

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

TRUTH

WE CAN TOUCH



*How Baptism and Communion
Shape Our Lives*

TIM CHESTER

“In *Truth We Can Touch*, Tim Chester makes a compelling case for evangelicals to recover an understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as God’s promise that comes to us in physical form. Deeply biblical and yet eminently practical, this book provides an alternative to a theology of the word limited to our heads. God’s word in Christ comes to us not only in preaching but also in baptism and at the table. As embodied creatures, we embrace God’s promises in touch and taste, with delight and praise. This accessible and winsome book is a joy!”

J. Todd Billings, Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology, Western Theological Seminary; author, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*

“This is hands down the best book on the sacraments I’ve read—warm, compelling, eye-opening, and saturated in gospel encouragement. I hadn’t realized how much I needed it.”

Sam Allberry, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *Why Bother with Church?*

“In this delightful book, Chester reminds us that baptism and Communion are God’s gifts to us that convey the gospel and grace in powerful ways. As a Baptist I would put some things differently, but I celebrate and rejoice in the main thesis set forth by Chester. Baptism and Communion are central in the New Testament, and something is wrong if they are neglected or ignored by us. Take up and read and be instructed, challenged, and—most of all—encouraged by the gospel, which is displayed so beautifully in baptism and the Eucharist.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Professor of Biblical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“After reading Tim Chester’s *Truth We Can Touch*, I sent our pastoral staff a message: ‘Add this book to our reading list for our interns, and add it to our book nook.’ Chester is one of our favorite writers, and his books have blessed our local church. Once again, he combines theological clarity with gospel warmth, conveying the beauty of Christ to the reader. By reading this accessible book, you will value baptism and Communion more, and you will be moved to worship the Savior as you consider Chester’s explanation of baptism as the embodiment of our union with Christ and the Lord’s Supper as the embodiment of our communion with Christ.”

Tony Merida, Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina

“At last, here is a great evangelical book on the sacraments. I have longed for such a book for years, one that is deep yet accessible, theologically robust and biblically grounded, and—perhaps most of all—one that touches the heart with wise pastoral application. This is a valuable resource for all ministers and a treasure for all God’s people. I cannot commend it highly enough—a delight from beginning to end.”

Melvin Tinker, Senior Minister, St John Newland, Hull, United Kingdom; author, *Language, Symbols, and Sacraments*

“The sacraments are integral to the history of redemption, yet the evangelical church has tragically neglected them as secondary and nonessential. Tim Chester sets baptism and the Lord’s Supper vividly in their biblical and historical contexts. Superbly written, easily accessible to a wide readership, rooted in Scripture and the theology of the Reformation, this book can be a catalyst for widespread recovery of the supreme blessing God gives through his appointed signs.”

Robert Letham, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology

TRUTH
WE CAN TOUCH

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TRUTH WE CAN TOUCH

*How Baptism and Communion
Shape Our Lives*

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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 the 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 René 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

was only evil continually.” The indictment could not be more complete: *every* intention, *only* evil, *all* the time.

What is God’s response? Judgment. Why do Christians keep going on about sin? What is this morbid fascination with failure? The answer is that we cannot ignore God’s judgment in favor of some happy thoughts because judgment is the biggest problem we all face. A just and holy God will respond to evil with judgment. He must do so—otherwise he would cease to be just and holy. And God cannot do that.

God’s judgment is what happens in the story of Noah in Genesis 6–9. This judgment takes the form of water. God sends a flood to wipe out humanity. In effect God *un*-creates his world. Back at creation, God separated the waters to create dry land. He brought order from chaos. At the flood the waters recombine to cover the land, and chaos returns—a chaos that drowns humanity in watery judgment.

Saved through the Judgment Symbolized by Water

But God is also gracious, and in his grace he creates a new future for humanity. He saves Noah and his family. In the ark, Noah comes through the waters of judgment. Then God sends a wind. In Hebrew the word translated “wind” is the same word used for “Spirit.” Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters at creation (Gen. 1:2), so God again sends his Spirit-wind, separating the waters to create dry land. In a sense, humanity and the earth in which we live are reborn or re-created out of judgment.

The waters of that ancient flood become a symbol of God’s judgment throughout the Bible story.

Later God rescues his people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt through Moses. The people find themselves caught between the pursuing Egyptian army and the sea. There appears to be no escape from death. But again God sends his Spirit-wind. Again

God separates the waters to create dry land. Exodus 14:21–22 says: “The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.” Moses leads the people through the water on dry “ground” or dry “land” (it is the same word in Hebrew). God’s people escape from death through water. But when the Egyptian army follows them, God again un-creates in judgment. The waters un-separate. They fold back on one another, and the Egyptians are drowned—just like humanity in the time of Noah. God judges Egypt with water and, at the same time, saves his people *through* water.

Forty years later, Joshua, the successor to Moses, brings a new generation of Israelites to the edge of the land God has promised them. Yet, between the people and the land is the Jordan River “at flood stage” (Josh. 3:15 NIV). But as soon as the people touch the river, the waters upstream pile up “in a heap” (Josh. 3:16), and, we read, “Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground” (or “dry land”) (Josh. 4:22). Joshua says, “For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over” (Josh. 4:23). God’s people are again reborn into a new land through water.

Fast-forward to Jesus. Once again we find ourselves on the banks of the river Jordan. John the Baptist has been baptizing people—immersing them in water. We’re told he was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). At that time baptism was what Gentiles did to join God’s people. Gentiles had not been part of the nation that had passed through the waters of the Sea with Moses, nor through the waters of the river with Joshua. So they had to pass symbolically

through water to join God's people—a kind of accelerated catch-up.

