acts 2:42; 8:15; 19:6), and holy orders (John 20:21-2).¹⁸ The seven sacraments are seen as comprehensive of all of life, from the cradle to the grave, and are often grouped together as follows: the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist); the Sacraments of Healing (Penance and the Anointing of the Sick); and the Sacraments of Vocation and Commitment (Matrimony and Holy Orders).¹⁹

The Reformed and Roman Conceptions of the Sacraments Contrasted

Over against Rome, the Reformed have maintained that our Lord instituted only two ordinances: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The accent in Protestant theology is on repentance—not penance, which involves auricular confession and prescribed acts of contrition—as part of the ongoing activity of the believers, particularly as they hear the Word and examine themselves before and during the reception of Holy Communion. Confirmation is not a distinct ordinance but occurs in the initial owning of the covenant (public profession of faith) and in every renewal of the covenant (the Lord's Supper being the covenant renewal meal), as well as in the assurance administered by the Holy Spirit in all the means of grace. Anointing of the sick, or extreme unction, is simply allied to prayer and inasmuch as prayer is a means of grace, so is prayer for the sick. Marriage likewise is not a sacrament; it is rather a creation ordinance given to all

chosen to focus on the problem with the notion that the sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato*.

¹⁸Robert C. Broderick, ed. *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 534.

¹⁹McBrien, 805ff., 835 ff., and 851ff.

persons indiscriminately and not restricted to those in the covenant (though, of course, those in the covenant are to marry only others in the covenant). Holy orders, too, is not given to all Christians (as are the two legitimate ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and while ordination may be a means of grace, as a kind of specific authoritative benediction, it is not a sacrament.

Clearly, an obvious difference exists between a biblical and vigorous affirmation of the sacraments as means of grace and Rome’s sacerdotalism. The former recognizes only the two sacraments instituted by our Lord, while the latter adds five to that number. Beyond this, though, the differences between the Reformed high estimate of the sacraments and Roman sacerdotalism lies in the view of the Schoolmen that “the sacraments work by the working of the work” (*sacramenta operantur ex opere operato*).²⁰ Trent affirmed and strengthened this view of scholastic theology: “If anyone says that, through the sacraments of the new law, grace is not conferred by the working of the work [i.e., the performance of the sacramental action] itself, . . . : let him be anathema.”²¹ The notion that the sacraments are efficient “by the working of the work,” i.e., by the very act of administration, runs counter to the teaching of the Reformed confessions that grace is conferred by the sacraments “to whom it belongs,” i.e., the elect of God, to whom the Holy Spirit is pleased to grant irresistible grace.²²

Interestingly, Roman theologians regularly misrepresent the Protestant position on the sacraments. Ott writes that, for the

²⁰Quoted in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: Herder, 1958), 329. The sacraments have within themselves the power to produce grace in their recipients. This is *the* view of the sacraments in the Middle Ages.

²¹“*Si quis dixerit, per ipsa novae legis sacramenta ex opere operato non conferri gratiam . . . : anathema sit*”—from Trent, Session 7, First Decree on the Sacraments, Canon 8 in Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: Sheed and Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 685. Over against Rome’s *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments, *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXVII:3 maintains: “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them.”

²²We have already seen this in the Canons of Dort (Heads of Doctrine III/IV). See also *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXVIII:6.

Reformers, “the sacraments are not means whereby grace is conferred but means whereby faith and its consequences are stirred into action.”²³ Not so, as we have seen above. The Reformed Confessions teach that grace is conferred to the elect in the sacraments, though such conference is not tied necessarily to the time of the sacramental administration.²⁴ To be sure, faith, which is a gift of God’s grace by the Holy Spirit, must receive the grace offered in the sacrament. Rome, however, sees the sacrament as virtually automatic—certainly most of the Roman Catholic laity view it that way. For example, in opposition to the Reformers’ teaching of the necessity of faith to receive the grace of the sacraments, Trent declared: “If anyone says that the sacraments of the new law do not contain the grace that they signify; or do not confer that grace on those who place no obstacle in the way...: let him be anathema.”²⁵ Trent goes even further in its teaching that the sacraments confer grace immediately, “without the mediation of fiducial faith”: “If anyone says that grace is not given by sacraments of this kind always and to all, as far as depends on God...: let him be anathema.”²⁶ This is clearly a denial of the work of the sovereign Spirit who gives grace in the sacrament according to his good pleasure.

