



THE WATER AND THE BLOOD

HOW THE SACRAMENTS SHAPE
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

KEVIN P. EMMERT

“The relationship between identity and the sacraments is a fascinating and timely subject, and Kevin Emmert is a judicious and thoughtful guide. Even people who differ slightly in their understanding of baptism and Communion, as I do, will benefit from reading this book, thinking through the issues, and reflecting on how it can shape disciples today.”

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“One major problem in the Christian ecclesiastical imagination is that somehow we ‘do’ church. That is both incorrect and harmful, but it plays well in a world where individuals consider their lives to be those of free self-construction and thus worship to be a matter of spontaneity and human creativity. Of the many ways of exposing and correcting this faulty vision, Kevin Emmert offers one of the most powerful: reflection on the sacraments not as things we ‘do’ but as gifts from God by which he binds us to himself. Evangelical neglect of the sacraments has taken a heavy toll on church life and has fueled our inability to resist the siren call of expressivism. This book teaches pastors and laypeople that a large part of the answer to this complicated problem lies in the simplicity of sacramental practice.”

Carl R. Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College;
author, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*

“In our day, questions around personal identity are swirling and ever present. And Christians are not immune from the upheaval and confusion. Kevin Emmert’s book looks for help in what for many Christians might seem an unlikely place: the sacraments. *The Water and the Blood*, however, is not a partisan plea for a particular view of baptism and Communion. Instead, Emmert presents a compelling and winsome case to all Christians for the value of the rites and symbols of the historic church. Here we learn that the sacraments confirm our identity as those united to Christ and inspire us to live accordingly. Emmert demonstrates how the sacraments bring purpose, meaning, and joy to our lives and invite us to live a story worth telling.”

Brian S. Rosner, Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

“Amid today’s desperate and hollow quest for ‘identity,’ Kevin Emmert reminds us that to be a Christian means not only to identify *with* Christ but also to be *in* Christ. And the gateways of grace through which God draws us into Christ and forms us in his image are the very sacraments of baptism and Communion given us by Christ in Scripture.”

Joel Scandrett, Associate Professor of Historical Theology, Trinity School for Ministry; executive editor, *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism*

“In an age when many struggle with questions of identity, Kevin Emmert helpfully points to the sacraments as identity-forming activities that can teach us in tangible ways what it means to be persons united to Christ. *The Water and the Blood* offers a practical guide to how baptism and Communion can shape our identity and daily lives as believers joined to Christ. This work, steeped in Scripture and biblical insights from historical Protestant confessions and Christian thinkers, inspires all types of Protestants to reconsider baptism and Communion as critical identity-shaping rites.”

Karin Spiecker Stetina, Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“Saturated in Scripture and the best of the Christian tradition, this book has a word for us that is too good and beautiful to ignore. Far from baptism and the Lord’s Supper being empty signs of an absent Christ, they are safe harbor, true sustenance, and, yes, identity markers. For at font and table, in the life-giving presence of our Lord, we learn *whose* we are and thus *who* we are. Read this book! It is full of wisdom and gospel truth—a balm and bulwark against the modern malaise surrounding authentic personhood.”

John C. Clark, Professor of Theology, Moody Bible Institute; coauthor, *The Incarnation of God* and *A Call to Christian Formation*

“Identity seems to be the preoccupation of our time. Unfortunately, we tend to look in all the wrong places to find it—some inward, others to the fickle affirmation of others. This book lights the path to a better way. Kevin Emmert shows how only Christ provides a solid foundation for our identity and how we encounter him afresh through the sacraments. With deep yet accessible theology, Emmert demonstrates how the sacraments help form our identity in Christ in a dynamic and tangible way. *The Water and the Blood* is a profound and beautiful book that will resonate with believers from a variety of traditions.”

Drew Dyck, author, *Yawning at Tigers* and *Your Future Self Will Thank You*

“Our culture has sent us and the people we love on a wild goose chase in search of our true selves. Rather than deliver on its promises of authenticity, this chase has left us anxious, divided, and confused. Kevin Emmert’s *The Water and the Blood* points us in a better way, showing how the heavenly gifts of baptism and the Eucharist have bolstered the people of God in their secure and tangible identity in Christ in every era. Richly researched and pastorally attuned, this volume will help every pastor and Christian exchange the wild goose chase for the still waters and green pastures of our good shepherd.”

Aaron Damiani, Rector, Immanuel Anglican Church, Chicago; author, *Earth Filled with Heaven: Finding Life in Liturgy, Sacraments, and Other Ancient Practices of the Church*

The Water and the Blood

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How the Sacraments Shape Christian Identity

Kevin P. Emmert

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Water and the Blood: How the Sacraments Shape Christian Identity

© 2023 by Kevin P. Emmert

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover painting and design: Micah Lanier

First printing 2023

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8499-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8502-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8500-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Emmert, Kevin P., 1986– author.

Title: The water and the blood : how the sacraments shape Christian identity / Kevin P. Emmert.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022060725 (print) | LCCN 2022060726 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433584992 (trade paperback) |

ISBN 9781433585005 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433585029 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Baptism. | Lord's Supper. | Sacraments.

Classification: LCC BV803 .E66 2023 (print) | LCC BV803 (ebook) | DDC 234/.161—dc23/eng/20230523

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022060725>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022060726>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

For Ashley, Jack, Charlie, and Noah

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Preface

COUNTLESS PEOPLE TODAY STRUGGLE to understand themselves, and they are looking in all sorts of directions to find who they are. Christians, however, do not need to look far to discover their identity. Answers to their questions regarding personal meaning, significance, and purpose lie right before their eyes in the context of God's people gathered for worship—specifically in the rites and symbols of the historic church.

This book, therefore, is about the sacraments. But it is not a typical book about the sacraments. It is not limited to discussing the nature and purpose of baptism and Communion, though it certainly does explore those features in detail. Nor is it polemical, arguing for, say, a specific mode of baptism, whether the infants of Christian parents can or should be baptized, or whether (and, if so, in what manner) Christ is present in the bread and the cup. This is primarily a book on what the sacraments reveal to us about being persons in Christ, about what it means to have our identity and purpose as Christians constituted in him. It is about what it means to be baptized persons, persons immersed into Christ and into the communion of saints. Therefore, it is also a book on the doctrine of union with Christ and what that doctrine means

for the self. This study is my attempt as a scholar, active church member, husband, and father to attain a firmer grasp of what it means to be joined to Christ and his body and what that union means for personal identity. The sacraments have far more to teach us about our identity as in-Christ persons than we realize. Christ and his benefits are presented to us in baptism and Communion, and as we embrace him more fully, we come to understand more profoundly who we are in him.

While I am writing from my own ecclesial context as an Anglican of Reformed convictions, I attempt to appeal to Protestants of various stripes. I have in mind especially those who tend to embrace a “low ecclesiology.” This demographic typically possesses a minimalistic understanding of the sacraments (and often prefers the term *ordinances*) and thus ascribes them little value in corporate worship. My goal is to set forth what many Protestants have historically agreed on regarding the sacraments while at the same time challenging them to think more deeply on what the sacraments teach us about being persons in Christ. I want readers to know that the gifts of God for the people of God—baptism and Communion—reveal to us who we are in Christ. These visible words of the gospel have power to shape our understanding of Christ and of ourselves, as well as to subvert worldly notions of the self and personal identity. Many people today are seeking to discover themselves through self-referential means, and the result is confusion. For Christians, identity is not constructed but revealed. It is not self-generated but received. Identity is given in Christ and ratified in the gospel sacraments he has ordained.