But now John is baptizing *Jews*. These Jews recognize that, in effect, they are like Gentiles. They are wicked. They face God's judgment. They need forgiveness. They need to be reborn by the Spirit through water. They need to reenter a renewed land.

Then Jesus steps forward from the crowd. Here is the Son of God, the Word made flesh. He is perfect, sinless, spotless, righteous. He doesn't need to repent. He doesn't need forgiveness. He doesn't need to be reborn.

And yet he steps into the water—the water that symbolizes our sin and our judgment. Jesus steps into our mess, our wickedness, our judgment. He identifies with us. It's a dramatic expression of intent. Jesus is symbolically engulfed by the waters of judgment. All those stories from the Old Testament were setting us up to understand *this* moment. In his baptism, Jesus identifies with his people and expresses his intent to take the judgment we deserve. Jesus is declaring, "I'm with you." It is the sign of the incarnation—Jesus has become one with humanity.

Then we read: "And when [Jesus] came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10–11). Notice that once again the Spirit is involved. God the Spirit descends on God the Son, and God the Father speaks from heaven. Mark emphasizes that this took place "immediately" after Jesus came out of the water. The Holy Trinity is united in affirming this act of identification through baptism. This is the plan.

The Father says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." What is Jesus doing when the Father speaks

these words? He is dripping with water—water that symbolizes judgment. He’s identifying with sinners as the drops run down his face. Having passed through the waters of judgment, he receives the verdict: “You are my Son. I love you. You give me pleasure.”

There’s a second reference to baptism in Mark’s Gospel. Two of the disciples ask to sit on the left and right sides of Jesus when Jesus reigns as King. Jesus replies, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). He’s talking about the cross. At the cross, Jesus will drain the cup of God’s wrath on our behalf. The cup of cursing is filled with our sin and will be drained by Christ at the cross so that the cup of blessing is filled with Christ’s merits and drunk by us at the Lord’s Supper. And Jesus will be baptized with God’s judgment on our behalf. In the Jordan River, Jesus was symbolically baptized into our sins. On the cross he is actually and really baptized into our sins. He is immersed in our sin—completely covered. He dies and is buried. He bears our judgment in full.

And on the third day, he rises again. He passes through judgment to give us new life.

Nearly forty years ago I, too, stood on the edge of water and then stepped in. I was baptized. Like Noah, like Moses, like Joshua, like Jesus, I passed through water.

Saved by the Promise Embodied in Baptism

This is how Peter explains what was happening in that moment:

Long ago . . . God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt

from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 3:20–21 NIV)

Notice, first, Peter says Noah was “saved through water.” “Through” can be a bit ambiguous in English. Here it doesn’t mean “by.” We’re not saved *by* the waters of baptism. Noah certainly wasn’t saved *by* the waters of the flood. Quite the opposite. He was *threatened* by the water. Instead, he was saved *from* the water *by* the ark. Peter says Noah was saved “in” or “into” the ark. So “saved through water” means kept safe as he passed through the water. Noah was kept safe by God as he passed through the waters of judgment to a new life.

Second, Peter says the story of Noah is reenacted in baptism. “This water symbolizes baptism,” says verse 21 (NIV). Like Noah, in baptism we are saved through water. We pass through the water that symbolizes judgment and we emerge to a new life.

The word translated “symbolizes” implies an “antitype” or pattern. You have a prototype or a picture, and you have its fulfillment in an antitype, the reality to which the picture points. This means Peter is not simply coming up with an interesting parallel. He’s not simply saying, “You know what? It’s a bit like Noah.” Instead, Peter is saying God has worked throughout history according to a pattern. The stories of Noah, Moses, and Joshua all took place as they did to prepare us to understand the meaning of Jesus. So it’s not so much that the story of Noah is reenacted in our baptism. It’s more that our baptism was *pre-enacted* in the story of Noah. Noah is the set up, and baptism is the punch line.

Third, Peter says baptism saves you. Many of us might blanch at these words. But we need to take what Peter says seri-

ously. The beginning of verse 21 states, “This water symbolizes baptism *that now saves you*” (NIV). Baptism saves you.

What does Peter mean? He does *not* mean that those who are baptized are automatically saved regardless of their faith or their lack of faith. *Nor* does he mean the water has magical healing or cleansing properties. He specifically rejects any such notions in verse 21, where he says baptism is not “a removal of dirt from the body.” It’s literally “from the flesh”—a word commonly used in the New Testament to describe humanity in sin. Instead, baptism “saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (NIV).

When Peter says, “Baptism . . . now saves you,” he’s saying something similar to what we affirm when we say, “The gospel saves you.” The gospel is God’s promise. It’s the promise that the death and resurrection of Jesus have dealt with the problem of sin and judgment—if we put our faith in Jesus. *Baptism is that promise in physical form.* Marcus Peter Johnson puts it this way: “Baptism is not something other than the gospel, it is the gospel in three-dimensional form, the experience and assurance of which we live for the rest of our lives.”¹ Baptism is God’s promise that we have been saved “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v. 21).

Think of it like this. The Puritan Stephen Charnock says, “The gospel sacraments seal the gospel promises, as a ring confirms the covenant of marriage.”² In a wedding both the bride and groom say, “With this ring I thee wed.” The exchange of rings is instrumental in making the marriage. Just as Peter says baptism saves you, so we might say the exchanges of rings makes you married.

1. Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 231.

2. Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse upon the Goodness of God,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 342–43, modernized.

