



FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

A Lutheran Response to the Evangelical View of the
Sacraments

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Introduction

The Almighty God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has forgiven all your sins. By your baptism, you are born again and made a dear child of your Father in heaven. May God strengthen you to live in your baptismal grace all the days of your life. Peace be with you.¹

It has been my pleasure and my privilege to speak these words on several occasions to an individual just baptized. It is my prayer, my hope, and my confidence that you have had similar opportunities. These are the words not of the baptism proper, but of the rite as it appears in the *Christian Worship* hymnal. In other words, they are not, strictly speaking, part and parcel of the sacrament, but they have been put into use to explain, clarify, and teach what takes place in the sacrament.

Similarly, after each table of communicants have received the Lord's Supper, in my experience, they are dismissed with a word of blessing as well as explanation. The dismissal I am accustomed to using declares, "May this strengthen and keep you steadfast in the true faith, to life everlasting. Go in peace, your sins are forgiven."²

Clearly and appropriately, we have connected the use of these sacraments to the forgiveness of sins. The question that this paper has been asked to address is "What do we mean?" That is, "What do we mean when we say that baptism and the Lord's Supper forgive sins?" The question is asked in the context of recognizing that many in the Evangelical or Anabaptist camps would clearly deny this statement and assertion.

What Do We Say?

Lutherans have long spoken about the sacraments in this way. In fact, in the very definition of the sacraments, we tend to speak of the forgiveness of sins. I can still hear the cadence of my confirming pastor drilling into my head a five-point definition of what makes a sacrament: "A sacrament is 1) a sacred act 2) commanded by God 3) contains visible elements 4) connected with God's Word 5) works forgiveness of sins." Kuske's exposition in *Luther's Catechism* makes the same points in a slightly different format:

When we use the term "sacrament," we mean a sacred act that has three basic characteristics:

1. A sacrament is *a sacred act that Christ established* or instituted for Christians to do.

1. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), 14.

2. Interestingly enough, I am not able to cite and specific reference for these words. A good portion of them appear to approximate part of *The Lutheran Hymnal's* words of distribution (see page 29). I apparently have picked them up by observation.

2. A sacrament is a sacred act in which *Christ tells us to use earthly elements* (water, bread, and wine) *together with God's Word*.
3. A sacrament is a sacred act in which *Christ offers, gives, and seals to us the forgiveness of sins* and thus also life and salvation.³

These definitions, of course, are not biblically mandated. The term *sacrament* is neither used nor defined in Scripture. But we have used this definition to describe what sets Holy Communion and Baptism apart from other rites and activities. They have in common the institution of Christ, the use of visible elements connected to God's Word, and the forgiveness of sins.

This final aspect of the sacraments is spoken of at length in the Lutheran Confessions. The Augsburg Confession says, "Concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him."⁴ Though here the word *forgiveness* is not specifically used, it is clearly meant, for only through the forgiveness of sins does anyone become pleasing to God.

In a separate article, the same confession rejects "*those who teach that the sacraments justify ex opera operato without faith and who do not teach that this faith should be added so that the forgiveness of sin (which is obtained through faith and not through work) may be offered there.*"⁵ Thus faith receives the forgiveness of sins offered in the sacraments.

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession expounds on the number and use of the sacraments. Speaking of Baptism, Lord's Supper, and absolution, it confesses: "For these rites have the command of God and the promise of grace, which is the essence of the New Testament. For surely our hearts ought to be certain that when we are baptized, when we eat the body of the Lord, and when we are absolved, God truly forgives us on account of Christ."⁶ Here again the use of Baptism and the reception of Holy Communion are tied to the forgiveness of sins. Likewise in speaking specifically of the Lord's Supper, the Apology asserts, "Because this is a sacrament of the New Testament, as Christ clearly says [cf. 1 Cor. 11:25], communicants therefore ought to be confident that they are being offered what is promised in the New Testament, namely, the free forgiveness of sins."⁷

3. David P. Kuske, *Luther's Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1998), 220-221, emphasis original.

4. Augsburg Confession IX.1-2 in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.

5. Augsburg Confession XIII.3, *Ibid.*, 46.

6. Apology XIII.4, *Ibid.*, 219.

7. Apology XII.20, *Ibid.*, 221-222.

Luther's Small Catechism also addresses this issue. It is indeed worth teaching to even the young people of the household or the church. Particular to our discussion is the second part of Holy Baptism:

What gifts or benefits does baptism grant? Answer:

It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.