Just as our identity as Christians is not self-constructed, neither is this book the product of self-isolated exercise. Most of this book was written not in my office or in a study but at my family’s din-

ing table. It was informed by family life and crafted at the center of family life, at the very spot where my family and I enjoy food, Scripture, prayer, and singing—together and with our guests. And so I dedicate this book to my precious family. Ashley, my dear wife and closest companion: I cannot find the words to express just how incredible your love and support is, which you show me day after day, year after year. In so many ways—more than you know—you show me what it looks like to live in Christ and like Christ. Your self-sacrificial love and service are both beautiful and humbling. Thank you for your constant encouragement as I wrote this book and for all the helpful suggestions you provided. You are an incredible editor and—far more importantly—a godly woman. You make my work and life unspeakably better than what it would be without you. My sons, Jack, Charlie, and Noah: Thank you for your joy and energy, which bring me so much happiness. And thank you for your patience as I wrote this book. I am proud to be your father. May the three of you lay hold of your baptismal identity and enjoy a long life of sweet communion with our Lord.

I am also grateful for my friends Meghan Robins, Will Chester, and John Clark. Each of you read various portions of an ever-evolving manuscript and provided keen insight for improvements. John, you in particular read my drafts carefully and offered numerous helpful suggestions for both content and phrasing. This book is better because of your thoughtful contribution, wordsmithery, and godly encouragement.

Several of my Crossway colleagues were also hugely instrumental in the development of this book. Samuel James, you helped me tremendously at the early stages as I was still outlining the book, and you provided incredibly valuable feedback on every chapter. David Barshinger, you made numerous edits and suggestions that

greatly improved my work. Thank you for your keen editorial eye and theological expertise. I am honored to work with both of you.

I must also recognize my church family. I could not have written this book without participating in the joyful liturgical work performed week in and week out by the congregation. My own church and ecclesial tradition have given me greater clarity of what it means to enact our in-Christ identity. As we gather around the font and approach the table, in living union with the one holy catholic and apostolic church, I learn more of what it means to be immersed into Christ and to commune with him.

And with that, I gladly acknowledge that this book seeks to be confessional-theological, done in the context of the church and for the church. It aims to confess what Holy Scripture teaches about who we are in Christ and to offer a theological account that is connected to faithful, historic Christian dogma. When we come to understand more who Christ is and what he has done and what it means to be in him, we come to understand more deeply and joyfully who we are.

Abbreviations

- ANF* *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox. 10 vols. 1885–1887. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.
- BCP* Anglican Church in North America. *The Book of Common Prayer*. Huntington Beach, CA: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019.
- BDAG Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- BNTC Black's New Testament Commentaries
- CCC* *Creds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition*. Edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022.
- CNTC Calvin's New Testament Commentaries
- Inst.* Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960.

ABBREVIATIONS

NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NPNF</i> ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> . Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886–1890.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
PG	Patrologia Graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

Introduction

The Problem of the Christian Self

IN AN AGE WHEN COUNTLESS PEOPLE are struggling to understand their identity, Christians frequently tell one another, “Your identity is in Christ.” This statement is often issued in attempts to swiftly tranquilize anxiety when someone expresses uncertainty over place and purpose in life: Who am I? Do I belong? How do I find security? What is my purpose? Yet in many such cases, the adage does little to assuage unwelcome feelings of bewilderment. People often tout it without much elaboration, and thus it feels like a trope. Truthfully, the statement is pregnant with rich theology and deserves greater reflection—especially in an age when many Christians are operating with a confused or undeveloped sense of self. In our day, too many Christians do not rightly understand the Christian self and what bearing their identity in Christ has on their identity as particular persons.

At the core of the statement that the Christian’s identity is in Christ is the biblical truth that our very existence *as Christians* is constituted in and determined by the living, active, and present *Christ*. The Christian self is a self *in Christ*. Put differently, being

in Christ is our primary identity as Christians. This is true because Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, is the God-man. As both God and man, he is not only the one true mediator between God and humanity but also the true revelation of both God and humanity. He alone truly reveals both who God is and who we are.

Trying to understand this unfathomable truth helps us navigate the tides of modern secular culture, which is obsessed with self-understanding and self-actualization. One of the greatest absurdities today is that many of us Christians have followed the world's advice on how to find a place and purpose in life. Our world tells us to look at ourselves in order to discover ourselves.¹ With mantras like "Be true to yourself" and "You do you," we are conditioned to believe that we are individuals who determine our own identities and can express them however we want.² But the more we look at ourselves, the more confused we become over who we are. Indeed, the path to self-discovery and self-actualization leads only to despair. While the notion that identity is self-generated is a relatively recent development, the truth is that looking inward, in a manner that is self-focused, is not a uniquely modern disposition. It is the inclination of sinful humans, the proclivity we all have inherited from our primal parents. When Adam and Eve erred, they imme-

1 A 2015 study found that 91 percent of US adults agreed that the best way to find oneself is by looking within oneself. See David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 58.

2 Many have called this phenomenon "expressive individualism" and the age of "authenticity." On the development of such a phenomenon and critical analysis of it, see, e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). My aim in this book is not to show how such ideas now rampant in our modern world have developed but to offer a theological framework that can help Christians work through their feelings of anxiety and uncertainty with regard to who they are.

diately gazed at themselves and were engulfed in fear and shame. What is significant about this act of looking at ourselves is that it coincides with turning away from God. This is precisely the danger of looking at ourselves to understand who we are, for when we do, we turn away from the power that constitutes our very being. So in our constant search to find ourselves by looking at ourselves, we are actually losing ourselves.³

If we as Christians want to understand who we are—to know what significance, place, and purpose we have—we must fix our gaze on Jesus Christ because he is the one who has constituted our very existence. We can rightly understand *who we are* only in relation to *who he is*. Personal identity is therefore not something we must discover on our own through our own narratives and pursuits but is something already granted to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Simply put, our identity is not a construct to self-fabricate but a gift to receive.

How to Understand Ourselves

One of the most powerful tools for helping us understand ourselves in relation to Christ is the sacraments. As historic rites of the church, baptism and Communion are characteristic of the church—her belief, identity, life, and practices. They reveal, in palpable form, who the church is and what she is about, and they do the same for her particular members. To be sure, the sacraments testify chiefly to who Christ is and to what God has done for us in Christ. Yet these divine gifts—alongside and never in competition with the gift of Scripture—also proclaim to us what it means to be persons in Christ. As visible and tangible confirmations of God’s

3 I am indebted to John C. Clark for this expression.

work in Christ, the sacraments therefore give flesh and bones to the statement that the Christian's identity is in Christ and thus provide an effective antidote to the problems so many Christians today face in understanding their identity and purpose. Stated differently, baptism and Communion are identity-forming rituals that teach us in touchable and accessible ways what it means to be persons in Christ.