Does this mean the act of handing over a ring makes someone married? If I slip a ring on your finger before you realize what's going on, are we married? No, clearly not. Does the act of being baptized in and of itself make someone a Christian? If someone falls into the baptistery (it happens) or gets splashed with water from the font, is he or she thereby united to Christ? No, clearly not. The exchanging of rings makes a marriage only in the context of a wedding ceremony in which vows are freely made. Likewise, baptism through water makes someone a Christian only when someone responds with faith to the promises embodied in baptism, and only in the context of a baptismal ceremony conducted by the church. In that wider context we can appropriately say that baptism saves you, especially if you remember that being baptized was the way people responded to the gospel in the apostolic era.

Today, people are often invited to come to the front or repeat the sinner's prayer. In this sense, saying that someone is saved by baptism is akin to saying someone is saved by praying the sinner's prayer. Merely pronouncing the words in the sinner's prayer does not automatically save you. But when it is said with sincerity in response to a gospel presentation, then this kind of language makes sense. One might only wish that the New Testament mode of response (baptism) were being used instead.

One more point needs to be made from our wedding analogy. Suppose the moment in the wedding ceremony comes for the exchange of rings and the best man realizes he's left them at home on the mantelpiece. Is the marriage off? Is the wedding invalid? No. The couple can still be married. You can be married without a ring. But something is missing, something that will need to be rectified at a later date. The rings are a sign of a couple's marriage. They're important as reminders to the couple of their vows they've received and as a declaration to

the world of their new loyalties. If a true believer is not baptized at the time of conversion, does this invalidate the person's union with Christ? No. The believer is still converted and still heaven-bound—just think of the penitent thief on the cross. Nevertheless, something is missing, something that ought to be rectified as soon as possible. Baptism is an important reminder of Christ's covenant commitment to us and a declaration of our new loyalty to him and his people.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit-wind of God again blew over God's people, this time to fill them with courage and power. The apostle Peter proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus. His hearers were "cut to the heart" and said, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter replied: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38–39). What must we do, according to Peter? We must be baptized. We must go through the waters—the waters that symbolize judgment and sin. As we do so, we're acknowledging God's verdict on humanity. We're saying, "Yes, I am wicked and I do deserve judgment." But more importantly, we're identifying with Jesus. Just as Jesus identified with *us* in *his* baptism, so we identify we *him* in *our* baptism. We unite ourselves to Jesus. So his death is our death, and his new life is our new life.

So my baptism points me away from myself and toward the baptism with which Jesus was baptized. I'm saved by the cross-baptism of Jesus, his baptism into suffering and death on my behalf. My baptism points me to that baptism: *the* baptism of the cross. It is a sign and seal of what the baptism of Jesus brings to me. You are baptized "*in* the name of Jesus *for* the forgiveness of your sins," says Peter (Acts 2:38). Baptism

points me to my union with Christ. This is how New Testament believers thought of themselves, as those who are “in Christ.” Just as future generations of Israel lived as free people in the promised land because the first generation had passed through the waters of the sea and the river, so we live as free people with an inheritance in the new creation because Jesus (our progenitor) passed through the judgment of death.

Pledges, Seals, Witnesses, Signs, and Bonds

Peter says baptism is “the pledge of a clear conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:21 NIV). It’s not obvious whether he means our pledge to God or God’s pledge to us. The word translated “pledge” appears only here in the New Testament and only in Daniel 4:17 in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The verb to which it is related can mean “request.” So some people take this to mean that in baptism we make a request that God will give us a clear conscience. But the normal meaning of the noun is “pledge.” In Daniel 4:17 it means a “decree.” Some commentators assume *we* make the pledge (or request), presumably because it is made “to God.” But it could be that the “clear conscience” is “to” or “before” God. So Peter could be saying that it is God who makes the pledge that we now have a clear conscience toward him. Baptism is God’s decree that we are righteous in his sight. After all, Peter has just said, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). In Romans 4:11, Paul describes circumcision as a “sign,” “as a seal of the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” In the same way, baptism is a sign and seal of God’s promise to us of salvation in Christ.

The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. It was used in two ways at the time. First, it described

the oath taken by soldiers in the Roman army. It was a sacred pledge of allegiance. Second, if you were suing someone in Roman civil law, then both parties deposited the contested amount into a common fund. At the end of the case, it was winner takes all. But until that moment, the deposited money was *sacramentum* or, as we might say today, “sacrosanct.” In this sense *sacramentum* implied that the water, bread, and wine were set apart from their ordinary use to represent God’s promise or pledge to us in the gospel, along with our corresponding response of commitment.

Matters were confused by the fact that *sacramentum* was also used to translate the Greek word for “mystery” (*mystērion*). This is used in the New Testament to refer to the revelation of Christ in the gospel (Col. 1:27; 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:16) and the relationship of Christ to the church. But *mystērion* is never used of the sacraments in the New Testament. The problem was that the association with the word “mystery” meant the sacraments were confused with the religious practices of Roman “mystery religions,” which were thought to convey magical powers on the worshipers. So in medieval theology the sacraments were commonly seen as objects with inherent spiritual power.

To avoid these mistaken associations some churches have preferred the term “ordinances” to describe baptism and Communion, since they are activities “ordained” by Christ. The problem with this term, though, is that it doesn’t distinguish baptism and Communion from the other activities Christ has ordained (like preaching and prayer). Baptism and Communion have distinctive roles as expressions of joining and belonging to the church. Plus, their physicality sets them apart and requires us to think about them in a distinctive way.