Here Rome’s problem comes into sharp focus. She makes an end of the sacrament itself, when, in fact, the sacrament is a means to an end: fellowship and communion with God and with God’s covenant people. The sacrament is a communication of God’s grace by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the mere administration of the sacrament. The elements used in the sacraments—water, bread, and wine—in and of themselves, apart from the Spirit’s blessing upon them, have no more efficacy than

²³Ott, 326.

²⁴While *WCF* XXVIII:6 affirms that grace “is not only offered, but ...conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such...as that grace belongeth,” it also stipulates that the conference of such grace is “not tied to that moment of time wherein [the sacrament] is administered.”

²⁵Tanner, 684. “*Si quis dixerit, sacramenta novae legis non continere gratiam, quam significant, aut gratiam ipsam, non ponentibus obicem, non conferre... anathema sit.*”

²⁶Tanner, 685. “*Si quis dixerit, non dari gratiam per huiusmodi sacramenta semper et omnibus, quantum est ex parte Dei...anathema sit.*”

does the reading or preaching of the Word apart from the Spirit's blessing. It is typical of fallen, sinful humans to seek some way to "get God in a headlock," to force his hand, to make him bestow his favor upon us by a kind of soteric calculus: If I do this (pray, chant the mantra, receive the sacrament, say the "magic word," sacrifice to the idol, etc.) God (or the gods) must, necessarily and ineluctably, grant me what I seek.

The Reformed doctrine of salvation, though, is not that we do something that forces (or even prompts) God to save us, but that he works his salvation in us according to his good pleasure. To say that God works by his sovereign Spirit according to his own good pleasure is not to say that God is arbitrary. Nor is it to say that God fails to work his grace through means. Rather, it is to affirm that God is faithful to his promises and grants his people grace through the means of grace. To put it another way, God is a covenant-keeping God. To say that God is covenant-keeping, however, does not mean that we bind God, as an *ex opere operato* approach seeks to do. On the contrary, God has bound himself to his people. Although he ordinarily works through the means of Word and sacrament, God remains "free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure" (WCF V. 3). Never can the means of grace be construed to be some form of leverage whereby God is bound automatically to give us grace. Thus, Rome's affirmation of an *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments amounts to a denial of the absolute necessity of the work of the Spirit, i.e., that the Spirit alone makes effectual the sacraments and that the sacraments have no efficacy in and of themselves.

Rome's sacramental theology must be understood in the light of Rome's overall soteriology. Rome does not believe that justification (that article upon which the church stands or falls; the very hinge of religion) involves God declaring a guilty sinner to be not guilty. The Reformers taught that justification was forensic, based not upon infused righteousness but upon the work of Christ in which his righteousness is imputed to the elect, even as the sin of the elect was imputed to Christ. Rome does not believe that "justification is an act of God's free grace unto

sinner, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone” (WLC 70). Instead, Rome believes that justification begins with the grace infused at baptism and that final justification occurs when and only when a person has become truly and personally righteous.²⁷ Thus justification is the end result of the process of sanctification and sanctification occurs as one partakes of the seven sacraments. In other words, when one is thoroughly sanctified (which process is ordinarily not complete until all the temporal penalty for sin is paid in purgatory), then, and only then, is one pronounced “not guilty,” i.e., justified by God.²⁸ The Reformers decried the teaching that sinners are justified on the basis of infused righteousness. Rather, they maintained that sinners are justified solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to them by faith alone (in the active and passive obedience of Christ).²⁹

Tied in with Rome’s conception of justification is its doctrine of merit, which runs directly counter to the reformational teaching of human inability. Rome teaches that fallen unregenerate man has the ability to attract the grace of God by the doing of deeds that are at least partially acceptable to God—congruent merit. Once we have received congruent grace for

²⁷*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 481ff.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 482-3. Article 1989: (Reaffirming Trent) “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.” And Article 1995: “Justification entails the sanctification of [man’s] whole being.”

