

Means of Grace: Word & Sacraments, II

We are comparing the Word and sacraments. We have said they had the same author, God, and the same content, the Gospel. What about efficacy? What about effectiveness? What about what they accomplish? Romans 1:16-17 tells us that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. We would not, because of that, insist that people are automatically saved when they hear the Gospel. But we would insist that when the Gospel is received in faith, it accomplishes its purposes. That is, it saves. The Bible says some strong things about the ordinances. I will be using ordinance as a synonym with sacrament in a slightly different way than the *Westminster Confession*, when it included preaching, the sacraments, and prayer among ordinances. I have been using ordinance as a synonym for sacrament. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter says, “This water of the flood symbolizes baptism that now saves you.” “Baptism now saves you” is a reference that makes many people nervous. How could such efficacy be ascribed to Christian baptism? It is because of the significance of baptism. If its content is the Gospel, and if the Gospel saves, then it could be said of baptism, which signifies the Gospel, that it saves. The meaning is not that the mere rite performed saves. And Peter seems to hint at that when he says, “this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you.” Not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. Furthermore, he goes on and says, “It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”

So what we have done so far enables me to better understand why the Scripture could say things like that. If in fact the ordinances are the Gospel—if baptism and the Lord’s Supper are “visible words”—then the Scripture could say of them what it says of the Word: that it is the power of God unto salvation. So we are not to be surprised by passages that say, “baptism now saves you.” or 1 Corinthians 10:16, a neglected verse that speaks of the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul says more about the Supper, but here already in Chapter 10 there are words about it: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” Here the Lord’s Supper is said to be a participation in Christ. That is, a sharing, a communion in Christ in the blood and in the body of Christ. How could this be said? Because the Lord’s Supper most profoundly signifies union with Christ. And so the sign could stand for that which it signifies. So it is here. The sign of the drinking and the eating could stand for union with Christ in His body and blood.

Thus, in terms of efficacy, the same efficacy we ascribed to the Word at times in Scripture is ascribed to the sacraments, in my estimation, as visible words. Not giving to the rites themselves powers by the mere performance of the rite, any more than the Word itself actually saves apart from the working of the Spirit and apart from a believing response. You say, “Are you prepared to say that baptism does save if somebody believes the message of baptism?” Sure. Because the message of baptism is the Gospel. “Are you prepared to say the Lord’s Supper saves as somebody believes the Gospel communicated through the Lord’s Supper?” Yes, because these are visible words. And they do what God has promised. If He promises to cleanse our sins, for example, in Christian baptism, and somebody believes the Gospel communicated through Christian baptism, then he or she is saved. And if He promises to join us to His Son in the Lord’s Supper and somebody believes that message while even receiving a Lord’s Supper, then yes, a person can be saved. Because “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” So I am willing to say these are means of grace. What I can say of the Word I can say of the sacraments with some qualifications I am going to make in a moment. But, if they are visible words, then it is possible to say, in a correct and biblical sense but not in every sense, that they save. They save because their content is the Gospel. And when the Holy Spirit works, and when there is faith on the part of the hearers, then yes, the Gospel saves, but never automatically. I keep

saying that to keep you from misunderstanding.

There are dissimilarities, however, between the Word and sacraments. The outward form is different. The Word is found in a book, and specifically as a means of grace, it is the Word preached. So it is a sermon, a proclamation that is the form of the Word. By contrast, the sacraments involve material elements: not a book, but water or bread and grape juice or wine. And it involves ceremony. Not just water by itself, but water in immersion or pouring or sprinkling, and not even just that of course. You need the Word with it. Likewise, not just bread and wine, but bread and wine with the words of institution and the partaking of the same. So the outward form and function are different because technically the Word brings about faith. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word about Christ (Romans 10:17). And also the Word causes faith to grow. "Desire the pure milk of the Word," the apostle Peter says. In 1 Peter 2:2 Peter says, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." So the Word brings about faith. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word about Christ, the message about Christ. And the Word causes faith to grow. Technically, the sacraments do not create faith. They rather strengthen faith. So in that regard, if we think about necessity, although I have said the sacraments are means of grace, I am not prepared to say everything of them that I say of the Word. There is a difference. That is, the Word is necessary for salvation in a way that the sacraments are not. The dying thief was saved on the cross without ever having been baptized or partaking of the Lord's Supper. The Word is necessary in a way the sacraments are not. Does this mean we can strike the sacraments from the Church? No, we would be disobedient to our Lord in doing so.