Further, because the sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces—to use the language of Augustine,⁴ which has been embraced by countless Christians throughout history—they offer aesthetic appeal in a time when many Christians are being allured and catechized by ungodly narratives and practices. Carl Trueman has urged the church to “reflect long and hard on *the connection between aesthetics and her core beliefs and practices*.”⁵ He rightly observes that personal narratives have become the highest authority in our modern world, which means that personal narratives are the arbiter for ethics and morality. To this we can add images, which, as Mario Vargas Llosa explains, “have primacy over ideas. For that reason, cinema, television and now the Internet have left books to one side.”⁶ This is evident, Trueman argues, in that people's opinions on gay marriage and complex political issues—to name just a few examples—are shaped nowadays primarily by “aesthetics through images created by camera angles and plotlines in movies, sitcoms, and soap operas.”⁷ Or as Jonathan Gottschall remarks, “People can be made to think differently about sex, race,

4 See Augustine, *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *NPNF* 3:312 (26.50).

5 Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 402; emphasis original.

6 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, trans. John King (New York: Picador, 2012), 37, quoted in Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 403.

7 Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 403.

class, gender, violence, ethics, and just about anything else based on a single short story or television show.”⁸ The stories and images presented to us on a daily basis are shaping not just our views on morality but also our sense of self, for, as Charles Taylor has shown, morality is inextricably linked to identity.⁹

If our morality and sense of identity—which mutually reinforce one another—are shaped so profoundly by aesthetics, then Christians need to not just participate more frequently in the sacraments but also reflect more deeply on their nature, meaning, and power. When rightly understood, rightly administered, and received with faith, baptism and Communion have the power to shape our self-understanding and moral vision. This is because they connect us to the greatest and most powerful story of all time—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the sacraments exhibit the historic church’s core beliefs and practices in an attractive and appealing, though certainly ordinary, manner. In baptism and Communion, we find a direct connection between beauty, orthodoxy, and orthopraxy that catechizes the people of God with a greater understanding of the gospel and how they fit into that larger reality as persons in Christ.

The call for renewed and deeper reflection on the sacraments may seem strange or even faddish—especially to “low church” evangelicals who are not formed by a particular confessional heritage and who tend to have a minimalistic view of the sacraments. But the fact is that throughout the history of the church, the sacraments have been integral to Christian life and spirituality. Back in 1977, a group of evangelical theologians emphasized in “The Chicago

8 Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), 152.

9 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Call” a need for modern evangelicals to return to the “historic roots” of the church by not only embracing “the abiding value of the great ecumenical creeds and the Reformation confessions” but also returning to “sacramental integrity” and “a sacramental life.” In their call, they decried “the poverty of sacramental understanding among evangelicals,” which they said was “largely due to the loss of our continuity with the teaching of many of the Fathers and Reformers.” Such loss, they maintained, “results in the deterioration of sacramental life in our churches” and “leads us to disregard the sacredness of daily living.”¹⁰ Sadly, “The Chicago Call” has been largely neglected, and our connection with our Christian ancestors and their deep understanding of what it means to be persons in Christ remains largely severed. To return to our historical roots and also understand what it means to be in-Christ persons, we need to embrace a mindset—indeed, a manner of life—that is grounded in and consciously oriented toward the sacraments and specifically the gospel truths they communicate.

The sacraments not only provide continuity with the historic church but—when connected to and given meaning by the written word of God—also give us a clear picture of Christ, what he has done for us, and what it means to be persons in him. A proper understanding of ourselves, therefore, cannot be attained without reflecting deeply on Christ and his body, the church. And the church offers us the greatest and truest story of all. The corporate events of baptism and Communion are a major part of that story because they are integral to the life and identity of the church, and they shape in profound ways our understanding of Christ and his

¹⁰ “The Chicago Call of 1977,” *Epicleris*, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.epiclesis.org/>. See also Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 11.

body, of which we are members, thereby helping us discern ourselves better. And as we immerse ourselves into the gospel story heralded faithfully by the historic church, we come to understand with greater certainty that we are, fundamentally, baptized and communing persons.

One passage in Scripture that, when read canonically and theologically with input from faithful interpreters throughout church history, reinforces the truth that we are baptized and communing persons is John 19:34, which reports that “there came out blood and water” from Christ’s side after he was pierced. John Calvin, for one, teaches that the blood and water, the two symbols for sacrifices and washings in the Old Testament, represent atonement and cleansing, justification and sanctification—the chief benefits that Christ has secured for us.¹¹ And following Augustine,¹² Calvin believes that our sacraments, baptism (washing) and Communion (atonement), represent these benefits and enable us to embrace them more firmly. John Chrysostom, speaking of the water and blood that flowed from Christ’s side, says that the church exists by these two.¹³ Those who possess faith in Christ are regenerated by water and nourished by his body and blood. Just as Eve was made from the side of Adam, so the church, the bride of Christ,

11 John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, ed. David W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, trans T. H. L. Parker, CNTC 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 186.

12 Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John*, trans. John Gibb, *NPNF*¹ 7:434 (120.2).

13 John Chrysostom, *Joannis Chrysostomi Opera Omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, PG 59 (Paris, 1862), 463. Not all interpreters see the water and the blood that flowed from Christ’s side as symbolic of baptism and Communion. Given how the images of water and blood function in John’s Gospel, however, a strong case can be made that the water and the blood from Christ’s side not only prove that he was truly human and that he indeed died but also refer to the sacraments, which signify and seal cleansing from sin and guilt, new life and atonement, sanctification and justification. Numerous premodern interpreters of the passage lean in this direction.

is made from the side of Christ.¹⁴ We are persons of the water and the blood, persons who have been cleansed from our sin and guilt and made one with the triune God. Our very existence and identity as Christians are constituted by Christ and his self-giving work of salvation, which are portrayed to us in baptism and Communion.

Moving Forward

Those in positions to catechize and counsel Christians especially should reflect more deeply on the notion that *being in Christ* is our primary identity as Christians. Such church leaders need to be sufficiently equipped to relay to those under their care a proper theological account for understanding their identity as Christians, as baptized and communing persons, which, in turn, ought to give meaning and shape to the more specific elements of their identities as particular persons. Yet my hope is that readers beyond this group embark on this journey as well. Those interested in learning more about the sacraments will find here, I hope, a fresh yet biblically and historically faithful treatment of the sacraments, all told to the view of what they reveal about our status and calling as in-Christ persons. Therefore, this book will also be of interest to those looking to understand more deeply the doctrine of union with Christ.

The first two chapters explore the sacraments in a general manner, laying the groundwork for understanding what the sacraments teach us about being persons in Christ—and indeed, how they form us as persons in Christ. Chapter 1 focuses on the relation between Scripture and sacrament. Chapter 2 discusses the nature and purpose of the sacraments in greater detail and how the sacraments form and shape the people of God.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Gospel of John*, 434–35 (120.2).

The next two chapters pay special attention to the sacraments themselves and what they show us about Christian identity. Chapters 3 and 4 explore baptism and Communion, respectively, focusing primarily on what they reveal about our identity as persons who have been immersed into Christ and who commune with him.

The final two chapters focus on two biblical-theological themes relating to Christian purpose. Chapter 5 explores conformity to Christ, with primary emphasis on Christian morality, and chapter 6 discusses participation in Christ's ministry. As those redeemed, we are called to embrace both his moral vision and his spiritual mission. Thus, chapters 5 and 6 focus more intently on the imperative truths of being in-Christ persons. And the sacraments are ever in focus, for, when connected to the word of God, they present to us what it means to live as persons joined to and commissioned by the Savior.

