

Trinity Presbyterian Core Group

Lesson 2: How does God feed us in the Sacraments?

Intro

- We discussed last week the marks of a true church. As the Belgic Confession states:
The marks, by which the true Church is known, are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin.
- We also focused on the first mark, the preaching of the Gospel. Now we will focus on the second mark and answer the question: How does God feed us in the Lord's Supper and in Baptism?
- In answering this question we will examine how the Sacraments reinforce what the Word proclaims to us: that though we continue to struggle with sin, our holy and merciful Father has accepted Christ's work in our place and is working now through His Spirit to help us live in light of His love for us.

What is a sacrament?

- John Calvin helpfully explained this concept:
Calvin
We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel... First, we must consider what a sacrament is. It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.¹
- So the sacraments are not meant to function on their own, but rather are designed to make clearer what the Word has already proclaimed to us.
- The fact that both Baptism and the Lord's Supper both point so directly to Christ helps us see how God intends the sacraments to be somewhat of a lens through which we see the Christ in all of the Scriptures.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. XX-XXI, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), *Inst.* 4.14.1.

- The Heidelberg Catechism has been recognized by many as offering one of the best explanations of what the Scriptures teach on this issue:

Heidelberg Catechism Question 66: What are the sacraments?

The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross. (Genesis 17:11; Romans 4:11; Deuteronomy 30:6; Leviticus 6:25; Hebrews 9:7-9,24; 20:12; Isaiah 6:6,7; Isaiah 54:9)

Question 67: Are both word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, as the only ground of our salvation? (Rom.6:3; Gal.3:27)

Answer

Yes, indeed: for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.

- But they are also designed by God to communicate to us in our state of weakness, to preach to us in ways that confirm all the more how crucial the work of Christ is for our ongoing battle against the world, the flesh and the devil.

Caspar Olevian (1536 –1587)

God has added [sacraments] to the Word: (1) because He wished to offer the glory of His grace not only to hearing but also to the eye, to authenticate the unchanging nature of His promise before all the world and to come to the aid of our weak faith; (2) because man better realizes what is set forth with manifold obviousness; so God wished to display to man as in a picture the grace attested by the Word; (3) because we more surely and confidently believe what can be apprehended by the eye and touched by the hand; and (4) we also preserve it more faithfully in memory. So to remove any doubt as to the Covenant of grace established to all eternity in Christ's death and as to our union with Christ, God willed that we should be so exhorted by visible evidences of His covenant and so fortified by the use of them, as though we had seen the attested grace with our own eyes and touched it with our own hands.²

- So if this is the point behind the sacraments then we should see them as crucial things that God has designed to help us grasp the Gospel so that we can better live in light of it.

² Caspar Olevian, (one of the primary authors of the Heidelberg Catechism) quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 590-591.

- How then is the Holy Spirit involved in working through the Sacraments to feed us with the work of Christ?

The Spirit and the Sacraments

- We are often so beset by misunderstandings of what the sacraments are that very rarely are even seeing Christ's work in them, let alone thinking rightly about how the Holy Spirit works through them and gives them their power.
- The two errors we most often see both make things about man rather than about God:
 - 1. Memorialism** (makes them too subjective)
 - The first error makes the sacraments only have power insofar as we use our powers of memory to give God thanks for what He has done.
 - In this view, the activity is flowing from us to God and not the other way around.
 - In this, the Christian is not fed by God through Christ's work as administered by the Spirit and is instead simply doing their duty of praise to God.
 - This is the most common view found among American evangelicals
 - 2. Sacramentalism** (makes them overly objective)
 - According to this view, the sign *is* what it signifies. So they treat receiving the sign as though the person taking it has fully received Christ as well.
 - In this view faith is not necessary on the part of the recipient, nor is the preaching of the Word necessary because the signs *are* what they signify and do not need the Word in order to have something to communicate.
 - The Church's authority is all that is necessary to make the Sacraments effective
 - This is the official Roman Catholic view
- But we need to see that the point of Sacraments is that God has instituted these rituals in order to stoop down to our level and communicate His saving grace in Christ to us by the power of His Holy Spirit.
- It is not through our memories, or our authority, but through the work of Christ which the sacraments point us to by the Spirit's communication.