²⁹The distinction between justification and sanctification is aptly summarized in LC 77: “Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that God in justification imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification his Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued: the one doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.”

“doing what we can”—though it may not be intrinsically meritorious—we are empowered to perform acts that are in themselves meritorious—condign merit.³⁰ This teaching on ability and merit runs directly counter to what is set forth in WCF XVI. 3-5, which teaches that the best works of the saints are in no sense meritorious. Rome is not incorrect that God requires merit, but the merit that he requires is perfect righteousness, which belongs to God’s people only because of the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to them. So over against Rome’s teaching that the sacraments ineluctably produce grace and that man can merit grace, the Reformers affirm that the Spirit alone empowers the sacraments and that sinners are, at every point, afflicted with inability. They have no others merits but the merits of their mediator, Jesus Christ, which are applied to them by the Holy Spirit.³¹

Protestant Expressions of *Ex Opere Operato* Conferrals of Grace and the Minimizing of Human Inability

The struggle against an *ex opere operato* bestowal of grace and a denial of inability (by the affirming of merit) is not confined to our opposition to Roman Catholic dogma. What is usually labeled as “Arminianism” likewise denies inability.³² This is seen in American church history in the contrast between the First and Second Great Awakenings. While the First Great Awakening affirmed the doctrine of human inability, the Second Great Awakening, particularly in its later “Finneyan” stage, attacked the doctrine of inability head-on.³³ Similarly, the Arminian evangelical

³⁰Ott, 264-9.

³¹A helpful discussion of “by whose merit are we saved?” is found in Lee Iron’s “Redefining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology,” in Howard Griffith and John R. Muether, eds., *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 253-269.

³²This is manifested in Articles III and IV of the Remonstrants.

³³This is the central point of Iain Murray’s *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994): the revival of the First Great Awakening gave way to the revivalism of the Second.

“altar call” may be as sacerdotal as any administration of the Eucharist in the Roman communion: the invitation to “come down the aisle” and “receive Jesus” may not be significantly different from the *ex opere operato* claim of the priest who bids communicants to come and receive Jesus in the element.

One might well argue that sinful flesh seems perpetually to seek some way to guarantee that one will “get God.” It also seeks some merit, some ability of its own. One might also conjecture that Reformed believers would be, more or less, immune from the tendency to secure grace by an *ex opere operato* action and from the propensity to earn merit with the aim of attracting God’s grace. But, of course, like all believers, they have sinful flesh that must be put to death.

Covenant theology, as we have already noted, is a hallmark of the Reformed approach.³⁴ Within the wider umbrella of covenant theology, however—or better, given certain misconceptions of covenant theology—the notion of *ex opere operato* looms nearby, threatening to undermine human dependence upon and trust in divine grace alone. This threat becomes a reality when the certainty of the promises of God are made dependent upon the contingency of human faithfulness. This misconceiving of covenant theology argues, for example, that when the spiritual head of a covenant home is faithful to God and his Word, the faithfulness of his wife and children is—in *ex opere operato* fashion—inevitable. This would mean in some fashion that it is the faithfulness of a man as husband and father that secures the eternal wellbeing of his family. The implication of this is that we