I intend this book to be confessional-theological. It aims to confess what Holy Scripture teaches about who we are in Christ and to provide a theological account that is informed by faithful, historic Christian dogma. It takes "The Chicago Call" seriously and seeks to help others return to the historical roots of the church by promoting deeper reflection on the sacraments. Every chapter therefore appeals to major historical Protestant confessions and stalwart Christian thinkers who have demonstrated faithful exegesis and fruitful theological reflection. I apply what orthodox Christians have affirmed through the centuries to our current situation, one that is marked by agonizing uncertainty over personal meaning and purpose.

It is imperative that I mention at the outset that I do not intend to address the unique aspects of people's individuality—that is, what makes them persons distinct from others. Features of

a person's particularity—from genetic makeup, personality, and family narrative to vocation, education, and hobbies, to name just a few—are not in view in this work. My goal is to speak to the identity that *all Christians* share as in-Christ persons and to show that the sacraments of baptism and Communion provide a robust theological grid for understanding that identity. And it is through this grid that every aspect of our individuality must be discerned. Our primary identity as in-Christ persons is the controlling feature of all other identity markers, and it provides clarity amid confusion and produces joy and hope instead of despair.

With that stated, let us think about what it means to be in Christ and how the sacraments testify to and solidify the identity we have received in him as persons of the water and the blood.

Word and Sacrament

MANY CHRISTIANS TODAY have a weak understanding of the sacraments and what they accomplish in the lives of believers. We know they are important because Christ commanded that we observe them, but we are largely ignorant of their purpose and power. Baptism and Communion have existed as long as the church has and are thus integral to the life and identity of the church. They are, as I stated in the introduction, characteristic of the church: they reveal definitive qualities of what the church is, what she believes, and how she acts. If these ancient rites reveal the life and identity of the church, then it is no stretch to say that they reveal something about the particular members of the church. In an age when many Christians, not just people outside the church, are wondering where they can find personal meaning and purpose, clarity and peace and assurance with regard to who they are, the best options lie right before our eyes—literally, in the context of God’s people gathered for worship.

To suggest, however, that the sacraments help us become better attuned to what it means to be persons in Christ raises an essential

question: What about Scripture? Does not God's written word teach us all we need to know concerning spiritual matters and therefore what being in Christ means for personal identity and purpose?

One of the great legacies of the Protestant Reformation is the recognition of the preeminence of Scripture, that God's written word is the chief source for theological investigation and religious matters, the one to which all others must yield. This is in contrast to the teaching of Roman Catholicism, for example, which ranks Scripture and church tradition so closely that both are deemed equally authoritative. As the Second Vatican Council's document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, declares, "It is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated *with the same sense of loyalty and reverence*."¹ Scripture cannot be rightly understood apart from the equally authoritative magisterium, and the latter is just as necessary as the former for ascertaining divine truth. Protestants say no to this, and doggedly so, as it implies that God's word is insufficient or unclear in what it communicates to God's people. And so we champion *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone): Scripture, as self-revelation of the triune God—in whom there is no fault or deficiency and who is supremely authoritative as Creator and Redeemer—is the perfect, sufficient, and ultimate authority for the church regarding faith and practice.²

So it may seem that our question is already answered and that we ought to redirect our focus: we need not busy ourselves with

1 Roman Catholic Church, *Dei Verbum* (1965), Vatican, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://www.vatican.va/>; emphasis added.

2 I do not offer here a defense of *sola Scriptura* but rather presuppose it. My aim in this chapter is not to prove the authority, sufficiency, validity, or perspicuity of Scripture but to joyfully affirm these traits while discussing the relation between word and sacrament.

discussing the sacraments in attempts to discover what it means to be a person in Christ. Scripture, after all, offers the answers, for it is God's written word, supremely authoritative on spiritual matters.

Yet *sola Scriptura* does not, and never has historically, maintained that other sources have no significance for the task of theology or for the shaping of Christian piety—and therefore for molding our self-consciousness as persons in Christ. *Sola Scriptura*, which maintains that God's written word is the supreme authority in all matters of faith, must not be confused with *nuda Scriptura* (bare Scripture) or *solo Scriptura* (only Scripture), an erroneous and foolish notion that Scripture can be understood outside any ecclesial context or that other sources have no bearing whatsoever on the task of theology, which necessarily informs our manner of living. Never mind that it is impossible to adhere to the idea in practice. Scripture is not the only means through which God nourishes his people and draws them ever closer to himself. That much is affirmed by chief Protestant theologians since Reformation times and by definitive Protestant confessions. And the sacraments in particular have played a significant role in the life of the church, in nourishing God's people. Thus John Calvin says,

We are assisted by [the sacraments] in cherishing, confirming, and increasing the true knowledge of Christ, so as both to possess him more fully, and enjoy him in all his richness, so far are they effectual in regard to us. This is the case when that which is there offered is received by us in true faith.³

Calvin, as ardent a proponent of the Protestant Reformation as any and one who intrepidly chastised Rome for depreciating Scripture,

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.14.13 (hereafter cited as *Inst.*).

recognizes that God in Christ by the Spirit strengthens his people by various means—the sacraments being a vital one.

So when it comes to fortifying our understanding of what it means to be a person in Christ, it is detrimental to think along either-or lines, as though we must choose between using either Scripture or the sacraments for theological investigation and spiritual formation. To do so is to misunderstand the nature of both word and sacrament, which are divine gifts, and their relationship to one another. Scripture grounds the sacraments, and the sacraments reinforce or accentuate Scripture; Scripture and sacrament are complementary, not competing, and both offer us *Christ*.⁴ As Robert Bruce so wonderfully remarks, there is nothing greater than “to be conjoined with Jesus Christ,” and the “two special means” of procuring that “heavenly and celestial conjunction” are the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments.⁵ Both word and sacrament play a vital, complementary role in joining us to Christ, the one in whom we find our identity.

This chapter, therefore, focuses primarily on the means by which God communicates himself to his people and the relationship the sacraments have to the written word. In the next, we examine the nature of the sacraments, though I cannot avoid discussing that in some form here. Once we have laid this groundwork, we will be ready to immerse ourselves into and feast richly on Scripture’s teaching on the sacraments and what they communicate to us about Christian identity and purpose.

4 I am indebted to John C. Clark for this expression. See also “Sacraments in Worship,” Ligonier, September 15, 2017, <https://www.ligonier.org/>.

5 Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh in A.D. 1589 by Robert Bruce*, trans. and ed. Thomas F. Torrance (London: James Clarke, 1958), 39.

Properties of the Word

A good first step to take in understanding the relation between word and sacrament is knowing the nature or characteristics of the word of God, particularly what the principle of *sola Scriptura* affirms. This is because Scripture is the necessary grounding for the sacraments. The sacraments have no meaning apart from the word. So to understand the sacraments aright and what they reveal about our identity as in-Christ persons, we must first understand Scripture, the ultimate authority on matters of faith.

