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FOREWORD

It is a privilege to introduce *Truth We Can Touch* and to commend it to you. This is a much more important book than its size might suggest, because it will help you to understand and enjoy two of Christ's special gifts to you—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Reading it reminded me of two incidents in my life.

The first was a conversation I had years ago with a doctoral student from the Far East. I knew him as "Timothy." But one day, when I felt I had come to know him well enough, I asked him, "Timothy, what's your *real* name?" He smiled and said, "Timothy." I smiled back, knowing he would see that I wasn't convinced this was the whole truth! "Come on, tell me, what is your real name?" Again, he replied, "Timothy." So, I tried a different maneuver. "What is the name your parents registered for you?" This time he responded with his native Asian name. Despite feeling we were in the endgame of a little chess match and that somehow he had a secret move up his sleeve, I said, "So *that's your real name!*" "No" he said—and then theologically checkmated me! "Timothy is my real name. *That's the name I was given when I was baptized.*"

Timothy taught me a great lesson that day. The name you were given at your baptism is even more important than the name by which your birth was registered. Timothy's baptismal

name had not changed Timothy's heart any more than his ethnic name had. But since the day of his baptism, it had reminded him who he was as a Christian and had called him to live in the light of that.

The conversation left me wondering if Timothy was in the minority of Christians—someone who understood his baptism well enough for it to have an ongoing significance for him every day of his life.

You might think from this that it would be a neat idea to give people new names when they are baptized. But we don't need to do that, because that has already happened. Your own baptism was a naming ceremony: you were baptized "in[to] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). That naming ceremony no more changed your heart than did the name you were given at birth. But like the registration of your family name, this new name expresses who you really are as a Christian believer; it is a constant reminder to you of the family to which you belong and what it means to be part of it. Our baptism is meant to be a daily reminder of this—for the rest of our lives. That is why the New Testament has so much to say about its ongoing significance for believers.

The second incident also happened in the Far East. With three other men I was invited by the owner of a famous hotel to have dinner with him—the kind of hotel where the suites would cost you more than \$15,000—*per night!* The owner wore one of those watches you see advertised but learn online that you could never afford! He was a very gracious host. His splendid European chef appeared in the private dining room to explain the menu he had chosen for us—including "zee special white truffle" on the soup, and a steak that almost melted in the mouth. The company was enjoyable, and the food was exquisite. The whole experience was memorable, not least the way, when

we arrived, it seemed that a pathway through the hotel had been created by the staff—we were surely very important people to the owner!

But the truth is, all the evening gave me was a story to tell you. For all the kindness of our host, he inhabited a different social world than I. The watch he was wearing was probably worth more than the house I live in. I could never afford to spend a night in his hotel. It was very thoughtful of him to invite me to come, and I said so as his driver opened the door of his magnificent limousine to take him home! It was a little like a holiday abroad—for a night!

But I tell you the story to make a point. An “experience” though it was, I would readily swap it for the opportunity to sit down at a table and have something to eat and drink with the Lord Jesus. And the wonderful truth is that I can and do, every time we share the Lord’s Supper. That is why many churches refer to it as the *Communion* service. It isn’t because we “take Communion.” It is because we *experience* communion with Christ. For that is what Communion is. The most expensive meal we ever have on earth cannot hope to compare to that.

This is what *Truth We Can Touch* will help you to see more clearly. It will help you to understand how your baptism can be a lifelong help to living for Christ. And it will show you that the Lord’s Supper isn’t so much something we do but the way Christ enables us to enjoy his presence. In it he says to us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). When that happens, we discover—as the two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus also did (Luke 24:28–31)—that when he comes and is present at the table, he becomes the host and gives us his little love gifts of bread and wine—visible, tangible, tasteable expressions of his dying love

for us. And we recognize his presence with us. What meal could possibly mean more to us?

It is because the Lord Jesus Christ gave baptism and the Lord's Supper to us in order to bless us that I especially appreciate Tim Chester's whole approach in *Truth We Can Touch*. He has his own convictions about the various theological and practical controversies that have surrounded these gifts of Christ. But his goal here is not to satisfy our sometimes-warped desire to have the "right" positions on these sad disagreements. He has chosen a better way: to show us how to appreciate, rightly use, and enjoy the gifts themselves, because through them we come increasingly to know, trust, love, and enjoy their giver. This, after all, is why our Lord Jesus gave them to us.