³⁴In recent years, there has been a good deal of attention given to the problem of continuity/discontinuity between Calvin and the Calvinists, with much of the attention centering on the question of whether Calvin was a covenantal theologian and if so what sort he was. While this discussion has occurred in many books and over the range of the periodical literature, the recent book by Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) is, in my estimation, definitive in its conclusion that Calvin was a theologian who employed the concept of covenant in a way that would be in keeping with the development of that concept in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, (see especially, 306-311).

are saved not because God is faithful and keeps covenant with us and our children but because we are faithful and keep covenant with God.³⁵

This is not, as much as it may seem initially, a faithful explication of covenant theology. The faithfulness of the spiritual head of the house does not guarantee the faithfulness of his wife and children. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to such a notion as “biologism.” To be sure, God is pleased to provide, by the father’s faithfulness, an atmosphere, an ethos, which *encourages* trust in and obedience to God on the part of his wife and children. The notion, however, that paternal faithfulness *secures* the grace of God for one’s family implies that the grace of the covenant is bestowed (in response to human faithfulness) *ex opere operato*.³⁶ Such a notion also implicitly denies human inability, as if anyone is so faithful.

Against this idea, parents in general and fathers in particular must recognize that at every point the grace that God gives to their loved ones is given not because of their faithfulness but in spite of their failures. If they do not recognize that in their very best efforts they are often beset by failure and that God is

³⁵ The only head-for-head guarantee of faithfulness that we have is the sure knowledge that all of the elect—to a person—will be saved. While, we do not know who the elect are, we do know that not all Israel is Israel (Romans 9:6), and therefore we know that not all who are part of the covenant community are elect. Perry Miller, in his famous *New England Mind* and other works, argued that the doctrine of the covenant was developed by Puritan and other federalist theologians to tame the dangerously uncontrollable predestinarian God of Calvin. On this view, a strong doctrine of the covenant would be opposed to a strong position on election. It may be that some teachers who invoke covenant seek to do that very thing: to dispense with consideration of election. We ought properly to regard this as a false dichotomy because Scripture teaches both. In some recent popular discussions of the covenant, some want to talk only about covenant and not bring election into the discussion, doing damage, albeit unintentionally, to God’s sovereignty and our inability (see, for example, Steve M. Schlissel, “Covenant: Keeping it Simple,” in *Christian Renewal Forum* (May 28, 2001): 7-10).

³⁶ We might infer from the Second Commandment that parents in general and fathers in particular set a kind of default value of either obedience or disobedience for their children. This must always be balanced off against Ezekiel 18, which teaches personal responsibility for sin.

gracious in spite of our failures, not because of our own faithfulness, but because of Christ's faithfulness, then they will fundamentally misconstrue the true nature of the covenant.

Even as Rome's sacerdotalism is located in the church, biologism is a sacerdotalism of the family. Douglas Wilson, for instance, asserts that the requirements laid down in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6 mean that if the children of an officer of the church do not walk faithfully as Christians then the officer is disqualified from service.³⁷ Similarly, Wilson argues that if a man is faithful as a "federal head" his wife and children will be faithful too.³⁸ Part of the strong attraction of this argument, doubtless, is that God does regularly and abundantly bless us, our wives, and our children. But we must at every point recognize that it is not because of our merit in any sense (including our faithfulness) that God blesses us and it is only by the grace of God that the power of the Holy Spirit works that blessing in our lives. The divine grace that is bestowed to wives and children is not automatic and is certainly not because of husbandly fidelity. Wilson may well agree with this, yet his position, implying that human fidelity produces inevitable head-for-head results, misses the covenantal mark and heads in a biologicistic *ex opere operato* direction.

Wilson reasons that the Titus passage in particular—"having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly"—indicates that the children of church officers must be true believers. But this language in Titus may well have reference as much to an external state as to an internal one (which only the Holy Spirit can affect). Wilson asks rhetorically, "in what Pauline sense can the son be described as faithful" if that means something other than being a true believer?³⁹ The answer to that question is found in 1 Corinthians 7:14, if not elsewhere, in which Paul writes that, covenantally, a believing spouse sanctifies the unbelieving spouse and that their children are holy. To ask Wilson's rhetorical

³⁷*Standing on the Promises: A Handbook of Biblical Childrearing* (Moscow; Idaho: Canon Press, 1997), 44-49.