What are these words and promise of God? Answer:

Where our Lord Christ says in Mark 16[:16], "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be damned."⁸

Both the second and third parts of the Small Catechism concerning the Sacrament of the Altar are pertinent here:

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer:

The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing? Answer:

Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, "forgiveness of sins."⁹

Luther's Large Catechism naturally follows the Small in addressing these matters. Regarding Baptism: "This is the simplest way to put it: the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. For no one is baptized in order to become a prince, but, as the words say, 'to be saved.' To be saved, as everyone well knows, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever."¹⁰ And again, "Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true."¹¹ And yet one more time, "Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the

8. Small Catechism IV.5-8, *Ibid.*, 359.

9. Small Catechism VI.5-8, *Ibid.*, 362-363.

10. Large Catechism IV.24-25, *Ibid.*, 459.

11. Large Catechism IV.41-42, *Ibid.*, 461.

jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory."¹²

Similarly in the Large Catechism Luther addresses the Sacrament of the Altar:

For it is most necessary that we know what we should seek and obtain there. This is clear and easily understood from the words just quoted: "This is my body and blood, given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." That is to say, in brief, that we go to the sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because the words are there, and they impart it to us! For this reason he bids me eat and drink, that it may be mine and do me good as a sure pledge and sign—indeed, as the very gift he has provided for me against my sins, death, and all evils.¹³

Furthermore, it is this forgiveness that motivates Christians to come to the sacrament. Luther states,

But those who feel their weakness, who are anxious to be rid of it and desire help, should regard and use the sacrament as a precious antidote against the poison in their systems. For here in the sacrament you are to receive from Christ's lips the forgiveness of sins, which contains and brings with it God's grace and the Spirit with all his gifts, protection, defense, and power against death, the devil, and every trouble.¹⁴

This same conviction continued among the Lutheran confessors also after Luther's death. The Formula of Concord testifies of the forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament of the Altar specifically. This is stated most clearly in the Solid Declaration, where the Words of Institution are prescribed to be used in public worship "so that Christ's words will arouse, strengthen, and confirm the hearers' faith in the nature and benefits of this sacrament (that is, the presence of Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits that have been won for us by Christ's death and the shedding of his blood, which are given to us in his testament)."¹⁵

The Lutheran Confessions have much more to say on the topic of the sacraments, and in dealing with each one individually. Additional quotations will have their place later in this paper, but the foregoing establish unmistakably that Lutherans have held in high regard the teaching that Baptism and Holy Communion forgive sin. It is of utmost importance that we as heirs of the Reformation continue to do so.

12. Large Catechism IV.83, *Ibid.*, 466.

13. Large Catechism V.22, *Ibid.*, 469.

14. Large Catechism V.70, *Ibid.*, 474.

15. Formula of Concord SD VII.81, *Ibid.*, 607.

While to this point we have considered the sacraments together, it remains worthwhile for us to focus on each separately as well, since the challenges to and false teachings against each one are in some respects unique.

Holy Baptism is a washing with water connected to the Word of God. This washing is not one that removes physical dirt from the outside of our bodies, but it is a washing away of sin. The benefits of Baptism are received by faith, which God the Holy Spirit creates, strengthens, and preserves through Baptism.

We struggle to explain and describe the blessings and benefits of Baptism in a succinct way. A full and complete definition of this gift of God is not easily captured in a soundbite or in a Twitter-friendly phrase. Though this no doubt says something about our human limitations, it speaks volumes about the abundant grace of God in this sacrament. As we consider it, we find new aspects over which we might marvel, new assurances for our faith, and new encouragement in our Christian living.

Baptism is a means of grace. Gaylin Schmeling explains, “When we speak of baptism as a means of grace, we refer to it as an instrument, or channel, that brings the benefits of the cross to us and produces faith in us to receive those benefits. When faith is already present, the means of grace strengthen and preserve that faith.”¹⁶ When we say that Baptism forgives sins, we mean that in this sacrament God offers and gives to us forgiveness of all our sins to be received by faith. This forgiveness is based on and results from the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for us. Therefore, though the accusations have been made at times, we do not mean that Baptism forgives sins apart from Christ or apart from faith.

Deutschlander employs rich imagery to describe the meaning of this sacrament as he writes,

It’s as though there were a great well and fountain of God’s love and grace in heaven—love and grace that is of his very essence. Then in the Sacrament of Baptism God takes all of his love and mercy and pours it into a funnel. It gushes down from heaven through the funnel of Baptism and covers us as the spigot is opened fully in the simple baptismal act....And it is as though Christ has taken the one being baptized in his arms and placed that one in the lap of his Father, declaring, “See! Here is one for whom I lived on earth, shed my blood, suffered the torments of the damned, and died! For my sake adopt also this one as your own dear child for time and for eternity.”¹⁷

And we join with Deutschlander in concluding, “The Sacrament of Baptism is indeed a beautiful means of grace, is it not?!”¹⁸

16. Gaylin R. Schmeling, *Baptism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 24.

17. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2015), 420.