So I, for one, believe that what Tim Chester writes here can only bring more and more blessing to us as individuals and as churches, and that it will enhance our appreciation and enjoyment of the privileges we receive as Christian believers. And in encouraging you now to turn over the page and read on, I feel sure that if you want to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, you will not be disappointed.

Sinclair B. Ferguson

INTRODUCTION

Why Water, Bread, and Wine?

Let me invite you to try three thought experiments with me.

Thought Experiment 1

Imagine your church stopped celebrating Communion. Nothing is announced. It just stops happening. Everything else goes on as before. You gather each Sunday to sing God's praises and hear his word. You meet midweek to study the Bible and pray together. You get involved in evangelistic initiatives and serve your local community. But Communion doesn't happen.

How long do you think it would be before you noticed? What difference would it make to your life? To your life together as a church? Would you miss it?

All good experiments have a control sample, and this one is no exception. As a control, imagine what would happen if your church stopped singing. Again, no announcement is made. But next Sunday there's no music group or organist; there are no hymn numbers or songs on the screen. The Bible is read, prayers are offered, a sermon is preached. But there's no music.

Same questions: How long do you think it would be before you noticed? What difference would it make to your life? To your life together as a church? Would you miss it?

Here's my hunch. In the no-singing scenario there would be an uproar after the very first meeting. A group of people would surround the leaders demanding to know what was going on. People would be pointing in open Bibles to Colossians 3:16. Veiled threats would be made. But what about the no-Communion scenario? I fear that many Christians could skip Communion without missing very much, and perhaps without even noticing for some time.

Thought Experiment 2

Our second thought experiment takes the form of a question: When did you last point someone to his or her baptism?

Let's assume you're involved in discipling and pastoring other people in your church. Perhaps you read the Bible regularly with someone. Perhaps you're part of a prayer partnership. Perhaps you're a youth group leader. In these kinds of contexts, how often do you point people to their baptism?

I ask the question because it's something Paul does often in his letters. Check out 1 Corinthians 12:12–14, Galatians 3:26–29, and Colossians 2:11–12 if you don't believe me. Peter does the same thing in 1 Peter 3:18–22. For the apostles, baptism was not simply an event that took place back in the day. For them it shaped the whole Christian life. Christians were baptized people living a baptized life. So why don't we live like this? Lewis Allen writes:

Where did we go wrong, that we preachers have so undervalued the Lord's Supper and baptism? A glance around evangelical churches shows that the sacraments are the

church's Cinderellas—tolerated, patronized, and even put to work, but little loved and even less gloried in. We love to celebrate a baptism and share the joy of grace in a person's life; but do we teach the saints to live in the light of their baptism, and to draw strength from the fact that they bear the name of the Trinity? And are our Supper services more obligation than celebration, something we would feel embarrassed to leave out of our worship, rather than something we love to share together?¹

Thought Experiment 3

Some of you might find our third thought experiment a bit tougher. This might hurt. This time round you can do the thought experiment for real if you want. Go online and find a picture of a cute-looking kitten. Apparently, half the Internet is made up of cat photos, so this shouldn't be too hard. Print it out and then pin it on a dart board. You can probably see what's coming. Now throw darts at it. Me-OW!

Those of you of a certain callous disposition might relish this idea. But what about the rest of us? Most of us instinctively hesitate to throw the dart. But why? It is, after all, just a piece of paper. No actual kittens were harmed in the making of this exercise. What's going on? It's clear why we would be reluctant to hurt an actual kitten, but why do we find it hard to harm a photo of a kitten?

It's not just kitten photos that have this effect.

It was hot and the electricity in the hotel had failed. That meant no fan, no water pump, no flushing toilets. I was in the middle of nowhere. I had nothing to do until the next day, and there was nothing to distract me. I lay on the bed in my T-shirt trying not to move and dreaming of frosty November mornings

1. Lewis Allen, *The Preacher's Catechism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 180.

back in England. What brought comfort was pulling out a rather battered photo of my wife and daughters. Of course, it didn't make them present in the room, at least not physically present. (I wouldn't have wished that on them.) It was only a piece of paper. But somehow it brought them close. It made them feel a bit more alive to me.

Or imagine someone burning the Stars and Stripes or the Union Jack or the flag of whatever happens to be your home country. We've all seen pictures of a crowd of people on the television news, cheering as the flag of their enemy burns. Why is this act so emotive? After all, it's just a piece of cloth. Yet a burning flag is powerful. For the crowd it provides a focus for protest and a release of frustration. For others it provokes anger; they may feel somehow personally violated.