³⁸*Federal Husband* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999).

³⁹"The Pastor's Kid," *Credenda Agenda* 11:3 (1999): 13. See also, "The Pastor's Kid, Again" in 11:5 of the same periodical, 13.

question here highlights his problem: Paul is not affirming (in 1 Cor. 7:14) that the spouse and children are automatically believers; rather, they are covenantally set apart. In fact, “not accused of riot or unruly” (as the Titus passage has it) may well be epexegetical of “having faithful children.” Similarly, the requirement in 1 Timothy 3 focuses on “ruling well” by “having children in subjection,” likening it to rule in the church. In other words, a man must demonstrate familial rule before he is given ecclesiastical rule. Wilson, however, seems to assume that godly familial rule means that all of the household (head-for-head) will come to believe. But such an outcome is neither automatic in a Christian home nor in a Christian church.

To assume that godly household rule means that head-for-head every family member knows and loves Christ would mean that faithful church rule would entail true Christianity on the part of all parishioners. If a family governor is, *ipso facto*, a failure because someone in the family departs from the faith, then a church governor is, *ipso facto*, a failure because someone in the church departs from the faith. No, a man may be faithful in the main and, sadly, have an errant child or even an ungodly wife. A pastor may be faithful in the main and have a congregant commit heinous sin or depart from the faith altogether. It is not, *ipso facto*, an errant child or apostate parishioner that indicates a lack of faithfulness on the part of a father or a church officer. Rather, what inarguably constitutes failure as a father or church officer is turning a blind eye to sin. When there is sin in the camp, the godly family governor acquits himself by godly discipline even as the godly church officer acquits himself by ecclesiastical discipline. A father shows himself to be disqualified for church office when he refuses to deal with sin in the family: it may be assumed that if he cannot exercise such rule in his home he will not exercise it in the church. If, however, unfaithfulness on the part of those under care means that the one giving care is, *ipso facto*, not fit for office, then the Lord Jesus Christ was not fit for office because he “lost” Judas Iscariot. Hopefully, the absurdity of this assertion exposes the folly of this position.

In some ways, even more egregious than Wilson's "faithful father means faithful children" approach is his assertion that a husband is responsible for the sins of his wife, implying that a faithful husband will produce a faithful wife: "Just as Christ *as the Head* assumed all the responsibility for all the sins of all his people. . . . , responsibility for things He didn't do, so husbands should be willing to do the same for their wives."⁴⁰ The assumption here is that the husband loves his wife by being covenant head to her in the same way that Christ is covenant head to the church.⁴¹ Since Christ bears the guilt of the sins of his people, so, too, the husband bears the responsibility for the sins of his wife.

It is commendatory that Wilson seeks to call husbands to responsibility not only for their own actions but for the marriage (and family) relationship as a whole. While there is much here and elsewhere in his writing that is of real value to the church and her families, nonetheless, Wilson makes a serious category mistake in calling husbands to imitate something that is inimitable and unique to Christ as the only one who is fully God and fully man.

Wilson's error is that he attempts to make the husband a covenant head who bears sins by imputation, as did Christ. However, Christ's bearing our sin as covenant head of a new humanity is unique and not exemplary. This uniqueness is

⁴⁰*Federal Husband*, 12, 18.