The most fundamental reason that Scripture is the ultimate authority on matters of faith is that it is God's self-revelation, or self-communication.⁶ Scripture is not fundamentally about human beings and therefore is not primarily a cultic or ethics manual, though it does reveal a great deal about who we are and how God would have his people worship and live to him. Scripture is principally God's revelation of himself, who he is and what he has done and does, as well as who he is in relation to his creation. It is not primarily an anthropocentric or anthropological book but a theocentric and theological one—it is the word *about* God. And as God's revelation of himself, Scripture is *from* God. He is both the main content and primary origin of Scripture—as well as its end goal. Scripture is supremely both about him and from him, and it leads us to him so that we may know and enjoy him more deeply and intimately.

As the apostle Paul writes, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete,

6 See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, *Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–17.

equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). All, every bit—the seemingly mundane or obscure, as well as the recognizably exhilarating and profound, every word and not just the parts we prefer—is exhaled by God. Or as the apostle Peter states, the writings of Scripture are the product of men being “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). So while the human authors worked in their own particular ways and communicated with their own unique styles and voices, what they produced was not conjured of their own wills. They were guided by God’s Spirit in such a way that they may be truly called authors, not amanuenses, though God is the originator of the content they produced. This is what is affirmed by the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, God working through human authors and messengers to reveal himself and his purposes.

Already we come to grasp a little of who we are: creatures made to know God. He wants to communicate, indeed give, himself to us. He has deemed us worthy, not because of some inherent virtue within us but because of his unconditional love and supreme grace, to be recipients of his self-revelation. He has breathed out to us his word about himself so that we may be filled with his very life and enjoy eternal fellowship with him. And he has chosen to use humans in the process. He has deemed us fitting agents for divine communication. We are, as beings made in his image, given unrivaled dignity.

Because Scripture is God-breathed, exhaled by the triune God, who alone is perfect and without error, it is completely trustworthy as “the principal guide and leader unto all godliness and virtue.”⁷ Scripture is true and reliable, without fault, not because of the human authors but because of who God is. Irenaeus wrote in the

7 The 1547 and 1562 prefaces to the First Book of Homilies in *The Books of Homilies: A Critical Edition*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clark, 2015), 3, 5.

second century, “The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”⁸ And the Homilies of the Church of England express, “It cannot therefore be but truth which proceedeth from the God of all truth.”⁹ It seems impossible that words written and transmitted by sinful humans could be wholly truthful and without fault. Yet the old expression holds true here: God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line. The human authors, though imperfect in themselves, were used by God, carried along by his Spirit, in such a way that the autographs are dependable guides to truth. As the Westminster divines affirm, “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependent not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.”¹⁰ God in his perfection is able to preserve the integrity and sanctity of his word.

Scripture is also perspicuous, or clear. Our all-wise and all-powerful God both knows how and is able to communicate in such a manner that his revelation of himself is intelligible to humans. God is indeed beyond comprehension, as the prophet Isaiah poignantly captures:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:9)

8 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *ANF* 1:399 (2.28.2).

9 “An Information for Them Which Take Offence at Certain Places of Holy Scripture,” in Bray, *Books of Homilies*, 373.

10 Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4 (hereafter cited as WCF), in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 184 (hereafter cited as CCC).

But the fact that God is mysterious and incomprehensible, dwelling in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), does not mean he has chosen to remain hidden from us. He has revealed himself to us in his word—and ultimately in his Son incarnate, Jesus Christ. This act of revealing himself to us Calvin calls *accommodation*, God’s condescending to our level so that we may understand and know him. Scripture, then, is like the “lispings” of a nurse to an infant, Calvin explains.¹¹ Baby talk may seem an offensive analogy to draw when explaining God’s communication to us, but it suggests tender affection and eagerness to bond by any means possible. Scripture is God’s meeting us where we are, his communication to us in terms and concepts we are able to understand. While God may be too lofty for us to ascend to him by reason, he is not too lofty to stoop to us, and Scripture is a primary means by which God has descended to us. It is his way of speaking in layman’s terms, as it were.

This, however, does not mean that all parts of Scripture are “alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.”¹² Many passages are difficult to understand, but “that is due, not to any lack of clarity in Scripture,” Martin Luther explains, “but to [our] own blindness and dullness, in that [we] make no effort to see truth which, in itself, could not be plainer.”¹³ The problems we experience result from our own limitations or obduracy rather than any inherent fault in God’s word.

So, returning to the pronouncements of Westminster, to say that Scripture is perspicuous or clear is to affirm that “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are

11 Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.13.1.

12 WCF 1.7 (CCC 186).

13 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of “De Servo Arbitrio” (1525); Martin Luther’s Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke, 1957), 72.

so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”¹⁴ Yet this does not suggest that we are capable of understanding Scripture on our own apart from divine assistance. We may be creatures of supreme dignity, but we are sinful and need divine illumination, the act whereby the Spirit of God scatters the darkness from our hearts and minds so that we may discern his truth. This is what Paul gets at when he insists that the things of God are “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). No one, he exclaims, “comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:11). The “natural person,” the one alienated from Christ and yet to be regenerated by the Spirit, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). Only the “spiritual person,” the one whom the Spirit indwells and animates, has “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) and is able to interpret “spiritual truths” (1 Cor. 2:13). So while Scripture is plain and clear regarding what is necessary for salvation, these truths, along with all the riches of Scripture, can be embraced only when the Spirit of God enables a person to do so. The Spirit of God and the word of God cannot be separated. The key to grasping the truth of Scripture, in a way that leads to life and blessedness, is *Spiritus cum verbo*, the Spirit working with the word.¹⁵ The Spirit is always connected to the word. He is the agent of inspiration and illumination. And because the Spirit, the Lord and giver of life—to use the description of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed—is always working through the word, the word is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). It is not an antiquated document or inert

¹⁴ WCF 1.7 (CCC 186).

¹⁵ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 152.

object but an animate and mighty tool in the hands of the living God that accomplishes his purposes of revelation and redemption.

God's written word faithfully testifies to the living Word, Jesus Christ, communicating clearly to us all that God deemed necessary for us to know for the salvation attained by him, and therefore, it is sufficient—for knowing, trusting, loving, and obeying Christ, its supreme subject. No other means is required for attaining a knowledge of true religion. "There is no truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation but that is, or may be, drawn out of that fountain and well of truth," as the Homilies puts it. "In Holy Scripture is fully contained what we ought to do and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love and what to look for at God's hands at length."¹⁶ Or as the Thirty-Nine Articles proclaims, "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."¹⁷ This conviction is not peculiar to a single stream of Protestant thought but distinguishes Protestantism from any tradition that deems Scripture wanting. The Belgic Confession declares, "We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it."¹⁸ And the Westminster divines agree:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence

¹⁶ "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture," in Bray, *Books of Homilies*, 7.

¹⁷ Thirty-Nine Articles, art. 6 (CCC 116).

¹⁸ Belgic Confession, art. 7 (CCC 82).

may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.¹⁹

As John Yates III rightly explains, “To speak of the sufficiency of Scripture is both an affirmation and a qualification. It is entirely sufficient for redemption but not exhaustive concerning everything in life.”²⁰ While Scripture is not limited in the sense that it is faulty or weak, it is limited in its focus, dealing with specific rather than all matters—yet in what it focuses on, it is completely authoritative and true and so is a reliable guide to salvation and the life lived by faith.