In one sense symbols and signs have no intrinsic value: a photo is just a piece of paper; a flag is just a piece of cloth. But intuitively we know they are much more than the materials from which they're made. We invest them with meaning, and that meaning is, well, meaningful—they are full of meaning. There can be a real and strong link between signs and the things they signify.

Baptism is “just” water. Communion is “just” bread and wine. But there is no “just” about it. The sacraments are full of meaning. They have power.

In the local church in which I grew up, young potential preachers were given an opportunity to speak a word at the Communion service, a short introduction to what was about to take place. Thus it was that at the age of eighteen I first “preached” to a congregation. And I can remember what I said. I spoke on 1 Corinthians 10:17: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” My main point was that “something happens” at Com-

munion. I'm not sure it was articulated with any more clarity than that. But I was theologically aware enough to realize what I was saying might be controversial. I had picked up that most of the people in my church saw Communion primarily, perhaps only, as a memorial of a past event. We looked back to what God had done in Christ two thousand years ago, but we didn't expect God to do anything today as we shared bread and wine. So I realized some people might disagree with what I said. Still, I was a young, arrogant teenager, so I plowed on regardless. As it happens, nothing was said afterward, and I was not excommunicated as a heretic. Perhaps being the pastor's son helped.

Often since, I have reflected on that early theological "hunch." I've not grown out of it. Quite the opposite. My estimation of the sacraments has only grown over the years, even though within evangelical circles they're rarely discussed. Indeed, there are those who seem keen to play down the significance of the sacraments. When baptism and Communion are talked about, we're more often told what they do *not* mean than what they do mean.

Why is this? Let me suggest a couple of possible reasons.

Yesterday's Battles

First, we are still fighting the debates of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century was a great return to the biblical gospel. To the fore were two big issues. First, there was a rediscovery of justification by faith alone—we are saved entirely by trusting in Christ's finished work rather than through a process of moral transformation. Second, there was a reaffirmation that our faith is built on the authority of Scripture alone—the Bible and not church tradition is our supreme authority.

But the sacraments were a close third. The Reformers rejected the idea that the sacraments are effective irrespective of the faith of those involved, and therefore they rejected the idea that babies are born again simply by being baptized. They also rejected the idea that Christ is offered as a sacrifice to God afresh in the “mass,” along with claim that the bread and wine become the physical body and blood of Christ.

These issues resurfaced in the nineteenth century with the emergence of the Oxford Movement, a movement that sought to bring about a renewal of Catholic ideas in the Church of England. The Oxford Movement gained a lot of traction at the time, and evangelicals felt embattled. As a result, the sacraments can feel like dangerous ground. Like a field full of land mines, they become surrounded by warnings signs. “Don’t go there” is the message.

Today’s Mindset

Second, we are children of modernity. Our modern world is the product of the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that placed human reason front and center. The starting gun of the Enlightenment is usually recognized to be Rene Descartes’s claim “I think, therefore I am.” What is significant for our purpose is not what Descartes concluded (we’ll take for granted that Descartes existed), but the manner in which he arrived at that conclusion. Descartes deliberately excluded any input from the world around him. His experience of the world could, he feared, be an illusion. He needed a basis for truth that transcended what he saw and heard and touched (or what he feared he might only be imagining he saw and heard and touched). So he made human reason the ultimate basis for knowledge. Ever since Descartes, modern people have assumed truth operates in the realm of the mind. Our es-

sential selves reside in our thoughts, memories, and hopes. The world around us—including our own bodies—is separate from our real selves.

This worldview both collides with and, in part, fits with evangelical religion. The collision is obvious. In the modern worldview, human reason trumps divine revelation. And so the Enlightenment has seen a series of hotly contested debates and supposed contradictions between reason and revelation—debates about the historicity of the resurrection and the virgin birth, evolution and creation, the meaning of the incarnation, the authority of Scripture, the nature of miracles, the reality of prayer, and so on.

What is less often recognized is that in some key ways modernity has proved a good fit for evangelical religion, in particular its emphasis on truth residing in the mind. For evangelicalism is a religion of the word. We preach the truth of God's word to convert people by persuading them to accept the claims of the gospel and put their trust in Christ. The action, as it were, takes place in people's minds. All well and good.

But this leaves us uncertain about the sacraments. We're not sure what they're for or what we're supposed to do with them. In the sacraments, truth is embodied in water, bread, and wine—in physical substances. And in the sacraments this truth is appropriated by our bodies—we get wet, we eat bread, we drink wine.