18. *Ibid.*, 432

Just as beautiful and just as much a means of grace is the precious gift God has given in the Lord's Supper. In this meal we partake of bread and wine and together with them the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself. Koelpin explains, "Jesus is present at the meal, hidden under the form of bread and wine, to reveal to us the death benefits of his work on the cross."¹⁹ In other words, he is present in the sacrament to bring us forgiveness. The connection between Christ's body and blood in the sacrament and forgiveness of sins is described by Deutschlander:

If Jesus gives us himself in the Sacrament, then, of course, there is the forgiveness of sins there! For when God looks at us what does he see? He sees Jesus who is ours by faith and who is now ours also in this special way with the gift of himself, the gift of his true body and blood in the Sacrament. Yes, he sees in us the very price of our salvation! For it was with his true body and blood that he paid the price for our forgiveness. If we have in the Sacrament the price of our salvation, then surely we have the salvation that price paid for!²⁰

Again, these assurances really only scratch the surface of the great comfort Holy Communion offers and the incredible significance it has in the life of a Christian. To ground our discussion and both reinforce and explain many points already made, we turn our attention to the scriptural basis of our understanding of the sacraments.

Why Do We Say What We Say?

Simply put, we maintain our position concerning forgiveness in the sacraments because of the words of Scripture. We are convinced, as the Lutheran Confessors were, that the only sure foundation for our teaching is the Bible. All proper doctrine is not only related to what is said in the Bible, but it is drawn directly from it.

Several passages inform our view of Holy Baptism. Christ's commission to his followers and his institution of Baptism is found in Matthew 28:18-20: "Then Jesus came to [the eleven disciples] and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" The main verb of Jesus' command is "make disciples." As in English, "baptizing" and "teaching" are participles in the Greek. We carry out the instruction from Jesus to "make disciples" by baptizing them and by teaching them.

The Apostle Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit pens many passages concerning this sacrament. In his Epistle to the Romans, he describes how Baptism connects us to the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul writes, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,

19. Arnold J. Koelpin, *Lord's Supper* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2007), 47.

20. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 434.

we too may live a new life” (6:3-4). Paul makes a similar point to the Colossians when he says, “In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:11-12).

To the Galatian Christians Paul indicates that Baptism and the resultant faith brings people into the family of God. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (3:26-27).

Paul mentions Baptism also as he compares the love of a husband for his wife to the love of Christ for the church. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

And Paul ties Baptism to God’s saving act on our behalf in Titus 3:4-7: “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

Peter likewise connects Baptism to salvation and in even stronger terms. He writes, “In [the ark] 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 good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:20-22).

Scripture also records for us accounts of Baptisms performed for several individuals and households.

Christ’s institution of Holy Communion, which took place as he celebrated the Passover with his disciples, is found in all three synoptic gospels. Though not identical in the details that they share, the accounts are quite similar. As Matthew records: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (26:26-28).

Paul also treats the subject of the Lord’s Supper extensively in his first epistle to the Corinthian Christians. He reminds them, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (10:16). He later explains: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on

to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (11:23-29).

Enough has been said for the moment about what Lutherans believe and teach based on the Bible passages listed above and others like them. The focus of this essay is a comparison between those views and the views of other Christian groups. Specifically, the assignment concerned the Evangelical/Anabaptist view of forgiveness.

What Do Others Say?

A direct comparison between the confessional Lutheran understanding and the Evangelical view on this topic is a difficult matter. Part of the difficulty lies in the definition itself. It seems that in our circles the comparison has often been made between the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments and the "Reformed" view. But the Reformed view is really only a portion of the teaching of the larger Evangelical movement, and in fact it is not difficult to find those who would suggest that a Reformed position is at odds with evangelicalism.²¹

Even when we are able to further define a branch or school of Christian teaching and tradition, there are oftentimes a diversity of views acknowledged. So, for example, in presenting "The Reformed View" of the Lord's Supper, Leanne Van Dyke of Western Theological Seminary speaks of "The deep differences in Reformed understandings of the Lord's Supper," which "can be traced back to early Reformed founders, each with their own conceptual and ecclesiastical framework."²² Though she has a single preference, Van Dyke identifies three distinct views from Reformed history and suggests that all three remain influential. In the same way, I. John Hesselink identifies both Zwingli and Calvin as theologians who inform the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper, though their perspectives are not the same. Hesselink chooses to focus on Calvin since the Zwinglian perspective is expounded by a Baptist theologian in the same publication.²³

21. For example, Michael S. Horton "To Be or Not To Be" *Modern Reformation* <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var2=980>

22. Leanne Van Dyke, "The Reformed View," in Gordon T. Smith, ed. *The Lord's Supper: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 67.

23. I. John Hesselink, "Reformed View: The Real Presence of Christ" in John H. Armstrong, ed. *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 59.