⁴¹Closer attention to Ephesians 5:25-27 might indicate a different direction than the one that Wilson takes. Rather than seeing this text as teaching that the husband serves as a covenant head in the same way that Christ does, we would better understand the command for husbands to love their wives as Christ did the church as a directive for men to love their wives with a certain quality of love. Specifically, husbands are to love their wives with a justifying love (v. 25) and a sanctifying love (vv. 26-7). Christ, in v. 25, loved his people unconditionally with a justifying love, a love not based on their merit but on his choice of them. Having so loved, Christ loves his people with a sanctifying love that does not leave them in their sins but ever renews them in the whole man after the image of God, vv. 26-27. Thus a husband is to love his wife with both a foundational justifying love and an on-going sanctifying love that seeks the best for her. Such an approach seems to take the text more seriously and to exposit it more clearly than Wilson's particular "federal" approach.

highlighted in LC 38-40, which makes it clear that only a mediator who was God and man in one person could have, as one hymn writer put it, “borne the awful load of sins that none in heav’n or earth could bear but God.”⁴² LC 38, in particular, makes it clear that, as our covenant head, Christ was enabled to bear our sins upon the cross only because he was sustained in that unique task by his deity. Why was it requisite, as LC 38 asks, that the Mediator should be God? “It was requisite that the Mediator should be God, that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; and to satisfy God’s justice, procure his favor, purchase a peculiar people, give his Spirit to them, conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation.” No mere man, then, can be covenant head so as to bear the sins (or the responsibility for) the sins of another. No mere man could withstand what Christ as God and man withstood.

Adam did not bear the sins of his offspring. Rather his sin is imputed to his offspring descending from him by ordinary generation. Similarly, it is not fathers who bear the sins of the third and fourth generation but the other way around. Imputation works in only one direction with a human: the action of the covenant head is accounted to the offspring (Romans 5:12-21). Christ is the only covenant head who can bear sin, inasmuch as he is not merely a man; it is, in fact, with particular reference to his deity that he is qualified to be the sin-bearer. It is with particular reference to his humanity, on the other hand, that Christ did “perform obedience to the law” (LC 39)—indeed, his perfect law keeping is imputed to us, even as our sin was imputed to and borne by him. Thus there is particular reference to Christ’s humanity in his active obedience and to his deity in his passive obedience. The call of Wilson for husbands to “bear responsibility for” the sins of their wives is to ask them to do that which only the deity of Christ enabled our Lord to do. Thus to ask husbands to bear such responsibility is to lay on them an

⁴²From Horatius Bonar’s hymn, “Thy works, not mine, O Christ.”

unbearable burden—a burden that no man can bear, except the one who is fully God and fully man.

I fear that some in the Reformed community, like Wilson, though well-meaning in seeking to be properly covenantal, overshoot the mark. Covenant does not mean that our fatherly/husbandly faithfulness secures the salvation of our wives and children. Salvation is a gift of God's free grace, received by faith alone, and not ultimately conditioned either by the faithfulness of the parents or the faithfulness of the children who are the recipients of this grace. In fine, salvation is not due to the faithfulness of either us or our children, but due alone to the faithfulness of him who has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves. Covenant means that God has bound himself to us with an oath, but it cannot and should not be turned into an *ex opere operato* mechanism that seeks to guarantee God's grace and does so by making our faithfulness the decisive factor.

Genesis 15 makes it clear that God alone, by a self-maledictory oath, is the guarantor of the covenant.⁴³ To be sure, the covenant may rightly be said to be conditional in its administration: God blesses obedience and chastens disobedience in his people. But the book of Job amply illustrates that even this dynamic of blessing/chastening is not so simple as we might imagine it, certainly not as simple as Job's friends imagined it. All this is to say that though there is a conditional aspect to the covenant in its administration, it is unconditional in its inauguration. God has not chosen us because of faith foreseen nor does faithfulness keep us in the covenant. Our security and assurance rests completely in what Christ alone has done for us in fulfilling the covenant of works that Adam failed to keep and in bringing us into the covenant of grace.⁴⁴ Those who are saved are saved by grace alone through faith alone, not because of their

⁴³O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 128-131 especially.