Because of these characteristics, God’s word is “a sure, steadfast and everlasting instrument of salvation,” as stated in the Homilies.²¹ It is the primary channel through which our triune God communicates himself and his deeds to his people—in such a way that grace is conferred when the Spirit of God is animate within believers, granting faith in the promises of God. Scripture is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12), operating on our hearts and minds; it grants us life (Ps. 119:25, 50, 93, 107, 154, 156); it is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105); it accomplishes God’s purposes, going out from him without returning to him void (Isa. 55:11); it is not bound (2 Tim. 2:9). God’s written word is an effective means through which he produces spiritual life in believers when his Spirit, who illuminates them and leads them to faith, indwells and quickens them.

19 WCF 1.6 (CCC 186).

20 John W. Yates III, “*Sola Scriptura*,” in *Reformation Anglicanism: A Vision for Today’s Global Communion*, ed. Ashley Null and John W. Yates III (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 83.

21 “A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture,” in Bray, *Books of Homilies*, 8.

Additions to the Word

To say that Scripture alone is the perfect, sufficient, and final authority regarding faith and practice and that it is an instrument by which God produces life within believers when his Spirit illuminates them and leads them to faith does not mean that it is the only means by which God makes himself known. The classic distinction between so-called general and specific, or natural and supernatural, revelation serves the point. As the Belgic Confession states, “We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe,” and second, “by his holy and divine Word.”²² In the created order, history, and humanity, God reveals general truths about himself that all people, whether regenerated by the Spirit or not, are able to discern.

Scripture itself, in both the Old and New Testaments, testifies that God has disclosed himself in the universe. As the psalmist rejoices,

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge. (Ps. 19:1–2)

Perhaps Paul had this passage in mind when he exclaimed, “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” For this reason, we are “without excuse” if we do not acknowledge that God exists (Rom. 1:20) and therefore reckoned fools (Ps. 14:1). The created order will not permit us to plead agnosticism.

²² Belgic Confession, art. 2 (CCC 79).

Calvin, for one, reiterates these sorts of truths when he speaks of creation as a reflection of divine glory and power. The universe, in its splendor and “artistic construction,” is so “skillfully ordered” that it is “for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.”²³ Since all creation displays “those immense riches of [God’s] wisdom, justice, goodness and power,” Calvin urges, “we should not merely run over them cursorily, and immediately forget about them; but we should ponder them at length, turn them over in our minds seriously and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly.”²⁴ And even the constitution of human nature “presents a very clear mirror of God’s work,” particularly his governance. This truth is seen in many ways, Calvin explains, especially in infants who, as “they nurse at their mother’s breasts, have tongues so eloquent to preach his glory that there is no need at all of other orators.”²⁵

Simply put, when we pause to meditate on the natural world and even ourselves, we should immediately “ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and divinity,” as the Belgic Confession states, appealing to Romans 1:20.²⁶

Yet these truths, if recognized, do not lead to a saving knowledge of the triune God, though they do lead us to knowledge of our guilt before him. The created order, history, and humanity are limited insofar as they communicate that an all-powerful God, who created all things, exists and governs our world. But they do not reveal God’s plan of redemption, which culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus the necessity of special revelation, “God’s manifestation *of himself* to particular persons at definite

23 Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.5.1.

24 Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.14.21.

25 Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.5.3.

26 Belgic Confession, art. 2 (CCC 79).

times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him.”²⁷ God has made himself known in certain historical events (which are different in nature from human history in general), in divine speech, and ultimately in the incarnation of his Son. It is through these that God has manifested himself more fully to humanity so that we may be reconciled to him. And all three types of particular revelation are recorded in Scripture, meaning that Scripture may truly be called divine revelation because “it is an accurate reproduction of the original revelation.”²⁸ It may also be called revelation because God’s Spirit guided the human authors in the writing of the Scriptures. The Gospels, for instance, do not simply *contain* revelation, in that they record certain original, revelatory acts and teachings of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, but also *are revelation* because the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of each narrative, including the wording and form of each. All Scripture is breathed out by God.

So to attain a saving knowledge of the triune God, we must turn to Holy Scripture, by which God “makes himself known to us more openly.”²⁹ And as Scripture leads us into a fuller knowledge of God as Redeemer, it also equips us to rightly discern God’s glory in creation, history, and humanity. To use Calvin’s metaphor, the Scriptures are the “spectacles” or lens through which we must look, with eyes of faith, in order to behold all things clearly.³⁰

With these profound truths established and affirmed, we return to our initial questions: Does not Scripture sufficiently communicate all matters pertaining to faith and practice? Is it not the

27 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 144; emphasis added.

28 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 163.

29 Belgic Confession, art. 2 (CCC 79).

30 Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.6.1; 1.14.1.

ultimate *regula fidei* (rule of faith), the standard for religious belief? And more particularly, does it not successfully relay what it means to be a person in Christ and what union with him means for personal identity and existence? The answers are incontrovertibly yes, lest we infer that Scripture itself, as revelation from the Father that proceeds through the Son and by the agency of the Holy Spirit, is defective. God’s word is clear, reliable, sufficient, authoritative, and effective—and we may heartily rejoice in that glorious truth.

Yet God, as a compassionate, attentive Father who knows that we are formed from dust (Ps. 103:13–14), is “mindful of our crudeness and weakness.”³¹ And mindful of our creaturely condition, he has deemed it fitting to make himself knowable and accessible through various means, through what many theologians over the centuries have termed “means of grace” (*media gratiae*). Considering the goodness of God and his endless delight in expressing himself to his people, Stephen Charnock writes,

All goodness delights to communicate itself. Infinite goodness has then an infinite delight in expressing itself; it is a part of his goodness not to be weary of showing it. He can never then be weary of being solicited for the effusions of it. If he rejoices over his people to do them good, he will rejoice in any opportunities offered to him to honor his goodness and gladly meet with a fit object for it.³²

Though these words appear in a discussion on prayer rather than on the sacraments, they nevertheless reinforce the truth that God

³¹ Belgic Confession, art. 33 (CCC 105).

³² Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God: Updated and Unabridged*, ed. Mark Jones, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 1361.

takes immense pleasure in extending his goodness to those who seek him—and that he takes any opportunity to do so. This passage also employs the concept of “fittingness”: that God sees it fit or suitable, though not necessary as if he were bound, to act in the manner he has and to use certain means in communicating himself and his goodness to his people. Like any good parent, God is delighted to bestow on his children diverse gifts so that they may know him as a loving Father and be blessed by him. He is so paternally indulgent, so affectionately generous, that he has given us multiple means whereby we may perceive his glory and goodness and thus fortify our faith and grow in our delight in him. And one reason God gives us such a variety of gifts—especially tangible gifts such as the sacraments—is because we are spiritual-physical beings created with multiple senses. It is therefore fitting or proper that God should use various means to engage our entire beings.