Sinclair Ferguson

It is not by the church's administration, or merely by the activity of our memories, but through the Spirit that we enjoy communion with Christ, crucified, risen and now exalted. Christ is not localized in the bread and wine (the Catholic view), nor is he absent from the Supper as though our highest activity were remembering him (the memorialist view). Rather, he is known through the elements, *by the Spirit*. There is a genuine *communion* with Christ in the Supper. Just as in the preaching of

the Word he is present not in the Bible (locally), or by believing, but by the ministry of the Spirit, so he is also present, in the Supper, not *in* the bread and wine, but by the power of the Spirit. The body and blood of Christ are not enclosed in the elements, since he is at the right hand of the Father (Acts 3:21); but by the power of the Spirit we are brought into his presence and he stands among us.³

- Because this is quite mysterious to our minds, we will often err on the sides of making things center more on our activity because that makes more sense to us. But faith in the work of the Son and the Spirit is what God calls us to, not trust in our own wisdom:

Calvin

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space. Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper-not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.⁴

The Lord's Supper

- Given the definition of a sacrament mentioned above, it is crucial to see the Lord's Supper as a covenant meal established by God for the purpose of reminding us with visible and even edible signs, of Christ's life and death given for us.
- Many of the OT covenant ceremonies or renewals were ratified by a covenant meal. It was not only a celebration but also a statement of the fellowship that was now enjoyed by the two parties thus joined
- As the commemorative meal of the New Covenant, the Lord's Supper is more than simply a memorial or a celebration: it is a restatement and re-experiencing of the gifts Christ has given us through His death and life for us.
- Consider how the Bible's words of institution reflect this scenario:

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 201.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

- So in celebrating Christ's sacrifice for us we are fed by God, just as a father feeds and provides for his children, because the Holy Spirit gives the elements power to proclaim the Gospel to us.

Calvin

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality. To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality.⁵

What then does the Spirit do for those who take the Supper in faith?

1 Corinthians 10:16-18

¹⁶ 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?* ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?

- What does it mean to participate in His body and blood? The **Heidelberg Catechism** explains this well:

75. How is it signified and sealed to you in the Holy Supper that you partake of the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross and all His benefits?

Answer: Thus: that Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup in remembrance of Him, and has joined therewith these promises: **first**, that His body was offered and broken on the cross for me and His blood shed for me, as certainly as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup communicated to me; and **further**, that with His crucified body and shed blood He Himself feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life, as certainly as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, which are given me as certain tokens of the body and blood of Christ.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1

What then is required for someone to participate?

- There is frequently a danger in many churches that elevate the requirement for partaking of the Supper beyond simply being a believer in good standing with the church (i.e. not currently under the discipline of excommunication).
- We often hear that one must have all of their sin confessed, or that no one can have anything between them and another brother or sister in order to partake, but these requirements are erroneously taken from Matt 5 where Christ is describing something totally different: i.e., requirements for presenting a gift to the Lord at the altar.

Matt 5:23-26

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

- The Lord's Supper could not be farther away from this concept because we are doing nothing for God in partaking of it; rather, *He* is doing something *for us*.
- This had become an issue at the time of the Reformation when the church had demanded levels of obedience in order to qualify to partake of the Supper; Calvin assessed this well:

Calvin

Such a dogma would debar all the men who ever were or are on earth from the use of this Sacrament. For if it is a question of our seeking worthiness by ourselves, we are undone; only despair and deadly ruin remain to us. Although we try with all our strength, we shall make no headway, except that in the end we shall be most unworthy, after we have labored mightily in pursuit of worthiness. To heal this sore, they have devised a way of acquiring worthiness: that, examining ourselves to the best of our ability, and requiring ourselves to account for all our deeds, we expiate our unworthiness by contrition, confession, and satisfaction... I say that these remedies are too feeble and fleeting for consciences dismayed and dejected and stricken with the horror of their own sin. For if our Lord by his prohibition admits no one to participation in his Supper who is not righteous and innocent, grave caution is needed by anyone to assure himself of his own righteousness, which he hears that God requires... [W]hen will it come about that anyone dare assure himself that he has done his best? So, since no definite assurance of our worthiness appears, the door will always remain locked by that dread prohibition which decrees that they who eat and drink unworthily eat and drink judgment upon themselves....

Surely the devil could find no speedier means of destroying men than by so maddening them that they could not taste and savor this food with which their most gracious Heavenly Father had willed to feed them. In order, therefore, not to rush headlong to such ruin, let us remember that this sacred feast is medicine for the

sick, solace for sinners, alms to the poor; but would bring no benefit to the healthy, righteous, and rich — if such could be found. For since in it Christ is given to us as food, we understand that without him we would pine away, starve, and faint — as famine destroys the vigor of the body.⁶

- So we must see the Lord's Supper as a key component of God continual nourishment of us with the good news of Christ's finished work, so that we are further convinced of His love for us. Without these reminders we will, as Calvin said, starve and faint.

Baptism

- Though it does not do so in as continuous a fashion, baptism does nevertheless preach a similar message to us, and just as powerfully.
- While it does primarily function as God's initiation sign of membership into New Covenant community, it also continues to proclaim to us the good news of Christ's finished work.

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 165: What is Baptism?

Answer: Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ has ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.

What does the Holy Spirit do for us in Baptism?

- In baptism we are marked out as those who belong to the New Covenant community. This means that we are those who are privileged to hear the good news, which God ordinarily uses to bring all those who are such members, to saving faith in Christ.
- To those who combine the sign with faith, it then communicates to them that they have died and risen with Christ:

Colossians 2:11-12

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.41-42.

- So rather than seeing baptism as a public profession of a currently existing reality (i.e. that a new Christian has been washed because they have professed faith in Christ) it is rather a sign that Christ has suffered the death they deserve, which then results in new life.
- It is not something that *we* communicate to God or to others; rather it is something that *He* proclaims to *us*.
- Why do we believe this?
 - o First, we see Christ refer to his death as a baptism more than once:

Mark 10:38-40

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

Luke 12:49-51

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

- o Additionally, Paul describes our Baptism as symbolizing death

Rom 6:4

We were therefore buried with him through baptism *into death* in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

- o Baptism represents the trial by water concept that much of the ancient world believed, and that Scripture depicts powerfully in the OT (i.e. the Flood, the partings of the Red Sea and the Jordan etc)
- o This is what Peter alludes to when he says that the flood waters in the great flood represent baptism. Those flood waters did not wash the people on earth – it killed them, as a sign of God's wrath, but Noah and his family came through the waters to inherit a new life on the earth.

1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom[d] also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah

while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, *and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also*—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge[e] of a good conscience toward God. 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.

- Thus, baptism = death sign, not merely a washing. It symbolizes and proclaims to us the death that **we** deserve that Christ takes in our place, and which results in new life for us.
- In many ways baptism communicates the message of Paul to the Galatians:

Gal 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

How then does this “sanctify” us?

- Because the sacraments are powerful communications of God’s grace to us, baptism preaches the truths of what it symbolizes. Thus, just as the Spirit uses the Word to conform us more and more into the image of Christ, so He also uses baptism to preach the Gospel to us to effect this same transformation.

Second Helvetic Confession (1562)

Baptism, therefore, calls to mind and renews the great favor God has shown to the race of mortal men. For we are all born in the pollution of sin and are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him adopts us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant joins us to himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are assured by baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld.

- It is thus important for us to avoid the common error of believing that baptism is a statement about decisions of choices that we have made, and instead to insure that it is a statement that God makes about what He has done for us, to us, an in us.

Michael Horton

Christ’s death alone is atoning and cannot be repeated. He died *for* our sins, but we die *to* our sins. Christ took up his cross once and for all as a sacrifice for sin, but he calls his disciples to take up their cross daily.... This is what the Reformers by sanctification as a living out of our baptism. We were circumcised by the Spirit, “having been buried with him in baptism, in which we were also raised with him

through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:11-12; Rom 6:4-5, 11).⁷

- So our baptism preaches to us both Christ’s finished work and the new life that the Spirit will work in all who combine the receiving of that sign with faith in Christ.

Sinclair Ferguson

Baptism is often viewed as though it were primarily a mirror of our spiritual experience of conversion, and as though its core significance were testimony to our faith in Christ.... But this is not the New Testament's perspective.... Rather, baptism is first and foremost a sign and seal of grace, of divine activity in Christ, and of the riches of His provision for us. It is not faith that is signified or sealed. It is Christ. He is the one whose grace we see in the water of baptism... Thus, the gospel is confirmed to us by the Spirit working with the sign interpreted by the word, and by that confirmation faith itself is strengthened and assured.⁸

⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 661.

⁸ Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 198-199.