

Truths of the Reformation

(11) The Sacraments

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In our morning sermons, the last few months we have been focusing on various truths that were prominent during the Reformation as a way of celebrating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. The Reformation was the renewal movement that took place during the 1500s out of which Protestantism emerged and as Reformed Protestants it is an important part of our heritage. The Reformation resulted in a number of branches within Protestantism and we belong to the Reformed branch of which Presbyterianism is a part. As Reformed Christians we are very thankful for the understanding of the Bible which has been handed down to us and one of the ways we show that thankfulness is to teach and pass on the rich tradition of biblical interpretation of which we are heirs.

We live in a day when tradition is not valued as it once was. There are many different reasons for this, but the reality is that today what is new is much more valued than what is old. In many instances that is a good thing. But in other instances, that is a loss because there is much that is old that is valuable and life-giving and therefore worthy of preserving and handing down through the generations. And that is especially the case when it comes to the Bible and our understanding of it. The Bible is in a class of its own. It is God's Word to man. In it we have God's message to us about our relationship with him and the meaning of life and many other things of fundamental importance.

But the people of God have studied the Bible for many centuries and there is much that is valuable in what they have discovered. And for us that is especially the case with a man like John Calvin and those who have followed him in what we know as the Reformed tradition. This is all about help in understanding and applying the message of the Bible. There is much that is being taught by contemporary biblical scholars that is very helpful. We live in a very different age than the world of the

1500s and there are things going on in our world that we have to respond to on the basis of the Bible. But there is much in the writings of the Reformers that is as relevant today as it was the day it was written.

But it is time to bring this series to a close. There are more subjects that could be dealt with, but I think that this series has gone on long enough. The final subject that I want to deal with is that of the sacraments. The sacraments were an important subject for the Reformers. There was a lot of controversy surrounding them and yet it is as so often been the case in the history of the church, controversy has brought clarity, although in this case, there is still a lot of division as to various aspects of the sacraments. There are differences between the Protestants and Roman Catholics and there are also differences among the Protestants.

I'm not going to get into all that. In some contexts, it is important to understand the differences; this is not one of them. What I'd like to do this morning is give a general introduction to the sacraments as they are understood in the Reformed tradition. The basis for our understanding of the sacraments is the Bible, but we interpret the Bible convinced that John Calvin and those who followed him did the best job of understanding the biblical teaching on this subject as in so many others.

There are two sacraments according to the Bible. They are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both of these sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ himself. This is why we bother with baptism and the Lord's Supper. Jesus told us to.

In three of the four gospels, we have an account of Jesus' meeting with his disciples, just before he was arrested and tried and crucified, and celebrating the original Lord's Supper with them. And then in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, we have the apostle Paul making it clear that Jesus' intention was for the church to regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper until his return at the end of the world. Here is what Paul wrote, ²³"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do

this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

So, Jesus himself has instructed the church to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis until he returns to bring history to its conclusion. This is why we do it. This is why it is important. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we do so because Jesus has told us to do so.

The same is the case with baptism. Shortly before he ascended in to heaven, Jesus gathered his disciples around him and this is what he said to them: Matthew 28:18–20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This is why we baptize. Jesus told us to. Just before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told his disciples to make disciples of all nations and as part of that process disciples were to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Also as part of that discipleship they were taught to observe everything that Jesus has commanded us in his Word. This is why we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This is why we administer baptism to disciples. This is why we teach. This is what Jesus has told us to do. And we are above all followers of Jesus Christ. We seek to do all that he has commanded us to do.

So, we have these symbolic ceremonies that Jesus has told his followers to administer. Each one of his followers is to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and the Church together is to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis. Jesus does not specify how often it is to be celebrated. We feel that monthly is about right. Some churches celebrate it weekly. Others celebrate it quarterly. There is room for differences here because Jesus did not specify how often the Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated.

So, we have these two ceremonies that we conduct in the church because Jesus Christ has instructed us to do so. They are called

sacraments because that is a usage that has developed in the history of the church. The term is not a biblical term, but there is no compelling reason not to use it. What I'd like to address next is the question of why. Why did Jesus institute baptism and the Lord's Supper?

First of all, in very general terms, it is helpful to remember that we as human beings seem to have a need for ceremonies and rituals. Every society has them. Every religion has them. Think of the ceremonies in connection with Remembrance Day. There are many rituals and ceremonies that are practiced by our governments. Rituals and ceremonies and symbolic acts are a part of human life. They serve many purposes. Often, they have to do with remembering. They tend to highlight the importance of what is being remembered. So, Jesus in giving us baptism and the Lord's Supper is tying into something about us as human beings that needs ceremonies and rituals.