Scripture is, as I have already indicated, a means of grace in that it generates and promotes faith and grants spiritual blessings to those whom the Spirit illuminates and leads to divine truth. It guides us in the way of life. Scripture, as divine speech communicated by the triune God, is adapted to our hearing, and it is through hearing the word of God that we come to faith in Christ (Rom. 10:14–17). And as it creates and strengthens faith within us, it targets our intellects, affections, and imaginations. To be sure, Scripture, God’s written word, also appeals to our eyes in some manner as we read it. This means that while God’s word engages our hearing and also, to some extent, our sight, the rest of our senses are left unengaged. This does not mean, however, that Scripture is defective in any sense but that it targets a particular sensual aspect of our being. For this reason, as the Belgian Confes-

sion asserts, “God has added [the sacraments] to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what God enables us to understand by the Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.”³³ The sacraments, therefore, are also rightly called means of grace, for God has deemed them suitable instruments through which he communicates to us the benefits of Christ’s redemptive-historical work.³⁴

In discussions of the means of grace, it is common to find theologians asserting that God created humans to obtain knowledge of spiritual truths through two primary senses, hearing and sight, and that it is to these two senses that the word and sacraments appeal, respectively.³⁵ This is certainly true, and I dare not deny it since it is a conviction found early in church history; the fourth-century theologian Augustine, bishop of Hippo, describes the sacraments as visible words—that is, images of the gospel.³⁶ Yet we may fairly say that the sacraments appeal also to our senses of touch, smell, and taste. As we are plunged into or doused with the waters of baptism, or as we witness others undergo that rite and thus recall our own baptism; as we hold the bread, taste the grain, and then feel that morsel disintegrate in our mouths while we chew; and as

33 Belgic Confession, art. 33 (CCC 105). Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 616; Bruce, *Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*, 39–40; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Longmans, Green, 1930), 343.

34 E.g., Westminster Shorter Catechism q. 88 (hereafter cited as WSC) (CCC 429), and Thirty-Nine Articles, art. 25 (CCC 125). Some Protestant confessions and theologians include prayer along with the word and sacraments as the “ordinary means of grace.”

35 E.g., Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 616; Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: A System of Christian Theology*, single-vol. ed., trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 933.

36 Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John*, trans. John Gibb, *NPNF*¹ 7:344 (80.3); cf. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, trans. Richard Stothert, *NPNF*¹ 4:244 (19.16).

we smell the vigor of the wine³⁷ and feel it warm our throats as we swallow, we experience the gospel in ways that engage our whole beings—and in ways we cannot by simply hearing or reading.³⁸

But somehow, many of us, especially evangelicals not molded by a particular historical confessional heritage, have either lost or never developed our senses of sight, touch, smell, and taste, so to speak. Part of this is due to (rightful) rejection of the sacramental system of Roman Catholicism, in which the so-called seven sacraments are deemed efficacious regardless of whether faith is operative in the recipient. Part of it is due to inherited convictions of Pietism, a movement that emerged within seventeenth-century German Lutheranism and has had considerable influence on American evangelicalism. As R. Scott Clark explains, the movement perceived a cold confessionalism within Lutheranism that stressed correct dogma to the point of depreciating Christian living, and so the movement emphasized vibrant personal faith and experience. This is why in many evangelical circles today, personal spiritual disciplines have supplanted communal celebration of the

37 To be sure, not all Christian traditions use wine in celebration of the Supper and instead opt for grape juice. And not all who participate in this meal should partake of alcoholic wine due to either age, matters of conscience, or a history of addiction. For these reasons, churches that serve wine should also serve juice. As I explain later in this chapter, God is not bound to the sacraments. He can work in and through wine or juice. Nevertheless, I believe something greater is signified in wine than in juice, as is apparent in my discussion of wine and the elevating nature of Christ's work in chap. 4. Not only that, the use of wine accords better with the Passover meal and therefore our Lord's institution of the Supper.

38 Cf. Tim Chester, *Truth We Can Touch: How Baptism and Communion Shape Our Lives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 39–40. Commenting on the liturgical nature of Reformation Anglicanism, Ashley Null and John Yates explain, "For Cranmer, the sacraments were the ultimate example of the power of God's Word at work. Since human beings learn by their senses—by what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—Cranmer believed that when God's Word was joined to creaturely things like water, bread, and wine, the truth of his promises would more deeply impact people." Ashley Null and John W. Yates III, "A Manifesto for Reformation Anglicanism," in Null and Yates, *Reformation Anglicanism*, 199.

sacraments.³⁹ Another reason why the doctrine of the means of grace is forgotten or rejected by many of us today is that we are heirs of Enlightenment thinking, which prioritizes reason as the ultimate basis for knowing truth and reality. As a result, many people in our modern culture, even Christians, tend to dismiss the significance of physical objects—which is perhaps ironic, given the triumph of materialism. Never mind that the concept of natural law is almost totally forgotten or rejected. Simply put, ours is a day when matter does not matter, even for many Christians. The cumulative effect of these factors, among many potential others, means that many Christians are wary of classifying the sacraments as means of grace, instruments through which God makes himself known and communicates his goodness to us. Both experientialism and rationalism neglect the physical, tangible, touchable elements of the gospel. Both are less than full-bodied understandings of the gospel and so offer truncated versions of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is both fully God and fully human, who is fully bodied, the one in whom our very being and identity is constituted.⁴⁰

Scripture itself, which we so highly cherish, testifies that God uses physical, visible objects to communicate truths about him and his actions or to work on behalf of his people. In the Old Testament alone, we learn that God used water to judge rebellious humanity and to save Noah and his family. He used circumcision to seal (confirm) the righteousness that Abraham had received by faith (Gen. 17; Rom. 4:11), and he used the circumcision of infants to maintain his covenant with Israel and to incorporate

39 R. Scott Clark, “The Evangelical Fall from the Means of Grace: The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 133–47.

40 The substance of these last two sentences was informed by a personal conversation with John C. Clark.

children into his covenant people. When the Feast of Unleavened Bread was established, the Lord said to Moses that “it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth.” It was to be a reminder to God’s people that “with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt” (Ex. 13:9–10). He used the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night to protect and guide the people of Israel once they had left that house of bondage. After Joshua led the people across the Jordan, the Lord instructed him to select twelve elders to set up twelve stones on the dry land as a reminder “that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off” (Josh. 4:6–7). And then there are the many sacrifices that God used for the forgiveness of sins when his people turned to him, trusting in him alone.

The list could go on, and this is the world in which the church was born and the New Testament written. So to resist the idea that God uses physical means to extend his goodness and communicate himself to his people is to reject a thoroughly biblical concept. More problematic, the largely nonsacramental tendency of many modern evangelicals is likely the result of forgetting “our confession of the ultimate visible sign of the ultimate invisible reality, failing to embrace the Christ-mystery behind the sacraments.”⁴¹ The incarnation itself proves that God joins “himself to us through created, physical, material means, namely, the humanity of his Son. And it is none other than the Son who gives us the holy mysteries of word, water, bread, and wine to bring us the salvation that he is.”⁴²

41 John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 192.

42 Clark and Johnson, *Incarnation of God*, 192.

It is imperative to note that the means of grace, the “benefits of redemption,” as the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches, are effectual to the “elect,” who have “faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life.”⁴³ Moreover, the sacraments are effectual not because of “any virtue in them” or in the person administering them “but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”⁴⁴ The sacraments of baptism and Communion are indeed means of grace, effectual in communicating Christ’s redemptive benefits, because they are instruments used by the Spirit of God, who creates within believers faith in the crucified and risen Christ.

Complementary Pictures of the Word

At this point, it is necessary to qualify and elaborate on the nature of both the word and the sacraments, as well as on their relation to each other. The statement needs to be iterated again and perhaps more overtly: the sacraments do not stand on equal footing with Scripture. As the Belgic Confession states, the sacraments are “added” to the word.⁴⁵ There is a proper ordering of the two, with Scripture taking priority. Certainly, the word and the sacraments share similarities, yet they also differ significantly, and these differences testify to the superiority of Scripture.⁴⁶

As for the similarities, God is the author of both the word and the sacraments. Just as he is the ultimate origin and primary author of Scripture, so he is the author of and primary agent in

⁴³ WSC q. 88, q. 85 (CCC 429).