One might point out an apparent contradiction: I have said before that the sacraments save in a sense. And now it looks like I am taking away with one hand what I have given with the other when I say they do not save. Well, I am making distinctions now, and I am saying, as far as necessity goes, it is possible to be saved through the message of the Word communicated by the sacraments. For example, in seeing somebody else baptized a person could believe the Gospel there and trust Christ to be saved. Or even again in this anomalous situation of a liberal church where the Gospel is not preached clearly, yet the elements and the words of institution are given. A person could come to faith in Christ and believe in the Word of God. But, that is not the ordinary purpose of the Lord's Supper. It does preach the Gospel. For the most part, the intention is to preach it to those who already are saved, that we might hear that Gospel again and again and feed on Christ and grow in our faith. But, in that sacraments are visible words, yes, a person could be saved by them. But only because they are visible words. And the credit would go not to the ordinance itself, but to the Word embodied in the ordinance and to the Word accompanying the ordinance. The distinction is more clearly seen under necessity. So I would not say it is absolutely impossible to be saved at the Lord's Supper. It is possible, because God has built the Word into that ceremony, and the Word accompanies the ceremony. But it is not the performing of the work itself, the rite itself. And in that sense, the Word is absolutely necessary. And although the sacraments are very important, they are not absolutely necessary to be saved. That is, if a person believed in Christ and was scheduled to be baptized next week and did not live the next week, the person would be saved.

Listen to Calvin's practice in Geneva, which is very interesting. The Roman Catholics rushed dying babies to the baptismal font and even allowed, under unusual circumstances, female nurses to perform baptism. They still do. Calvin said this is superstition, and they did not rush dying infants to the baptismal font in Calvin's Geneva. He said, no, we believe in these sacraments; God has given them to His Church and they are important; our trust in the salvation of this infant is not in the water of Baptism. It is in the fact of the covenant of God, the fact that God is this child's Father by oath and covenant and the blood of His Son. It is not in the water per se. Calvin said not to baptize them. That was a

tremendous testimony to the fact that he was opposing Roman Catholic practice and what he regarded as superstition. And it is a way of saying that the Word is necessary. And although it is, the sacraments are important. They are not necessary as the Word is necessary. That is, they are given in addition to the Word, as an augment of the Word, as visible words, and as an important part of the healthy maintenance and life of the Christian church. So when I say that, I do not belittle them but I give them their place under the Word.

So, we have ways that Word and sacraments are the same. Their author is the same. The content is the Gospel. They can be spoken of in Scripture. I did not make it up. "Baptism now saves you," Scripture says. And there is a sense that it is true, but now I am qualified. And even the passages themselves sometimes qualify. In terms of dissimilarities, the outward forms differ. The functions differ. It is the Word ultimately that brings faith and nurtures it. The sacraments technically only nurture it. And in terms of necessity, the Word is necessary. The sacraments are not absolutely necessary, although they are not dispensable for the healthy life of the Christian church. So it would not be an act of faith to say, "I believe the Word. I do not need the sacraments." It will be an act of unfaith and disobedience to one's Lord, who says, "Yes, the Word saves, but you do need my means of grace. Avail yourselves of them. I gave them to you to build you up in your most holy faith."

Another thing that needs to be said, coming out of Romans 4, is that sacraments are signs and seals of salvation. The context here is justification. Specifically, Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. Remember, the Jews had elevated circumcision to a place that God never intended. In Romans 4:11, in the context, Paul is indicating that Abraham was saved—was justified—before he was circumcised. And in verse 11, Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness may be credited to them. Our interest here is a limited one. I cannot do a whole exposition on Romans 4 right now. Specifically, the Old Testament rite of circumcision is called "a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith." First of all, we need to understand what he means by the righteousness of faith. In short summary, he means justification. He is claiming that this Old Testament rite is proof that the Old Testament sacraments are not essentially different from New Testament ones. They are essentially the same. They both communicate justification.

Circumcision was a sign and seal of justification by faith. Let us talk about these concepts of "sign" and "seal." I am first going to distinguish them, the two components, and then tell you that the two words are really synonyms in this context. I had a Baptist student years ago who did a paper and taught me that. I said the Lord has a good sense of humor, because it was not his theology to begin with, and he was a Baptist when he was done. I thought I had a higher sacramental theology than he did, and I did in some ways, but he taught me. It was very helpful. That is, both the words "sign" and "seal" here signify what is traditionally understood by "signed and sealed." Both words mean both. That is, the sign seals and the seal is also a sign. Let me explain. In the world where we live, there are many signs. On the road you pass some stop signs, and a red light or a green light is a sign. There are many symbols in the world. By sign here, it means symbol. Circumcision is a sign of justification. It is a sign of the forgiveness of sins.

Here is a cutting away at the root of the propagation of the race. I am sorry to be so graphic, but that is what it is. And it speaks of cleansing at that source of life. So, circumcision is a symbol, a sign of cleansing. There are many signs in the world. Every seal is a sign, but every sign is not a seal. Some signs are also guarantees; they are pledges. That is what we mean by seal.