Daniel G. Reed's introduction to *Baptism: Three Views* explains why the particular three views, believers' Baptism, infant Baptism, and a dual-practice view, were chosen for that publication: "This book assumes that most of its readers will come from mainstream evangelicalism, and the three views represented make up the most common ones encountered in this broad tradition."²⁴ In other words, among the challenges of comparing the Lutheran understanding with the Evangelical view is to pin down any specific view to compare.²⁵

Perhaps the view that most sharply contrasts with the confessional Lutheran understanding of Baptism is that which is most commonly associated with the Baptist tradition. Thomas J. Nettles, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, explains that view:

Here is a definition that I think reflects the biblical standard for this ordinance: *Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer in Jesus Christ performed once as the initiation of such a believer into a community of believers, the church.* This baptism signifies the believer's confidence that Christ's work was complete for his forgiveness and justification and indicates his desire for unity with the church, Christ's community of the new covenant, purchased at the price of his blood. No saving efficacy inheres in either the form or the matter itself. The person baptized has no scriptural warrant to believe that in baptism Christ's saving activity is initiated, augmented, or completed.²⁶

According to Nettles, then, Baptism is a symbol. It pictures Christ's death and resurrection, and likewise pictures the experience of a believer being convinced that he was once dead in sin but has been made alive in Christ.²⁷ This is consistent with Bruce Ware's definition: "baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant, inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, signifying the promise for the one baptized that sins are forgiven, that new life in Christ is received, and that God gives the person a new heart and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by faith."²⁸ According to such definitions, Baptism does not convey forgiveness, life, salvation, or any such spiritual gifts, but signifies or represents them.

The value of this ordinance, the preferred Baptist term, then, is the confession of the one being baptized. Ware goes on to "commend believers' baptism for the health and well-being of the church" first because it provides "a young Christian a wonderful and sacred opportunity to

24. Daniel G. Reed, "Introduction" in David F. Wright, ed. *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15.

25. It is worth noting that the same could be done with "The Lutheran View" of these matters. Surely a diversity of opinion and teaching can be found among the ELCA, LCMS, WELS, and other Lutherans. One benefit of confessional Lutheranism in this regard is the existence of an accepted body of doctrine that may be referenced as such.

26. Thomas J. Nettles, "Baptist View" in John H. Armstrong, ed. *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 25.

27. *Ibid.*, 26.

28. Bruce A. Ware, "Believers' Baptism View" in Wright, *Baptism: Three Views*, 41.

certify personally and testify publicly of his own identity, now, as a follower of Christ. How rich and meaningful believers' baptism is!" Secondly, "The practice of credobaptism grounds the regenerate membership of the church." This is in opposition to the mixed company he sees in churches that practice infant baptism, in which baptized church members may be unbelievers. He admits, "Of course, believers' baptism is no guarantee that every church member is truly saved, to be sure. But at least *in principle and by structure and design*, a church that adheres to believers' baptism and upholds this baptism as prerequisite for church membership... consciously seeks to maintain a fully regenerate church membership."²⁹ Church membership is an important issue according to Nettles as well. He writes, "Baptism was not optional. Its significance as a testimony to salvation in Jesus' name, and the command issued by the Lord himself, made it the natural and most precisely expressive concomitant to saving faith. One cannot be received, therefore, into church membership without this kind of baptism."³⁰

This kind of Baptism can only be practiced by those deemed mature enough to make a confession of faith. Therefore, infants are necessarily excluded. This fact alone highlights the significant breach between the Baptist view and a confessional Lutheran understanding. The sacrament of Baptism offers and gives forgiveness even to infants because this means of grace creates the faith that receives its gifts. In responding to a solid description of this confessional Lutheran understanding of Baptism, Nettles takes particular issue with the concept of infant Baptism. He insists, "Baptism, therefore, symbolizes the saving moral transaction of God but does not constitute any essential element in it... [God's working through Baptism in an infant] is 'beyond explanation' because no word of revelation addresses it either in precept or example. Nothing can be said about it, because the NT neither records nor contemplates such a thing. The regeneration of infants through baptism does not exist."³¹

As suggested by these quotes, a major reason given for an insistence on credobaptism is that the New Testament never specifically mentions the Baptism of an infant. Among the many instances of Baptism recorded in the book of Acts, the process is consistent: a person hears the gospel message, comes to faith, and is baptized, in some cases along with that individual's household. At best, however, this is an argument from silence. Scripture does not answer the question for us whether infants were included in these households or not. Another commenter notes

"Appeals to biblical examples may be helpful but not conclusive. For example, to my knowledge there is no indisputable example in the NT of baptism being performed in a corporate worship service, as it is so often done today. Yet this does not mean that baptism must not be performed in corporate worship. On the contrary, the Scriptures do not give such details because they grant flexibility. In much the same way, the

29. Ibid., 49-50. Emphasis original.

30. Nettles, "Baptist View" in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 40.

31. Nettles, "A Baptist Response [to Lutheran View]" Ibid., 114.

amount of water with which a person must come in contact and the precise manner in which water is applied are matters of circumstance in which prudence must rule.”³²

While the specific point of contention in this quotation is the mode of Baptism, the point of biblical examples being inconclusive may also be made in regard to the ages of those baptized.