So one of the issues I want to explore in this book is the physicality of the sacraments. Why all this water? Why bread and wine? Sometime it feels like we would have been happier if Jesus had said, "*Say* this in remembrance of me," or "*Think* this in remembrance of me." That would have fit so much better into our Western, modernistic worldview—it would have made Descartes happy. But, no, Jesus said, "*Do* this in remembrance

of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). And then he handed us bread and wine and water.

There can sometimes be a sense that the sacraments are something of an embarrassment to modern evangelicals. We’re not sure what to make of them and what to do with them. To be sure, in Baptist churches baptism is often relished as a great celebration of the triumph of conversion. I hope it is God’s regenerating power that is being lauded, though sometimes I fear the focus is on the church’s evangelistic success. But it remains unclear whether baptism serves any further purpose in a person’s life.

Rediscovering the Sacraments

I have sometimes wondered if I was moving away from my heritage in the Reformers and Puritans. Perhaps I was becoming (whisper it quietly) “a bit sacramental.” But what I have found as I’ve studied the theology of the Reformation and its successors is a much richer, fuller understanding of the sacraments. Far from drifting away from my Reformed roots, I was actually returning to them. Robert Letham writes, “Nothing presents a starker contrast between our own day and the Reformation than the current neglect of the Lord’s Supper. . . . Today, the communion hardly features as a matter of significance. It is seen as an optional extra.”²

But I’ve also noticed, particularly as my interest in the sacraments has attuned me to the issue over the past ten years or so, that on the ground, as it were, many, many Christians value the sacraments highly. They find them to be a great source of comfort. It’s this instinct I want to articulate and encourage.

One issue I’m ignoring is whether infants should be baptized (the paedobaptist position) or just those professing faith

2. Robert Letham, *The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 1.

(the credobaptist or Baptist position). It's clearly an important issue. But it's not the focus of my concern in this book. Indeed, I fear it often distracts us from a serious consideration of the wider significance of the sacraments to our daily lives as Christians and congregations. I realize that this may frustrate some people, but there are plenty of other books to which you can turn to explore those debates.

There is, however, one aspect of the debate that we cannot completely ignore, and that is the question of what baptism signifies. Paedobaptists emphasize the way baptism signifies the work or promises of God. But evangelical and Reformed paedobaptists also emphasize the need to respond to these promises with faith. Meanwhile many credobaptists emphasize the way baptism signifies our response of faith. But Reformed credobaptists also emphasize God's initiative in salvation so that baptism is much more than simply a sign of an individual's decision to follow Christ. So all evangelicals agree that faith is vital—even when they disagree about the sequence of baptism and faith. Yet I want to argue that our *primary* focus when we think about baptism should not be on our faith, but on the object of our faith—Jesus Christ. I think this is consistent with both an evangelical paedobaptist position and a Reformed credobaptist position. If you've grown up in the kind of Baptist circles where the focus is all on the commitment we make in baptism, then this emphasis may initially appear unfamiliar. But I hope you will see that, while it is true that baptism is in part a sign of faith, first and foremost it points us away from ourselves to the promises of God and the work of Christ. As we recognize this, we will discover how God uses baptism and Communion to strengthen our faith and reassure our hearts.

Above all, I want us to learn to appreciate baptism and Communion. Christ gave them to us to nurture our faith. I

want us to understand how we can approach them so they do this. They do more than simply work on our minds to teach or remind us—otherwise Christ would merely have given words to say or truth to remember. Working out what the “more than” involves is the theme of this book. What is the added value of *physical* acts? Or, to put it another way, why water, bread, and wine? Why not just thoughts and words? I don’t believe the water, bread, and wine work like medicine or magic. They “work” as we respond to them in faith. But that means the more we understand and appreciate what they signify, the more benefit they will bring, and the more we will value them. So, what does it mean to live a baptized life and be a baptized body? How should we receive Communion?

ENACTED PROMISE

What's a human being? What are human beings like? There are many ways in which we could answer that question.

- We are creatures dependent on our Creator.
- We are social beings made to live in community.
- We are made in the image of God for a relationship with him.
- We have a tremendous capacity for creativity and kindness.

But there is one other answer that we cannot ignore: we are wicked people whose hearts are inclined to evil.

Of course, we do not like to think of ourselves as evil people. It is not a very inspiring thought! We routinely minimize or excuse our wickedness. But this is who we are. And perhaps in our more honest moments we recognize it. Certainly the evidence of history piles up in support of this conclusion.

More significantly, this is the verdict of God. Genesis 6:5 says, "The **LORD** saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart