

Discussion: Berkhof's "Systematic Theology"

Let us discuss Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. He argues that the Word and sacraments are means of special grace, of saving grace. Common grace is non-saving grace, the work of God's Holy Spirit in restraining evil. God works beyond His own people for the common good of humanity and so forth. But the Word and sacraments are means of special grace, of saving grace. The Roman Catholic Church regards itself as the primary means of grace. Neither Berkhof nor I agree with their claim. Mystics generally deny the necessity of the means of grace, which defines their position. There is a mystical dimension to the Christian faith. We cannot see God. There are certain doctrines that are really difficult for us to understand and are mysterious in that sense. We cannot see the Holy Spirit who is the member of the Godhead who is especially with us, empowering us. Union with Christ can be called a mystical union—it is very difficult to understand and comprehend, and it is spiritual in that way. Nevertheless, we do not urge mysticism, which seeks an immediate contact with God apart from His Word. This seems to us to be very dangerous and often ends up a very subjective and inner religion, lacking objective truth. We do not deny the means of God's grace as He has revealed them in His Word.

In the implanting of new life, God can work directly, but He often works by the means of grace. This is God's normal means of operation. We cannot say that He could do nothing else, because He is God. But we have to go on the basis of what He has told us in His Word, and this is true in that regard. God works directly but He ordinarily uses means. The Word of God preached is a means of grace. In the work of redemption, the Word and the Spirit work together. The Word and the Spirit are conjoined. God the Holy Spirit works through the Word.

The work of the law is preparatory to the work of the Gospel. There is law and Gospel in both the Old and the New Testaments. The Gospel was communicated to God's Old Testament people through the sacrificial system. What a beautiful picture of guilt and the necessity of a substitute, as the worshipper's hands were laid upon the sacrificial animal's head. The animal was taken in place of the worshipper, its blood was shed, and the forgiveness of sins was announced. This is the Gospel pictured in the old dispensation. Likewise, the New Testament is not devoid of the law of God. Gospel and law always go together. Both Testaments are full of both.

Christians are not free from the law of God. We are not to be lawless. We are free from the condemnation of the law of God. We are free from the ceremonial system. We do not pretend to be the nation of Israel and follow all their national rules and dietary codes, for that has passed away. But the moral commands of God to His people are part of their way of life for all time because they are a revelation of the character of God Himself. We are not free completely from the law and neither do we want to be. God's children do not find His commandments burdensome. We love His law. We want to obey Him and please Him as a response of gratitude for grace received. Reformed theology emphasizes the use of the law as a rule of life for believers. This was called by Calvin the third use of the law. The law has also the condemnatory use to show sinners their need of Christ, and the civil use in regulating civil life. The chief use of the law as Calvin understood, in disagreement with Luther, was this third use, as a rule for the Christian life.

The sacraments are never complete without the Word. There is no such thing as a Christian baptism without the words of the baptismal formula, the name of the Trinity. There is no such thing as the Lord's Supper without the words of institution. This is not only a symbol. It is also an action. But the action must be accompanied by the Word in order to have a sacrament. In the sacraments the external sign becomes a means employed by the Holy Spirit in the communication of grace. There is no essential difference, no difference in essence between the sacraments of the Old Testament and those of the New

Testament. I understand this is hard for some to understand. There is a difference in the administration of the sacraments between the Old and the New Testament. The old is bloody, more indirect, and there are many, many ceremonies. In the New Testament God gives us two sacraments which are simpler and more direct. But reformed theology has always held that there is one overarching plan of salvation: the covenant of grace administered in two major installments, the Old and New Testaments. You could call this dispensational distinctions, distinctions in administration, or distinctions in the progress of revelation. These are all different ways of saying the same thing. But if you are arguing for a difference in essence between the sacraments of the Old and New Testaments, that is no longer reformed faith. There is one Trinity and one way of salvation by grace through faith. In that way the sacraments, although different in outward form, are essentially the same in the Old and New Testaments.

Christ instituted only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. To be baptized into the name of the Trinity means to be placed in a special relationship to God. I have found that in church life we do many things, we participate in many things, and sometimes in our worship and in the ordinances we do not think, we do not seek to understand what is really happening. Sometimes we are not taught, so some fault lies with pastors. But we do not think; we do not seek to understand! Even the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"—we have not even thought about what that means. It means we are baptized into a special relationship with the triune God. According to Reformed theology as taught by Berkhof, the essential thing in the symbolism of baptism is purification. I disagree with Berkhof on this point. I think there has been genuine progress in Reformed thinking in this area. We would say that the fundamental symbolism is that of union with Christ, and a subset of that is indeed cleansing or purification. The most basic meaning of both the Lord's Supper and baptism is union with Christ, and being joined to Christ our sins are washed away.

Jesus, I believe, did not prescribe a certain mode of baptism. In all four Gospels John the Baptist says that the Messiah would baptize the church with the Holy Spirit. The Messiah does not do that in any of the four Gospels. This is very interesting. Where is that prophecy fulfilled? In Acts 2. I believe a good, biblical case can be made for all three possible modes of baptism. According to Berkhof, immersion is a proper mode of baptism. Also according to Berkhof, baptism must be performed by a teaching elder or minister to be valid. This is hard to prove biblically. Many of us understand this as being a part of doing things in a decent and orderly fashion so that we do not have private baptisms. Baptism represents primarily God's working in that person's life. It also represents a profession of faith, but that is not primary. There is no explicit command in the Bible to baptize children. Why do we do it, then? We will discuss that later.

The Abrahamic covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the new covenant. The covenant constitutes the objective and legal ground for the baptism of infants. I agree with Berkhof on this point. Baptism is a means of grace. However, because there is no covenant relationship the church should not baptize infants of unbelievers. According to the Council of Trent, by the words of consecration the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the body and blood of Christ. This is transubstantiation, which is not something we as Presbyterians agree with. Berkhof argues that Rome is wrong in withholding the cup from lay people. Both Luther and Calvin became very angry about this practice of the Roman Catholic Church when they studied accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper and saw Jesus commanding the people, saying, "All of you drink from it," or "Drink from it, all of you." This is a command for each of the believers to participate in the Lord's Supper with the cup, but Rome withheld the cup from the people in direct disobedience, it seemed to the Reformers, to the command of Christ. At least some of the time Rome does not so withhold the cup anymore. We are not sure as to whether that is a universal practice or not.

The Lord's Supper is a sign and symbol. Those two words mean the same thing. The Spirit mediates Christ's spiritual presence in the sacraments. That is, there is real effect; there is spiritual benefit for believers in the sacraments. There is grace bestowed. But this is not to be accounted for by a miracle in the elements. Rather, the Spirit mediates. He applies the work of Christ, who is at the right hand of God the Father, to the believing participants. According to Berkhof, infants are not to be permitted to take the Lord's Supper. He also argues that lack of the assurance of salvation need not deter believers from coming to the table of the Lord. The elders must be careful to guard the table and to keep anyone from it who they know to be in unrepentant sin, but that should not drive away those who are weak. They should rather confess their sins and then partake.