Of course, not all Evangelicals insist that Baptism is only for confessing believers. A Reformed understanding of Baptism calls for believers and their children to receive the sacrament. This view is even comfortable with the term sacrament, in contrast to the Baptist preference for the term “ordinance.” Richard L. Pratt, an ordained Presbyterian, relates that “In its own way, the Reformed understanding of baptism is highly sacramental. That is, Reformed theology views baptism as a mysterious encounter with God that takes place through a rite involving physical elements and special ceremony. Through this encounter, God graciously distributes blessings to those who participate by faith.”³³

Such a “sacramental” approach acknowledges that Scripture speaks of a close connection between Baptism and God’s grace. Pratt explains, “Reformed theology concurs with Scripture that there is more than meets the eye in the rite of baptism. Spiritual realities occur in conjunction with baptism, but the Scriptures do not explain in detail how baptism and divine grace are connected. Thus, Reformed theology speaks of the connection as a ‘sacramental [i.e., mysterious] union.’ It is in this sense that Reformed theology rightly calls baptism a ‘sacrament.’”³⁴ At the same time, this understanding is distinguished from those who “identify grace too closely with the rite” or “speak of baptismal regeneration or of the necessity of baptism for salvation.”³⁵

While at times this view seems to approach a confessional Lutheran understanding of Baptism, in the end it stops short. Baptism remains a symbol. It is an important and powerful symbol, but a symbol nonetheless. Arguing in favor of infant Baptism, Sinclair Ferguson states, “[Baptism] calls us to faith, repentance and blessing. Reject the grace (and the Christ) it signifies, and we will remain under the divine curse. Baptism is therefore not efficacious in an *ex opera operato* fashion. Yet it is not a ‘bare’ sign, for it communicates to faith or to unbelief what it symbolizes—covenant blessings to covenant faith, covenant curses to covenant disobedience.”³⁶ Ferguson adds,

The “proper work” of sacraments, however, is to display Christ as Savior and in the power of the Spirit to fulfill in us all that is treasured up for us in him. As Robert Bruce expressed it, we do not get a better Christ in the sacraments than we do in the Word,

32. Richard L. Pratt Jr., “A Reformed Response [To Baptist View]” *Ibid.*, 43.

33. Pratt, “Reformed View” *Ibid.*, 59.

34. *Ibid.*, 61.

35. *Ibid.*, 61-62.

36. Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Infant Baptism View” in Wright, *Baptism: Three Views*, 99.

but we do often get Christ better; we get a stronger grasp on him through faith. Baptism does not justify, but it is necessary for the believer because he or she remains weak and needs the vivid portrayal of grace which baptism provides.³⁷

The concept of the covenant is vitally important to this understanding of Baptism. Infants are not baptized so that they might have faith, but are baptized as a sign that they are included in the covenant through the faith of their parents. Old Testament covenants between God and Noah, Abraham, and Moses, are viewed as informing the New Testament, or essentially as analogous to it. Just as these Old Testament covenants were for both the individuals and their descendants, the argument goes, so in the New Testament a covenant relationship with God is extended to believers and to their children.

Ferguson explains:

Baptism is the sign of the covenant in its fulfillment just as circumcision was the sign of that covenant in the time of promise. Its primary function is not to symbolize our response to the promise of the gospel, but to signify and seal the gospel to which we are called (by the word and the symbol) to respond in lifelong faith and repentance. This is as applicable to infants as it is to others without compromising its significance.³⁸

Yet this covenant relationship between God and the baptized infant is not final or absolute. Ferguson explains,

None of this should be misunderstood as implying that paedobaptists believe that their children do not need to “be converted.” True, many children from Christian families cannot remember a decisive “conversion” moment, but “conversion” should not be reduced to a moment of psychological crisis. It is simply shorthand for the faith and repentance which mark the continuance as well as the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel sign of baptism—whether received in infancy or in later years on profession of faith—calls us all to this lifelong conversion.³⁹

Pratt makes the same point this way: “As with circumcision, baptism is not an end in itself. It serves as a visible reminder of the need for God’s covenant people to internalize their religion.”⁴⁰ This leaves the Reformed view in the untenable position of allowing for baptized infants to be a part of the New Testament people of God apart from faith. Yet Scripture makes it abundantly clear that forgiveness and entrance into God’s family comes through faith.

Both the Baptist and Reformed views on Holy Baptism fail to fully account for God’s inspired revelation that “baptism...saves you” (1 Peter 3:21). Reformed teaching labels this connection

37. Ibid., 100.

38. Ibid., 104.

39. Ibid., 111.

40. Pratt, “Reformed View” in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 67.

between Baptism and salvation a mystery, but a true understanding of the sacraments makes sense of this passage as well as all those that speak of saving faith. Faith and Baptism are not divorced from each other, but fit together perfectly. Baptism engenders faith, and faith receives the blessings of Baptism. The previously considered Baptist view is forced to explain away a passage such as this. Nettles offers his best attempt:

Did Peter believe that baptism saved? The book of Acts shows that he placed great importance on baptism in its connection with preaching and the consequent expressions of repentance and faith. Was the connection between baptism and faith vital and effectual in sealing salvation to the penitent sinner?