This language of pledge, seal, sign, and witness reflects the language used in the creeds of Reformation churches. The

French or Gallic Confession of Faith, a statement drafted by Calvin and adopted by the French Reformed churches in 1559, affirms that the sacraments serve as “pledges and seals of the grace of God, and by this means aid and comfort our faith because of the infirmity which is in us” (§34). It describes baptism as “a pledge of our adoption” and “a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification” (§35). Likewise the Supper is “a witness of the union which we have with Christ” (§36). The Belgic Confession (1561), one of the confessional standards of the Dutch Reformed churches, also speaks of the sacraments as “seals” and “pledges” “to nourish and strengthen our faith” (§33). The Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563, the historic confession of the Anglican Church, say the sacraments are not only “badges” or “tokens” of our profession but also “sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God’s good will towards us,” which are given to “strengthen and confirm our faith in him” (Art. 25). The Westminster Confession was written by English-speaking Puritans in the 1640s and became the main statement of faith of Presbyterians and, in adapted forms, Congregationalists and Reformed Baptists. It speaks of the sacraments as “seals of the covenant of grace” (27.1). The Lord’s Supper is “a bond and pledge of [believers’] communion with [Christ], and with each other, as members of his mystical body” (29.1).

Think of a contract. Think perhaps of an employment contract or a memorandum of sale or an IOU. What you hold in your hand is a sheet of paper with a series of commitments written on it. This is what the gospel is: a series of promises expressed in words. God promises forgiveness, acquittal, adoption, preservation, resurrection, and glory. The sacraments are like the signature at the bottom of the contract. In the past, agreements weren’t signed; they were sealed with a wax impression. So the Reform-

ers spoke of the sacraments as seals. But today a signature is our normal way of confirming commitments. The covenant promises God makes to us in the gospel are signed and sealed with water, bread, and wine. The signature doesn't add any new content to the promises; nor does it enact them. But it does seal and confirm those promises. Without a signed contract you might still have reason to be optimistic that someone would fulfill his or her promises, but a signature gives you much greater confidence. You have something you can point to, a commitment you can hold in your hand. And God has graciously given us baptism and Communion to give us greater confidence in his promises.

In the preaching of the gospel, God gives us the promise of the forgiveness in a form we can hear. That's the form that comes with clarity because it comes in the form of words. Without those words we wouldn't understand the gospel. But in the sacraments God also gives us the promise of forgiveness in a form we can see, touch, and even taste. The water, bread, and wine are added as confirmations of the reality of the promise. All our senses are thus engaged so that our frail faith might be nurtured. Jesus describes the wine as the "blood of the new covenant." A covenant is a relationship-forming promise. Here is God's promise in physical form so we can see it as well as hear it, taste it as well as read it.

Truth We Can Touch

This means my baptism preaches the gospel to me. And baptism does so in a very important way. It is an external act and a physical reality. It's truth we can touch. So baptism creates a very powerful promise.

Today you might feel forgiven. You might feel like a new person. You may feel loved by God. But what about tomorrow? What about the day when you sin spectacularly? Or when

cancer is diagnosed? Or when you're betrayed by a loved one? How will you feel then? Will you feel forgiven when you've sinned? Will you feel like a new person when cancer is eating your body? Will you feel loved when you're unloved? A hope based on our feelings or our circumstances is a hope built on a shaky foundation. It will not survive the storms of life.

But our hope is based on God's promise. We have that promise in God's word. But *God in his kindness, knowing how frail we are, knowing how battered by life we can be, has also given us his promise in water, bread, and wine.* He's done so because he loves us, and he wants us to be confident in that love. It's so important that we grasp this: baptism and Communion are God's promise in physical form.

Think how this works in a marriage. If you are married and you say to your spouse, "I love you," you give a significant reassurance of your love. But you do more than simply declare it. You also kiss, hug, and touch. The declaration of your love also takes physical form. And no husband or wife thinks that physical expression of love is redundant. Kissing and hugging add to the spoken declaration.

We would rightly be suspicious of a marriage that was all physical touching without any conversation or a marriage that was all conversation without any physical affection. In the same way, a Christianity that is all word and no sacrament or all sacrament and no word is missing something vital. Melvin Tinker explains, "For just as the physical act of embracing or kissing someone is capable of conveying forgiveness and acceptance (as in the story of the Prodigal Son—Luke 15:20), so the physical act of the giving of bread and wine conveys the forgiveness and gracious acceptance of God."³

3. Melvin Tinker, "Language, Symbols and Sacraments: Was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?," *Churchman* 112, no. 2 (1998): 145.

Some evangelicals seem suspicious of people who express a desire or need for the sacraments, as if this were an indication of spiritual weakness. And in one sense they're right—it *is* an indication of spiritual weakness, an acknowledgment that we need these vivid means of grace. But what is alarming is the presumption that we are above such needs and that a cerebral communion with Christ is sufficient. Calvin says of those who question the need for visible signs, “Nothing is more odd than for the faithful freely to do without the assistance handed down by the Lord or allow themselves to be deprived.”⁴

Calvin defines a sacrament as an accommodation by God to our weakness: a sacrament is “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.”⁵ God provides sacraments for “our ignorance and dullness,” “our weakness,” “our dull capacity,” and “our dullness.”⁶ Or as Thomas Cranmer, the great Reforming archbishop of Canterbury, says, “Our Saviour Christ, knowing us to be, as it were, babes and weaklings in faith, has ordained signs and tokens for our senses to allure and to draw us to more strength and more constant faith in him.”⁷

It's not just that we are weak; it's also that the promises of the gospel are so amazing that we struggle to believe them. The Dutch Reformed minister Gerard Wisse says this:

The promise of God in Christ Jesus is of such extraordinary magnitude that it seems almost impossible that it also

4. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Epistles of James and Jude*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and David W. Torrance, trans. A. W. Morrison (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1972), 138.

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.14.1.

6. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3, 6.

7. Thomas Cranmer, “Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament, 1550,” in *The Work of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. G. E. Duffield, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 2 (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1964), 71–72, modernized.

applies to someone like me. Therefore the Lord, by means of His Supper, stamps the seal of confirmation upon this promise. . . . God, so to speak, places the ring of spiritual betrothal on our finger.⁸

Likewise, the Puritan Richard Vines says, “So if doubts arise concerning the reality of God and the sureness of this covenant that speaks of so much grace and mercy, we look upon and take hold of this seal of blood [in the cup of Communion], and are thereby settled and therein acquiesce.”⁹

The Belgic Confession of 1516 states that the sacraments are added or “joined” to “the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses, both that which [God] signifies to us by his Word, and that which he works inwardly in our hearts, thereby assuring and confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us” (§33). The grace of faith, says the Westminster Confession, is “ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word” but also “increased and strengthened” by the sacraments (14.1).

So word and sacrament work together. Augustine says the sacraments are “a kind of visible word” of God,¹⁰ while the Puritan Thomas Watson describes the Lord’s Supper as “a visible sermon.”¹¹ John Calvin declares, “Let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him

8. Gerard Wisse, “May I Partake of the Lord’s Supper?,” in Wisse, *Christ’s Ministry in the Christian: The Administration of His Offices in the Believer*, trans. Bartel Elshout and William Van Voorst (Sioux Center, IA: Netherlands Reformed, 1993), 100–101, modernized.

9. Richard Vines, “The Fruit and Benefit of Worthy Receiving,” in *The Puritans on the Lord’s Supper*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 120.

10. Augustine, “Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John” (80.3), in vol. 7 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, ed. Philip Schaff (1888; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 344, quoted in Robert Letham, *The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 7.

11. Thomas Watson, “The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper,” in Kistler, *The Puritans on the Lord’s Supper*, 127.

the treasures of heavenly grace.”¹² “The content of the Word and sacrament is completely identical,” says the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck. “They only differ in the external form, in the *manner* in which they offer the *same* Christ to us. . . . In the Lord’s Supper we indeed do not receive any other or any more benefits than we do in the Word, but also no fewer.”¹³

In other words, the sacraments don’t add anything new or different from the promises we receive in the gospel. We’re not getting anything from the sacraments that we don’t already have through the gospel. Indeed, the sacraments *require* the word to make clear the meaning of the promises they embody. But the sacraments do confirm those promises and reassure us that they apply to us, frail sinners though we know ourselves to be. Here’s how Sinclair Ferguson puts it: “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.”¹⁴

Calvin goes further: “The sacraments bring *the clearest promises*,” he says, “and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life.” He adds that the sacraments attest God’s “good will and love toward us *more expressly* than by word.” They are “*more evident*” and “*more certain*.”¹⁵ The word communicates to our hearing. The sacraments, too, communicate to our hearing because they contain the word of promise in the words of institution (no one conducts a Communion service in complete silence). But in addition, they also communicate

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

13. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 479, 567.

14. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 223.

15. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3, 5–6, emphasis added.

to our sight, touch, taste, and perhaps even smell in the water, bread, and wine—hence the “more” of Calvin’s statements. Indeed, Calvin, who originally wrote in Latin, added a Greek word to describe the sacraments: *eikonikōs* or “icons.”¹⁶

Consider the words Ananias spoke to Paul when they met shortly after Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus: “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Paul was saved by calling on Christ’s name (as he explains in Rom. 10:5–13). But the promise of forgiveness took physical form for him in his baptism—so much so that, as the water covered his body, he could imagine it washing away his sins, the physical act pointing to the spiritual act that was taking place as he called on Christ’s name. Over his troubled soul washed the waters of baptism. This would have acted as a deep reassurance to a man who had just been accused of persecuting the risen Christ by the risen Christ himself (Acts 22:7).

So word and sacrament go together. That doesn’t mean there must always be a sermon when the Lord’s Supper is administered. That’s a potentially clunky application of this truth. Indeed, it can detract from the Lord’s Supper as if its real meaning is left to the accompanying sermon. Instead, the principle is that there must be an explanatory context. This will involve what the Westminster Confession calls “the word of institution” (27.3). But it will also involve a wider context in which the meaning of the sacraments and the gospel they represent are taught within the congregation. The people taking Communion need to have a growing understanding of its significance. We need to teach this. And this is often absent in evangelical churches. As a result, people don’t really know what they’re doing when they take Communion or how they should receive it.

16. J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord’s Table* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 18n14. See *Institutes*, 4.14.6.

A Truth beyond Feelings

I recently asked a group of people who had been baptized as believers how they felt when they were baptized. Do you know what most of them said? “Wet.” That might seem like a flip-pant remark or an evasive joke. But it’s actually a vital truth. My standing before God does not depend on how I feel inside. It depends on his promise. But how do I know that I have his promise? Because there was a day when I was wet. The promise didn’t well up inside me. If that’s how it came to me, then I might worry whether it was real—perhaps it was just a trick of my emotions. But instead God’s promise has come to us (if you’re baptized) in physical form, at a moment in history, as an external reality.

The same applies to Communion. The bread and wine are a physical embodiment of God’s promise. Think of them in those terms. As the bread is handed to you, think of it as God’s promise to you, his pledge, his covenant.

Here’s why this is important.