We need to look at the biblical teaching about baptism and the Lord's Supper to get at the specific purposes for these ceremonies. They are meant to help us in various ways. Jesus gave them to us in order to assist us in the life of discipleship. We will look at some of the hints that the Bible gives us as to why Jesus gave us these sacraments.

First baptism. As Jesus told his disciples to go out into the world and make disciples, he told them to baptize any who became disciples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We see this in practice in Acts 2 which tells of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church. At that occasion Peter preached a sermon that explained what was going on as well as the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and at the conclusion of that sermon he said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). And then we read in verse 41 of that chapter, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

Being baptized is a sign of belonging to the Church and as such it is a sign of belonging to God. That is what it means to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are your God. That is a pretty

simple idea. If you are baptized it means that you are a member of the Church and that God is your God. You are set apart from those who do not believe in the God of the Bible and who are therefore not members of the Church. Jesus commanded that all of his followers be marked with this sign of baptism.

But there is more. One of the things about both baptism and the Lord's Supper is that they have many different facets of meaning. And so, with baptism, the Bible also teaches that it is a symbol of the washing away of our sins. In Acts 22, Paul is retelling the story of his conversion to Jesus Christ. Jesus had revealed himself to Paul from heaven and had spoken to him. He was blinded by the encounter. He was taken to the home of a Christian and one of Christian leaders visited Paul there and said to him, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." There are a few more times in the New Testament where baptism is mentioned as a sign of the washing away of sin.

Again, this is a very simple idea. Those who hear the gospel and believe it receive the sign of baptism as a sign that their sins are washed away. It is a sign of the gospel of forgiveness of sins and renewal of life through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Because of our sins we are filthy before God and through faith in Jesus our sins are washed away. Very simple. Very meaningful. Very precious.

But as always, there are questions that come up that need to be answered. In the sacraments one of the big questions is, what exactly is the relationship between the symbol and the reality that it symbolizes. Listen again to the verse that I just quoted about Paul's conversion. Paul was told "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." This makes it sound like the ceremony of baptism actually washes our sins away. This is an instance where it is very important to compare Scripture with Scripture to make sure we understand what God is teaching us. This verse makes it seem like baptism actually washes away our sins. But we have to ask, does that fit with the rest of Scripture.

And it is here where we especially profit from our Reformed heritage. John Calvin, who is kind of the father of the Reformed family, was very good at seeing how the various truths of Scripture fit together. And

what he saw in the Bible was that God the Holy Spirit brings people to faith through the Word of God and that the sacraments are intended to strengthen the faith of believers. So, he writes in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “I consider that they [sacraments] have been instituted by the Lord to the end that they may serve to establish and increase faith” (Vol.1, p. 1284) And in another place, he writes, “We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel” (Vol. 1, p. 1276).

Calvin understood from the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit uses the Word to produce faith and then Holy Spirit uses the sacraments to strengthen faith by confirming the Word. Here are a couple of passages that speak to this matter. Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” This passage teaches that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. And Ephesians 2:8 teaches that faith is a gift of God. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Faith is a gift of God. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God. God the Holy Spirit uses the Word, not the sacraments, to bring people to faith.

Then he uses the sacraments to strengthen faith. We have seen that baptism is a sign of belonging to God and that is a sign of the washing away of our sins. It is a sign of a few other things as well, but for simplicity’s sake I will stick to these two. These are signs that Jesus has given us. And so, when we think of our baptism, Jesus is reminding us of his promise that through faith we belong to him and that through faith our sins are washed away. But it is stronger than this. The sacraments are not only signs. They are also seals.

In Romans 4, Paul is speaking about the fact that Abraham was justified by faith and he says in verse 11 that his circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.” Circumcision was an Old Testament sacrament that has been replaced by baptism. And Paul refers to it as “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.” Our baptisms are seals of the righteousness that we have by faith. They are seals that we belong to God by faith. They are seals that by faith all our sins are washed away.

A seal is a mark of authenticity. We get a diploma with a seal of the school on it and that is a confirmation that the diploma is authentic. Our baptism is a seal that God's promises to us are authentic. We think of our baptism and we remember that Jesus has given us this seal that his promises to us are real and the purpose of all of that is to strengthen our faith.

Now we baptize infants because circumcision was administered to baby boys in the Old Testament and baptism replaces circumcision. Baptism does not mean that the child is saved, but it does mean that God has sealed his promises to that child and the purpose is to strengthen the faith of that child if and when the Holy Spirit gives him/her faith through the Word of God.

So, this is what sacraments are for. Their purpose is to strengthen our faith. Their purpose is to give us greater confidence in the promises of the gospel. We have those promises that come to us in the Bible and in the preaching of the Bible and then Jesus has given us these symbolic ceremonies that give us symbols of the gospel promises and he has told us that these symbols are given to us to confirm the promises that are being symbolized. So, we think of our baptism and we remember that it is a God-given sign that confirms that through faith we belong to God and that our sins are washed away. When we reflect on the meaning of our baptism by faith our faith is strengthened – we are more certain of the gospel promises that God has made to us.

Let's look now at how this works with the Lord's Supper. In the institution of Lord's Supper, Jesus has told us what the symbols point to. Jesus broke the bread and he said, "This is my body, which is for you." Then he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." The new covenant was God's promise that he was going to forgive the sins of his people and write his law on their hearts so that they would be able to obey. So, the new covenant was God's promise of salvation. At the Lord's Supper, Jesus said that the wine was symbol of his shed blood and that that shed blood was the basis for the new covenant.

So, the symbolism is that Jesus offers himself to us as the one who was crucified for us. The broken bread signifies his broken body and the

wine symbolizes his shed blood. And he says to us in the Lord's Supper, "take and eat; take and drink." It's all symbolism. He offers himself as the one who gave his life for us and we receive the symbols by faith. This is ceremony and symbolism; but there is a spiritual reality that is happening with the symbols. Jesus is offering himself as our saviour. And we by faith receive him.

Jesus says that we are to do this in remembrance of him. We remember so that we do not forget. But remembering in the Bible is much more profound than that. By remembering we are actually taking part in the giving and receiving of the gospel. The past becomes a reality in the present. Jesus himself is with us offering himself and we are with him in receiving him by faith. It is symbolism, but it is pointing to something that is very real and very present.

This is a ceremony that Jesus has given us. It symbolizes the gospel. And its purpose again is to strengthen our faith. The symbols give us something tangible to see and feel. The ceremony is an acting out of the gospel. And through it Jesus is confirming that he really and truly does offer himself to us as our Saviour and that we may really and truly receive him by faith. The purpose is to make the gospel more real to us. The purpose is to confirm the promise of the gospel to us so that our faith may be strengthened.

One of the great contributions of John Calvin to our understanding of the sacraments is how they are intended to confirm the gospel promises and strengthen our faith. The Roman Catholic Church taught that the sacraments work automatically. Baptism was understood to wash away sins. The Mass was understood to actually convey the body of Christ. Calvin helped us to understand the biblical emphasis on the Holy Spirit using the Word to create faith and the Holy Spirit using the sacraments along with the Word to strengthen faith. What is in the foreground is always the promise, a promise which is received by faith.

But while the sacraments do not work automatically, they are effective in strengthening our faith when blessed by the Holy Spirit. When we look to the Holy Spirit to bless them and when we ponder them in faith, our faith is strengthened, and we are comforted and encouraged. We administer and take part in the sacraments because Jesus told us to. He

has given them to us to help us because he knows how much we need the encouragement that the sacraments bring. Let us then give them the thought that they deserve so that we may receive the blessings from them that Jesus intends.

Lord's Supper Meditation

In the second part of John 6 Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life and he also speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Many scholars think that there is some connection between this passage and the Lord's Supper even though it does not directly mention the Lord's Supper.

But clearly there are parallels. And clearly Jesus is using symbolic language when he speaks of eating him as the bread of life and when he speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It sounds kind of gross to us. Especially the part of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And indeed, unbelievers accused the early Christians of being cannibals because they used this kind of language. But it is meant to be symbolic. And that symbolism is seen most clearly in the Lord's Supper.

Eating and drinking are symbols for faith. Just as we receive bread and wine into our bodies, so we receive Jesus himself as our Saviour by faith. By receiving him we receive him as our Saviour and our Lord and we receive all that he has done for us by his life, death and resurrection. One of the ways that this can be summarized is by the term "eternal life." Jesus says in John 6:51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Then he says in verse 54, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood as eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

This is what we are doing at the Lord's Supper. We eat the bread which represents Jesus' flesh. We drink the wine/juice that represents Jesus blood. We are not pretending to be cannibals. We are using the symbolism that Jesus has given us to help us to understand what it means to take him and embrace him as our Saviour and Lord.

And we receive eternal life. The wages of sin is death. In Christ, we receive eternal life because he has overcome the curse of our sin by dying in our place. Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper to make this as real to us as possible and to strengthen our faith and our Christian walk. Thanks be to him for this wonderful gift.