In his first letter Peter says, in effect, that baptism saves: [1 Peter 3:21-22].⁴¹

Only Peter does not say “in effect” that Baptism saves. He says it directly. Nettles works around this difficulty by identifying this passage as one which “uses salvation language in reference to the symbols of his passion that Jesus commanded his church to observe. This involves concrete pictures—fit symbols—to express and call to mind the divine mercy in salvation.”⁴² Categorizing the passage in this way is ultimately an arbitrary decision. Nettles and others who argue in this way take a predetermined position and force the passages into agreeing with it. Pratt responds to this particular assertion by saying,

Floodwaters were the means by which Noah and his family were saved, not a mere symbolic act. It would appear that Nettles’ desire to put baptism into this third category [of passages about salvation] obscures the connection that Peter made.

Put simply, while I would agree that there are many ways in which Scripture uses salvation language, Nettles does little more than assert three categories that correspond to his theological assessments. His distinctions are by no means convincing.⁴³

Though Pratt’s ultimate conclusions are less than desirable, his point here is well made.

Similar issues, as you might expect, plague both the Baptist view and the Reformed view of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In order to consider the Baptist view, however, we must again acknowledge that a diversity of views about this (and apparently many other things) exist within the Baptist tradition. Roger E. Olson notes that “Baptists are notoriously diverse: at least fifty-seven varieties exist in the United States alone, and many more can be found in other parts of the world.”⁴⁴ In addition to noting the “wild” diversity of Baptists, he points out that there are no confessional statements that are considered binding for Baptists. In fact, official

41. Nettles, “Baptist View” in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 36.

42. *Ibid.*, 37.

43. Pratt, “Reformed View” *Ibid.*, 45.

44. Roger E. Olson, “The Baptist View” in Smith, *The Lord’s Supper*, 91.

statements from the Southern Baptists don't even receive the full support of many Southern Baptists.⁴⁵

While Olson therefore insists that there is no such thing as “*the* Baptist view of the Lord’s Supper,” he adds, “There probably is a general consensus among Baptists about what the Lord’s Supper *is not* (e.g., a means of grace), but little real consensus exists about what it *is*. All one can do is describe Baptist history with regard to this doctrine and practice and record the exceptions to the rough consensus in a particular time and place.”⁴⁶

From the beginning of this historical record, Olson insists, Baptists have rejected Catholic and mainline Protestant interpretations of the Lord’s Supper. He notes,

The word *sacramentarian* has confusingly been coined by historical theologians to refer to this rejection of sacraments as a means of grace. Here, of course, “means of grace” means visible and material objects such as water, bread and wine as conveyers of grace. Baptists do not necessarily reject grace present and active in the ceremonies of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. What they have rejected is any idea that the grace of God is especially attached to these visible, physical objects or emblems (bread and wine/grape juice) and especially that participants in the Lord’s Supper actually eat Christ’s body and drink his blood.⁴⁷

Yet Olson asserts that Baptists do not believe in a “real absence” of Christ or that the emblems of bread and wine are “mere symbols.” No, he says, “Baptist folk theology probably has vulgarized these emblems and the Communion service so that they are ‘mere symbols’ and ‘nothing more than a memorial meal,’ but Baptist theologians have often insisted that the emblems are objects in an event in which Christ is present and active in strengthening participants’ faith.”⁴⁸ In other words, the entire event of the celebration of Lord’s Supper may serve to strengthen faith for the participants, but not because of the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the elements.

Russel D. Moore speaks in a similar way when he asserts,

The question, then, is not whether the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace but *how* it functions as a means of grace. The supper does indeed ground, buttress, and establish Christian faith—but it does so through the proclamation of the finished redemption of Christ and the promise of the kingdom to come. In this sense, the eating and drinking of

45. *Ibid.*, 92.

46. *Ibid.*, 93-94.

47. *Ibid.*, 95.

48. *Ibid.*, 95.

the Lord's Supper create faith within the body, and this is analogous to the verbal proclamation of the word of truth.⁴⁹

Again, the Supper cannot be a means of grace in the sense that it conveys in any direct way the forgiveness of sins. It is only such (if at all) in the sense that it proclaims Christ and therefore may strengthen faith.

No matter the nuances of such a view, it is clearly a departure from the words of Scripture and from the confessional Lutheran understanding that is based on those words. In fact, the very words of Jesus necessarily come under attack according to this view. Moore offers: "Again, just as with the Passover meal, Jesus ties the significance of the meal with its function as proclamation. If Jesus intends to suggest that the elements of bread and wine are literally his body and blood, he certainly avoids the obvious question as to how the disciples see his body still before them, at that point neither broken nor poured out."⁵⁰ One might ask in reply this obvious question: what does Jesus intend to suggest except for what his words clearly say? The clear meaning of the words must be changed. Olson in the same way quotes an early twentieth century Baptist theologian (Augustus Strong) who says of 1 Corinthians 10:16 "Here 'Is it not a participation?' = 'Does it not symbolize the participation?'" Similarly, he says of Matthew 26:26, "'This is my body' = 'This symbolizes my body.'"⁵¹

Olson further notes that this view of the Lord's Supper is based on a specific understanding of Christ.

One can safely say it is that Christ is bodily in heaven and is not ubiquitous, as in Luther's view... Christ is able to be present and is present wherever faith is expressed in him and he is worshiped in spirit and truth. The Holy Spirit mediates the reality of Jesus Christ to believers in various settings when faith is present. Thus there is no bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but there as elsewhere the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, brings Christ into the believers' midst and spiritually nourishes them.⁵²

A Reformed understanding of this sacrament tries to distance itself from this "memorialist" view of the Baptists. Van Dyke explains:

The themes that Olson surfaces include a rejection of the idea that God's grace in the sacraments is particularly linked with the sacramental elements themselves. The Reformed tradition, especially in its connection to John Calvin, does actually stress the

49. Russel D. Moore, "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial" in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, 35.

50. *Ibid.*, 34.

51. Roger E. Olson, "The Baptist View" in Smith, *The Lord's Supper*, 101-102. The quote comes from Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1974), 963.

52. Olson, "The Baptist View" in Smith, *The Lord's Supper*, 107-108.

deep link between sacramental grace and the elements of loaf and cup. A Reformed believer would agree with a Baptist believer that God is not by necessity bound to the sacramental elements. But the Reformed believer would say that God does, through promise and covenant, bind God's gracious presence to these elements.⁵³

She says further, "There is something unique in the way God graces believers at the Table of the Lord. The grace is 'concentrated' because, in the Supper, the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ."⁵⁴

While acknowledging that the teachings of Zwingli, aligned closely to the Baptist view of Lord's Supper, may be considered part of the Reformed tradition, I. John Hesselink prefers John Calvin's "notion of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper, a presence that is spiritual in nature." This is not the only Reformed view, but it is "generally taught in most Reformed confessions, including the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the later Westminster Confession of Faith (1648). Hence, Calvin's view is today usually considered *the* Reformed view."⁵⁵

Hesselink notes that Calvin's teaching does distance him from Zwingli's understanding:

It cannot be overemphasized that Calvin does not teach that the bread and the wine are mere symbols of Christ's body and blood. In this regard, Calvin is closer to Luther than to Zwingli, for he believed in a real presence of Christ in the Supper. Luther and Calvin differed on the nature of that presence, but they both believed that Christ is really present in some sense in the elements of the bread and wine when they are received by faith. Calvin emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit more than Luther did, but at the same time he warned against conceiving of the sacraments as no more than a purely spiritual communion with the spirit of Christ.⁵⁶

Hesselink also acknowledges that the modern Reformed believer may well have a different view of the sacrament than that of Calvin's historic position. He writes, "This kind of realistic language about the 'eating of Christ's flesh' through faith... and having Christ's blood offered 'for us to taste' has been offensive to some later Reformed theologians and may shock some contemporary Reformed-Presbyterian faithful. Calvin himself concedes that 'it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us so that it becomes our food.'"⁵⁷

Here the same Christological concern that informed the Baptist position greatly influences Calvin and other Reformed theologians. Van Dyke explains:

53. Van Dyke, "A Reformed Response [to The Baptist View]" in Smith, *The Lord's Supper*, 113.

54. *Ibid.*, 114.

55. Hesselink, "Reformed View" in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, 59.

56. *Ibid.*, 62.

57. *Ibid.*, 63-64.

The challenge of accounting for the separation between Christ and the believer is particularly acute for the Reformed theological tradition. The Reformed tradition does not accept the Lutheran ubiquity doctrine, which states that Christ's human nature is present everywhere in the world. Nor does it accept the classic Roman Catholic theory of transubstantiation, which explains that Christ's true body has locally replaced the essence of the sacramental elements. The distinctive emphasis in the Reformed tradition on Jesus' ascension rules out these options. So how is Jesus Christ present in the sacrament?... Calvin made a bolder sacramental claim, that although Christ is in heaven, we are nourished in the Lord's Supper by his body and blood as food of our souls, united to him in the Spirit.⁵⁸

Hesselink speaks to the same issue as he explains, "Here a slight complication arises. Do we then only lift up our hearts (*sursum corda!*) to the ascended Christ and somehow feed on him there? Or is there a sense in which the risen Christ by his Spirit descends to us and nourishes us spiritually through the partaking of the elements? Both are true, but the accent is on the former." Indeed, Calvin speaks "figuratively of Christ's coming down to us in order to nourish us in the supper."⁵⁹