There are two opposite dangers in how we view the sacraments. First, the Catholic Church says that grace is conveyed through the sacraments *ex opere operato*—“by the action of the act,” irrespective of whether there is faith. This was developed to justify baptismal regeneration—the idea that people become Christians simply by being baptized. It also has the effect of making Communion the equivalent of taking a spiritual vitamin pill. What you think about a pill doesn’t affect the benefit it conveys to you (at least if we ignore the placebo effect). The pill strengthens your health whether you believe it will work or not. Catholic theology believes the sacraments can be like taking medicine you don’t believe in. The fact that you doubt their efficacy does not stop them working.

But sin is more than sickness; it is an act of rebellion against God. And salvation is more than healing; it is reconciliation with God. Sin and salvation—and therefore also the sacraments—are relational realities. The sacraments have value only in the context of a relationship with God in Christ. In other words, the sacraments benefit us when we have faith.

But there is an opposite danger, and this is a danger to which evangelicals are often prone. It is the danger of linking the efficacy of Communion to the way I feel about it: if I am moved, then it's effective; if I am unmoved, then it's ineffective. So, what makes it effective is my experience. What makes it effective is me! In this case, the Lord's Supper ceases to be a divine act and becomes a human act, and its power is human power.

We live in a culture where everything is about response and feeling. The validity of a truth or an action is linked to the way it makes me feel. And our contemporary evangelical culture is deeply imbued with this subjectivism. So we need to understand that the gospel is entirely outside us. The gospel is not my response. The gospel describes not my response but that to which I respond. Leonard Vander Zee comments:

Ask most any Protestant about the meaning of the Supper, and you will hear the word *remembrance*. The problem is that a too-simplistic understanding of the Lord's command has limited the meaning of the sacrament in the minds of many to the recollection of a long-ago historical event. It tends to place the weight of the sacramental meaning in the minds, heart and faith of the participants, as he or she struggles to remember, with faith and gratitude, what the Lord did for them on the cross.¹⁷

17. Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 210.

This is why it is helpful to think of the sacraments as embodied promises. Their validity and power lie in the one who makes the promises. The water, bread, and wine are objective realities outside us *that embody the objective nature of the gospel promise*.

Consider the parallel with the word of God. Conversion and growth take place as someone responds to the preached word with faith. But a lack of faith does not invalidate the preaching. The word that is preached is still true, still powerful, still divine. In the same way, God's presence is felt and his promise received only when someone responds to the sacramental word with faith. But a lack of faith does not invalidate the sacrament. The meaning does not reside in my response any more than the meaning of the preached word lies in the reader's response. Thomas Cranmer put it like this:

Christ is present in his sacraments, just as he is present in his word when he works mightily through it in the hearts of the hearers. By this we do not mean that Christ is physically present in the voice or sound of the speaker (whose sound perishes as soon as the words are spoken). Instead, by this we mean that Christ works through his word, using the voice of the speaker, as his instrument. In the same way, he also uses his sacraments, by which he works, and therefore can be said to be present in them.¹⁸

So it is true that baptism and Communion are effective only when we respond with faith. They are just like the *word* of God in that respect. Merely hearing a sermon doesn't save you—you need to have faith in Christ. Merely being baptized or receiving Communion doesn't save you—you need to have faith in

18. Thomas Cranmer, "Answer to Gardiner," in *The Works of Thomas Cranmer*, vol. 1, *On the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, ed. John Edmund Cox (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1844), 11, modernized.

Christ. But this does not mean that the meaning or power of baptism and Communion lies in our response—any more than the meaning of God’s word lies in our response. My response matters, but it does not make the word, the water, the bread, the wine meaningful. Their meaning derives from the gospel. They are all objective declarations of God’s promise to us. They derive their significance and value from Christ. So they do not come from faith. They come for faith—to create and strengthen faith.

The person who sits through a sermon deconstructing the words of the preacher or adding up the hymn numbers (as I used to do as a child) derives no benefit from the sermon. In the same way, the person who receives Communion at a special midnight Communion on Christmas Eve after an evening in a local bar without any thought of Christ (as my friends would do) derives no benefit from doing so. Indeed, in both cases, their response (or, rather, their lack of it) confirms God’s judgments against their unbelief. But children of God who hear the word and receive the sacraments with faith find their faith strengthened.

Think how helpful that is. You may be full of doubt or guilt or just spiritual numbness. And here is God’s promise. You hold it in your hands. You put it to your lips. This is God’s kindness to you. This is God’s commitment to you. This is God’s *yes* to you in Christ. The forgiveness of sin is not just something I feel. It is an objective reality that took place at the cross. And we have that promise in water, bread, and wine.

I want you to feel it. But it does not depend on your feelings. It arrives in your hands and in your mouth *from God*. What gives it its meaning is not your faith or your feeling but the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so it comes to *strengthen* faith. The sacraments are not dependent on how I feel, and

therefore because of this they are able to *change* the way I feel. They speak reassurance to my heart. Marcus Peter Johnson explains:

Our mental remembrance of the significance of Christ's death is not able, and is not meant, to sustain us in our fragile and compromised states, full of the perplexities, doubts, tragedies, griefs, and despair that inevitably accompany us. Only Christ is able, and is meant, to do that. The Lord's Supper is God's assurance to us that we really belong to Christ in the fulness of his saving person; that we really do share in the One who, in flesh and blood, is our justification, sanctification, and redemption.¹⁹

An Act You Can't Perform

The leader of the baptism service said, "We're here today because Jack has decided to be baptized to express his decision to follow Jesus." I winced. After a song, this was followed by Jack telling us why he had decided to follow Jesus and why he wanted to be baptized. What could be wrong with that? In one sense, nothing. I do not object to any of this language in itself. My problem is that it is not the place to start, and it is not what matters most.