⁴⁴These are points well-developed both by Michael Horton and R. Scott Clark in articles on the covenant (11-25) in the *Christian Renewal Forum on the Covenant*, published as a special supplement to the May 28, 2001 issue of *Christian Renewal*.

own faithfulness. One's wife and children are not saved by covenant faithfulness, either. To speak in any respect of our being saved by faithfulness is to re-introduce the idea of human merit into the covenant of grace and thereby undermine the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. The only merit that will permit us into the presence of a God who is of purer eyes than to look upon sin is the merit of our perfect mediator, Jesus Christ, with whom we are in union.

Conclusion

To affirm that God's grace comes to a man, his wife, or his children because of his faithfulness is both to attach an *ex opere operato* view to human obedience—turning the grace of God into an obligation on God's part—and implies a denial of the doctrine of total inability. It's a "Field-of-Dreams" view of the covenant: "if I keep it, they will come." Both of these errors, made by Rome and Arminians, are deadly to the gospel. Why? Because they all boil down to locating assurance of salvation in taking the sacraments of Rome, or having walked down an aisle and made a decision in an evangelical church, or of being faithful to the covenant (or even of being a member in a certain church). Assurance is not to be found, though, in something that we do but in what God in Christ has done for us. Sinners ever need to be reminded that they are needy beggars of God's mercy, reliant entirely on the Holy Spirit to make effectual to them the means of grace and that at every point, in the flesh, they are afflicted with inability.

It is only when we see ourselves as did Paul in 2 Corinthians 12-13—weak, needy, and lacking—that we discover the sufficiency of God's grace.⁴⁵ A high view of the sacraments is

⁴⁵See Dan G. McCartney "No Grace without Weakness," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61:1 (Spring 1999): 1-13, in which the author re-affirms the reformational reading of Paul, over against the "New View of Paul" of E.P. Sanders and other New Testament scholars. Also quite helpful in this regard is Richard B. Gaffin's review essay, "Paul the Theologian," in *The Westminster Theological Journal* 62:1 (Spring 2000): 121-141 in which Gaffin, too, finds Sanders, Dunn, Wright, *et al.* wanting and the Reformers essentially correct in

part and parcel of that profound recognition of need. When one truly hungers and thirsts after God's grace one seeks grace through the appointed means, i.e., through the blessing of the Spirit on the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Sacerdotalism, of whatever stripe, seeks to control God, seeking to guarantee God's favor by the performance of some action that is thought automatically (*ex opere operato*) to secure his blessing. God does indeed grant faithfulness to his own so that they persevere to the end. Those who are saved are those who remain faithful to the end, the Word of God being filled with exhortations to persevere in godliness.⁴⁶ But it must never for a moment be thought that their faithfulness saves them. It is only a gracious, sovereign God who saves. Since we are totally reliant on God, let us joyfully acknowledge the work of the sovereign Spirit, humbly confess our inability and affirm a grace that is worthy of its name.

their reading of Paul.

⁴⁶It has not been the purpose of this essay to discuss the reality that God blesses his covenant people for their obedience and that he chastens them for their disobedience. I fully affirm that God does bless and chasten his people according to their obedience or lack thereof and I furthermore reject the notion that there is no conditionality in the covenant: God does not smile upon us in our sin but demonstrates his fatherly displeasure. My point has been simply to refute all mechanistic and behavioristic ideas whereby we oblige God to do something for us (either by taking the sacraments or by being good parents). Contrary to such ideas, God has obliged himself and has done so while remaining fully sovereign, a mystery that we cannot fathom. Some in the Reformed faith would have us focus obsessively on divine election and affirm only the unconditionality of the covenant. Others, though, are so focused on the conditionality of the covenant that they want either to remove personal election from consideration or to identify covenant and election, the end result being that our faithfulness becomes the decisive factor in the eternal welfare of us and our children. Christ's work alone, however, in his active and passive obedience, is the grounds for our acceptance with God. We must continue to affirm both covenant and election and to live with the truth that God is beyond our comprehension.