⁴⁴ WSC q. 91 (CCC 430).

⁴⁵ Belgic Confession, art. 33 (CCC 105).

⁴⁶ Much of what follows is dependent on Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 934–35, whose explanation reflects a traditional Reformed understanding of the sacraments and their relation to the word.

the sacraments, the one who has instituted them through his Son, Jesus Christ, and uses them according to his purpose. It is also imperative to understand that the content of the sacraments and Scripture is the same: *Christ is the main subject matter of both.*⁴⁷ As Robert Bruce states, “We get no other thing in the Sacrament than we get in the Word. . . . You get the same thing [in the Sacrament] which you get in the Word.”⁴⁸ Not only that, the manner in which both are received is the same. Only *by faith* are the word and the sacraments effectual. Without faith, we cannot enjoy Christ, who is present to us in both the word and the sacraments by the power of God’s Spirit.

Yet the two differ in ways that should not be overlooked. First, as Geerhardus Vos explains, “The Word is absolutely necessary; the sacraments are not absolutely necessary. Expressed otherwise: the necessity of the latter does not lie on the side of God but on the side of man.”⁴⁹ Scripture is entirely sufficient for communicating to us all we need to know for salvation. Thus, as Calvin declares, “It is an error to suppose that *anything more* is conferred by the sacraments than is offered by the word of God, and obtained by true faith.”⁵⁰ While the word is absolutely necessary for salvation—for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17)—and while no one can come to a true and saving knowledge of our triune God apart from the word, the sacraments are not absolutely necessary for salvation. Thus we see the difference between *necessity of means* and *necessity of precept*. The sacraments are not necessary *means* for salvation because a person can be saved by

47 Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 934.

48 Bruce, *Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*, 84–85.

49 Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 935.

50 Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.14; emphasis added.

Christ without them. Yet they are necessary *precepts* (or “*generally necessary* to salvation,” as the Anglican catechism *To Be a Christian* puts it)⁵¹ because Christ commanded that we observe them and because he works generally through these ordained means.⁵² We are bound to them, though God is not, because Christ has instituted them for our use and benefit.

The word and sacraments also differ in their purpose. Related to the previous point regarding necessity, the word serves *to produce faith*—again, faith comes by hearing the word of Christ—and the sacraments serve *to fortify faith*.⁵³ This means that the extent of each is also different. The word of God is for all people indiscriminately, regardless of whether they are regenerated and enfolded into God’s covenant people. The sacraments, however, are reserved for those who belong to God’s new covenant people, for they serve to confirm and strengthen the faith of those incorporated into Christ.

Finally, the word and the sacraments differ in manner of expression, as we have already acknowledged. “The truth addressed to the ear in the Word,” Louis Berkhof explains, “is symbolically represented to the eye in the sacraments.” This means—and it should not be neglected—that “while the Word can exist and is also complete without the sacraments, the sacraments are never complete without the Word.”⁵⁴ The sacraments as visible words—a truth that we explore in greater detail in the next chapter and that is foundational to what follows in the remainder of our study—have no meaning

51 *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism; Approved Edition*, ed. J. I. Packer and Joel Scandrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 56; emphasis added.

52 On the distinction between necessity of means and necessity of precept, see Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 646.

53 E.g., Belgic Confession, art. 35 (CCC 107); Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14; Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 935.

54 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 616.

apart from Scripture. As Vos helpfully puts it, “The Word is resident in the sacrament. The Word is accompanied with the sacrament. If one takes away the Word, there is nothing left of the sacrament. If one takes away the sacrament, because of that the Word is still not lost.”⁵⁵ Again, Scripture grounds the sacraments.

And so I reiterate what I stated at the outset of this chapter: When it comes to understanding more firmly who we are in Christ, what being united to him means for personal identity and purpose, we do not need to take an either-or approach. We are not faced with turning to either Scripture or the sacraments. Because the content of both the word and the sacraments is the same—namely, Christ and his saving work—everything that I propose we draw from the sacraments is in fact drawn from Scripture itself, though the sacraments communicate these truths *in multisensory form*. And so the sacraments punctuate Scripture. The sacraments are visible words, physical representations of the gospel. Scripture and the sacraments are complementary and do not compete with one another. And as is evident in subsequent chapters, the sacraments summarize various teachings about Christ, his work, and what it means to be united to and abide in him. Put differently, the sacraments are pregnant with gospel truths, about both Christ and us as members of his body, that God wishes to deliver to his people so that they may be nourished to everlasting life.

As Sinclair Ferguson explains, “We do not get a different or a better Christ in the sacraments than we do in the word. . . . But we may get the same Christ better, with a firmer grasp of his grace through seeing, touching, feeling, and tasting as well as hearing.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 934.

⁵⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance; Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 223.

Or as Calvin provocatively states, “The sacraments bring *the clearest promises*; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life.”⁵⁷ Moreover, through the sacraments, “God attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word.”⁵⁸ They make God’s word “more evident” and “more certain.”⁵⁹ And Bruce adds,

That same thing which you possess by the hearing of the Word, you now possess more fully. God has more room in your soul, through your receiving of the Sacrament, than he could otherwise have by your hearing of the Word only. What then, you ask, is the new thing we get? *We get Christ better than we did before.* We get the thing which we had more fully, that is, with a surer apprehension than we had before. We get a better grip of Christ now, for by the Sacrament my faith is nourished, the bounds of my soul are enlarged, and so where I had but a little grip of Christ before, as it were, between my finger and my thumb, now I get Him in my whole hand, and indeed the more my faith grows, the better grip I get of Christ Jesus. Thus the Sacrament is very necessary, if only for the reason that we get Christ better, and get a firmer grasp of Him by the Sacrament than we could have before.⁶⁰

Stalwart Protestant theologians have affirmed that the sacraments give us the same thing we get by hearing the word of God but better, enabling us to draw nearer to Christ and embrace him

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.5; emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.6.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.3, 6. See also Chester, *Truth We Can Touch*, 39.

⁶⁰ Bruce, *Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*, 84–85; emphasis added.

more firmly. Similarly, the sacraments do not present to us a different or better teaching on what it means to be persons in Christ than what Scripture offers us, but we may grasp the same teaching more fully and firmly by giving greater attention and adherence to the sacraments, for they appeal to our entire being, delighting all our senses.

To affirm that the sacraments help us attain a firmer grasp of what it means to be a person in Christ, to understand more fully what it means to have our life constituted in him, does not suggest that we depart from hallmark Protestant convictions. Rather, it honors the Reformation heritage by affirming the conviction that the sacraments strengthen our faith and understanding of the triune God whom we worship and serve. The Reformation tradition resolutely affirms *sola Scriptura* while simultaneously recognizing that Scripture is but one of the means, though certainly the chief, through which our triune God works to make himself known and communicate his goodness to us. Some questions still need to be answered before we turn our attention to baptism and Communion in particular, questions that lead us to consider in more detail the nature of the sacraments and why they are considered means of grace—and how they could possibly teach us and form us as in-Christ persons. And so it is to those questions that we turn in the next chapter.