Consider what actually occurs in a baptism. Who is active and who is passive? Imagine the scene. A young man stands in a large pool of water. Then someone says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit." The young man is plunged under the water and then lifted out again. Or a baby is held in the arms of the minister, who sprinkles water on his or her forehead. Who is active and who is passive? Clearly the person being baptized is passive. This reality is reflected in the

19. Johnson, *One with Christ*, 240.

nature of the verb “baptize.” You can use the active form—“I baptize”—only if you are the officiant. For the person being baptized, the form of the verb is passive (“I am baptized”).

What do you do when you are baptized? The answer is *nothing*. It is done *to* you. It is an act you can’t perform for yourself. You just stand there, and someone pours water over you or immerses you in water.

It is a picture of our salvation. What did we do to be saved? Nothing. Jesus has done it all. It was Jesus who was immersed into death and hell on your behalf. In baptism you just stand there as God pours his blessing over you and immerses you in his love.

This is really important. You are not the active agent in your baptism. Your baptism is always something done *to* you, not *by* you. This is one of the strengths of the paedobaptist position. When an infant is being baptized, there can be no suggestion that this baptism is taking place as a result of the child’s merits or decision. But this truth is vital whatever the age or status of the person being baptized. Indeed, the passivity of baptism is more important for credobaptists to remember because, otherwise, credobaptists tend to emphasize the actions or decision of the person being baptized. It is true that we must respond with faith to be saved. But salvation does not start with our faith. It starts with the Father’s electing love, Christ’s work of redemption, and the new life the Spirit works in our hearts.

So who is active in baptism? The first answer is obvious: the person conducting the baptism. He represents the church. Baptism is an act performed by the church. The church baptizes. It is a corporate act through which we welcome people into membership.

But it gets better. After all, that is still the testimony of people. And who knows—one day they may let you down. The key

reality is that *God* is active in a baptism. Jack's baptism is an embodied promise from God to Jack.

In baptism (and in Communion) there is a three-way conversation:

- God says, "I have saved you by uniting you with Christ and his people."
- The church says, "We are united in Christ and committed to one another."
- I say, "I am committed to Christ and his people."

Francis Turretin says the sacraments have "primary" and "secondary" purposes. The primary purpose is to confirm the covenant of grace and seal our union with God—and this is a purpose God fulfills through the sacraments. The secondary purpose is to be a badge of our public profession of faith.²⁰ We will look at the declarations that the church and the individual make in future chapters. They are important because baptism does involve a covenantal commitment. But it is *really, really* important that God's voice is first and foremost. His is the voice that should dominate. "The primary movement which the gospel sacraments embody," says John Stott, "is from God to man, not man to God."²¹

The Westminster Confession captures this balance well (28.1). It says that a person's baptism is a sign and seal of five things:

- "the covenant of grace,"
- "his ingrafting into Christ,"
- "regeneration,"
- "remission of sins,"

20. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 341–42.

21. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 259.

- “his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.”

Only the final one of these five signs is about our response; the first four describe what God does.

The 1689 Second Baptist Confession of Faith was adapted from the Westminster Confession, and, as you would expect, it changes what the Westminster Confession says about *who* should be baptized. But it retains a similar balance when it describes what baptism *signifies* (29.1). It says baptism is a sign of

- “fellowship with [Christ] in his death and resurrection,”
- “being engrafted into him,”
- “remission of sins,”
- “giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life.”

In many Baptist circles today the emphasis tends to be on this final sign—our commitment to God. But the 1689 confession reminds us that, historically, Reformed Baptists have placed just as much emphasis as the Westminster Confession on the way baptism points us away from ourselves to our union with Christ and the promise of forgiveness.

The same is true of the Supper: it, too, primarily embodies a movement from God to us. The Dutch Reformed minister Gerard Wisse has this to say:

Our celebration of the Lord’s Supper is not in the first place an act whereby we bear witness to *our* conversion, *our* pious frame, or *our* relationship to the Lord—even though these things may also be discussed. Rather, it is primarily *God’s* act towards us, whereas our partaking is the reciprocal act. . . . As a sacrament it is a warranty—a visible sealing of the veracity of *His* promises. . . . In a sacrament the focus is in

the first place on a message which comes *from God* to us—the message of who and what the triune covenant God is and remains for His people.²²

This idea was central to the renewal of worship and liturgy at the Reformation. In the medieval church the focus was firmly on what the people did or, rather, what the priest did on behalf of the people. A service was performed *for* God or a sacrifice was offered *to* God to earn his merit. The Reformation switched this around. When the people of God gather, it is God who is active, and it is God’s voice that predominates. Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “The liturgy as the Reformers understood and practiced it consists of God acting and us responding through the work of the Spirit. . . . The liturgy is a meeting between God and God’s people, a meeting in which both parties act, but in which God initiates and we respond.”²³

The word “liturgy” comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, a combination of words meaning “work” and “people.” So the Catholic Church is fond of describing the liturgy and the sacraments as “the work of the people.” But, in fact, “work *for* the people” would be a better translation of *leitourgia*. In the Roman world, *leitourgia* was public work donated to the populace by a rich benefactor. In the same way, the sacraments are donated to us by our great benefactor. Corporate worship is not a work we perform for God’s benefit.

Again and again the Scriptures remind us that God has no need of our sacrifices. But if God does not need sacrifices, why does he ask for them? The answer is that God *gives* them as the promise and picture of full atonement through the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ. Their benefit is not for God but for the

22. Wisse, “May I Partake of the Lord’s Supper?” 100–101, emphasis added.

23. Cited in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 71.

worshiper. They were given in the Old Testament to nurture faith in the coming Lamb of God. We often remind one another that the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God when we need to raise resources for some project. But in their original context those words are actually a warning not to suppose that we do something for God in our worship.