Circumcision is not only a sign, but it is also a seal. Let me give you an example of a sign that is also a seal. The wedding ring that I wear is a sign. This ring is a sign of my wife's love for me and her faithfulness to me. I wear it. This sign is also a seal. A stop sign is not also a seal; it says stop. A certain threat might be involved if you do not stop. And the green light says go but it is not a guarantee of anything. I mean more than that. This ring symbolizes my wife's love. It is also a pledge: you with me. It is a seal, a guarantee of her love. So the wedding band is both sign and seal. It symbolizes love, yes. It also is a seal of guarantee, a pledge, a promise of that love. Every sign is not a promise. Some signs are promises. This one is both a sign and a seal. Circumcision was a sign. Who is doing the signing in circumcision? Abraham? No. Think about Isaac for a moment. The only thing Isaac is signing is crying. He is not signing anything. God is signing to Abraham. He is symbolizing something to Abraham. God is obviously symbolizing something to Isaac. Let me prepare you for the next lesson. What in the Word is God symbolizing to Isaac? Isaac is eight days old. What can Isaac understand? Nothing. But, God commanded Abraham to circumcise Isaac when Isaac could understand nothing. How is it supposed to work out? Well, come back next lesson for the next installment in these matters. For now, the Old Testament rite of circumcision is called a sign and a seal. It is a symbol. It signifies cleansing. It is also a pledge, a promise, and a guarantee on the part of God to do what the sign symbolized. And if it is true of one Old Testament ordinance, it certainly is true of the New Testament ones, which are even more important and are clearer. So later on when we talk about what they signify, we will say that God is promising to do what He has said He will do. By the way, having said that, the word "sign" here means "a sign which is also a promise." And the word "seal" means both symbol and seal interwoven. It may be more helpful for you just to keep them separate, but they both really mean both in that context.

Sacraments are signs and seals. God is symbolizing something to us. He is symbolizing the Gospel, communicated in these different pictorial ways and these two ways in the New Testament. And He is not only symbolizing the Gospel, but He is also promising the Gospel to us, His people.

Let us think a little bit about what baptism and the Lord's Supper have in common. Their origin is the command of Christ from Matthew 28, going to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Trinity. They have a common origin: Christ commanded the Church to observe them. Likewise, "eat the bread, drink the cup, do this in remembrance of me." Their origin is the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their meaning is the Gospel. More specifically, their meaning is the forgiveness of sins (Acts 22:16). Baptism signifies the washing away of sins. Water is a universal cleansing agent. It makes sense that baptism signifies cleansing.

At the Lord's Supper, Jesus said in Matthew 26:28, "This cup is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The wine speaks of His blood. It is specifically the blood of sacrifice, the blood of forgiveness. The Lord's Supper thus speaks of forgiveness in common with Christian baptism. You say, "The Lord really is being emphatic!" He gives us the Gospel, and we hear it, and He signs and seals the Gospel to us in our baptism. He signs and seals forgiveness to us. And He signs and seals forgiveness to us in the Lord's Supper, because that is what it means. And again, both of these speak of union with Christ. "...Baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," speaks of a relation with God. It speaks of union with God, or the shorthand in the book of Acts, "baptism in the name of Jesus," speaks of union with Christ.

The most profound meaning of Christian baptism, then, is thus being joined spiritually to the Son of God. So all of His benefits become ours: forgiveness, regeneration, reception of the Spirit, and so forth.

What about the Lord's Supper? We have already seen in 1 Corinthians 10 that it signifies union with Christ. There Paul could say, "is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation," a sharing, a union, a communion, "in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation," same word, *koinonia*, a fellowship, a partaking "in the body of Christ?" Thus, both baptism and the Lord's Supper signify a forgiveness of sins and union with Christ.

The minister of both is ultimately not the human minister, but God, who stands behind the human minister. We get it from the sense that Christ commanded both. Specifically, Colossians 2:11 in a context that says spiritual circumcision and Christian baptism overlap in meaning. In that context, Colossians 2:11, he could refer to Christian baptism as the circumcision of Christ: "In him you are also circumcised." Is Paul writing to Gentile Christians and saying that they had to be circumcised physically? Of course not. "In Him you are also circumcised. Not in the putting off of the foreskin, but in the putting off of the sinful nature. Not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but you were circumcised"—spiritually, is the sense—"with the circumcision done by Christ." Christ is the ultimate circumciser, if you will. He is the ultimate performer of the sacraments, even as He is the ultimate minister of the Word. When it has happened, having been buried with Him in baptism and so forth, there the spiritual significance of spiritual circumcision and Christian baptism overlap. The meaning is the forgiveness of sins. So the minister of the ordinances is none other than Christ Himself, the ultimate Minister.