I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.

For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.

I know all the birds of the hills,
and all that moves in the field is mine.

If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its fullness are mine.

Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats? (Ps. 50:9–13)

Instead, worship in your church on a Sunday morning is a *gift* given to you by God to nurture your faith. Psalm 50 continues with an invitation to call on God “in the day of trouble” (v. 15). Yes, we sing our praises to him, but even our praises are given as a means by which we might teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16; see also Eph. 5:19). Yes, we “offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Ps. 50:14; see also v. 23), but these honor God by responding to what he has done for us.

The issue is this: *Who* does the sacraments? In this respect the views of the sacraments held by Roman Catholics and many evangelicals are actually more similar than many evangelicals realize. For they both see the sacraments as something we do for God. But baptism and Communion are not something we do for God; they are something he does for us. Communion is

called the Eucharist, “a thanksgiving,” because it is a gift we received passively. The goal of the sacraments is not to build God up; instead, God uses them as a means of grace to build *us* up in our faith. This is why there are only two sacraments and not the seven identified by the Catholic Church. Protestants affirm some of the other five Catholic sacraments as legitimate activities—we, too, believe in marriage and ordination, for example. But we do not see these as sacraments, and that is because they are acts we do or promises we make. What makes baptism and the Supper distinctive is that they are gifts we receive from Christ.

Why does this matter?

There was a period of his life when Martin Luther, the great Reformer, was in hiding from persecution in a castle. He spent his time translating the Bible into German. But it was a dark time. The established church had rejected him, labeling him a heretic. He struggled with doubt and discouragement. On one occasion, it is said, he threw an inkpot across the room at the devil. But another one of his strategies was this. He was often heard shouting in the grounds of the castle, *Baptizatus sum*, “I am baptized.” In my imagination he stands in the courtyard of the castle in the falling snow (I don’t know why it’s snowing, but in my imagination it is) and shouts, “I am a baptized man.” How Luther felt was up and down—mostly down. His circumstances looked bleak. But his baptism was a fact, and it embodied the promise of God.

Imagine if someone had introduced Luther’s baptism with the words, “We’re here today because Martin has decided to be baptized to express his decision to follow Jesus.” If this is how I have been taught to understand my baptism, then Luther’s words have no power against the devil, no power to sustain faith, no promise of assurance. If baptism is primarily an expression

of my decision, my faith, my actions, then it is as strong as I am. And that is not very strong! In the midst of doubt, why would I not also doubt the feelings I had back at my baptism? Perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps I got carried away with the occasion.

But if, instead, I see baptism as an act performed on me from outside, then I am not left in my introspective swamp. I have a plank on which I can climb free. Baptism is not my declaration that I am okay. It is the church's declaration that I am united to Christ by faith. And it is God's promise to save me and keep me through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Fact. It is a declaration that comes to me from outside me. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not *primarily* signs of our subjective experience or faith or response. They are signs that point us to the gospel.

In one sense, we cannot know if we are among the elect, for we have no direct access to God's secret decrees. But we do know that all who come to Jesus are saved. God's electing choice is revealed when people put their faith in Christ. "All that the Father gives me will come to me," says Jesus in John 6:37, "and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." So our concern is not to second-guess the secret things of God's election (Deut. 29:29). Our concern is, Have I entrusted myself to Jesus? When doubts come or Satan accuses or our sin throws everything into confusion, we do not turn inward and look for signs of electing grace in the murky depths of our hearts. We turn outward to look at Christ. Baptism helps us do that. It does so not because those who are baptized are automatically saved, but because the promise of Christ is expressed in visible, tangible form in baptism. When doubts arise, we put our faith afresh in Christ, who once dripped with the water that expressed his identification with sinners. We put our faith afresh in Christ, who was submerged in judgment on our behalf at the cross. We put our

faith afresh in Christ, who emerged from judgment at his resurrection. We put our faith afresh in Christ, whose death and resurrection we have enacted in our own baptism.

As a child I had a long period during which I lacked assurance. It was a dark time, since I was all too aware of what was at stake. The questions that played on my mind were: Had I repented enough? Did I have enough faith? I am not sure in what units I thought faith was measured or what the pass mark was! One Sunday my father was preaching in another church and I traveled with him (something I do not remember doing on any other occasion). He preached on the words of Jesus from John 6:37 quoted above, “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” I can remember thinking: “I’ve come to Jesus and he promises not to send me away. It doesn’t matter how strong my faith is; what matters is that I have put that faith in Jesus.” Shortly thereafter I was baptized. Ever since, when I have been troubled by doubts, I have looked back to my baptism. It is as if my baptism captured that moment of clarity when I stopped looking at myself and looked instead to Christ.

In his “Large Catechism,” Luther said: “Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: ‘But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.’”²⁴ Of course, wandering around shouting “I am baptized” is not enough to save you if you do not have faith in Christ. But, then, people are not going to find comfort in shouting “I am baptized” unless they have some measure of faith. When we are afraid, when we feel the weight of our sin, when we feel the power of the enemy, we can say, “I am

24. Martin Luther “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord* (1580), ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pt. 4, §44 (462).

baptized.” In other words: “I have received the promise of God. God is for me. And if God is for me, who can be against me?”

What should you do when you are filled with guilt or fear or doubt? Look to the baptism of Jesus and see him dripping with water as a sign that he identifies with you in your sin. And look to your own baptism and see yourself dripping with water as God’s promise that you are forgiven in Christ. You have passed through judgment to new life with Christ.

*Baptism and the Lord's Supper are
more than just water, bread, and wine.
They are God's promises to us in physical form.*

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