The Formula of Concord addresses such teaching directly:

To explain this controversy, it must first be noted that there are two kinds of sacramentarians. There are the crude sacramentarians, who state in plain language what they believe in their hearts: that in the Holy Supper there is nothing more than bread and wine present, nothing more distributed and received with the mouth. Then there are the cunning sacramentarians, the most dangerous kind, who in part appear to use our language and who pretend that they also believe in a true presence of the true, essential, living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, but that this takes place spiritually, through faith. Yet, under the guise of such plausible words, they retain the former, crude opinion, that nothing more than bread and wine is present in the supper and received there by mouth.⁶⁰

These "cunning sacramentarians" insist that only by faith and through the working of the Holy Spirit are believers brought to the ascended Christ in the sacrament. The Lutheran Confessions root out such a falsehood by asserting that all who receive the sacrament receive the body and blood of Christ "whether they are worthy or unworthy, godly or ungodly, believers or unbelievers."⁶¹ The efficacy of the sacrament is in the sacrament, and specifically in the Word of God used in the sacrament. Remaining true to this position does not negate the fact that, as

58. Van Dyke, "The Reformed View" in Smith, *The Lord's Supper*, 78.

59. Hesselink, "Reformed View" in Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, 66.

60. Formula of Concord Ep. VII.4 in Kolb and Wengert, 504.

61. Formula of Concord Ep. VII.2 Ibid., 504.

Scripture makes clear, there is a difference in the result as believers receive Christ's body and blood to their spiritual benefit while unbelievers receive it to their harm.

How Do We Guard and Teach?

The summaries provided here of the Baptist and Reformed views of the sacraments clearly illustrate the difference between them and the confessional Lutheran position. Some comments have been included regarding the particular misunderstandings or misapplication of Scripture that has led to such teaching. A few remarks are in order regarding the biblical hermeneutic which will guard against such errors for us and for those we serve.

Of first importance is that we hold to the plain words of Scripture. Examples previously noted mark how false teachers must essentially change the wording Scripture in order to arrive at their conclusions. In many cases, it is an example of a theological system dictating what the words must mean instead of what ought to take place: the words of Scripture dictating the theological system. Again the Confessions are sensitive to this concern. In regard to the Holy Supper, they state:

Because of all these things, we are bound to interpret and construe these words of the eternal, reliable, and almighty Son of God, our Lord, creator, and redeemer Jesus Christ, not as embellished, figurative, exotic expressions, as would appear in line with our reason. Instead, we should accept the words as they stand, in their proper, clear sense, with simple faith and appropriate obedience and not permit ourselves to be drawn away from this position by any objection or human counterargument spun out of human reason, no matter how attractive it may appear to our reason.⁶²

Our God-given reason is to be used to understand the words and what they mean, not to change them until we are satisfied. Many teachings of Scripture will never fully satisfy our reason or thinking, yet we are called to humbly believe and accept. A "reasonable" insistence that the ascended Lord cannot be elsewhere in his body, for example, cannot be allowed to trump the words of Scripture that assure believers that he is always with them, and that he gives them his very body and blood in the sacrament.

Some passages indeed will speak in a figurative sense, but again the job of our reason is to understand when the words themselves demand such an interpretation, not to arbitrarily demand it when the words do not fit our preconceived notions.

Context will be an important consideration in reaching the proper understanding, and we will use Scripture to interpret Scripture. In practice, this has several applications. We dare not let one thought, principal, or passage become so important to us that we impose it on other passages. Instead, we will look with genuine interest for how passages fit together and relate to each other. The simple and clear passages will inform our understanding of more difficult

62. Formula of Concord SD VII.45 in Kolb and Wengert, 600-601.

passages, and not the other way around. Care needs to be taken, then, to form our understanding of any particular doctrine based on all the passages in Scripture that deal with that doctrine.

Employing, for example, an argument from Christology in order to determine an understanding of the Lord's Supper is out of place. Rather, both our Christology and our doctrine of the Lord's Supper should be drawn directly from passages that address each issue. Of course, we will not be surprised when the doctrine of Christology drawn from all applicable Bible passages beautifully fits with Scripture's teaching about the Lord's Supper. The accusation previously noted that Lutherans insist on the ubiquity of Christ in order to explain the real presence is not an accurate assessment. John R. Stephenson rightly takes issue with this assertion as he explains:

For while confessing the Lord's transcendent/immanent "omnipresence" according to his humanity, we do not identify this with his real *definitive* presence on the altar. Moreover, the Lord's Word alone is the basis of our sacramental doctrine; "omnipresence" is merely an apologetic response to the Reformed objection that Jesus' body cannot be in heaven and in the sacrament at the same time.⁶³

The goal indeed of good systematic theology is to apply all appropriate passages to each aspect of doctrine. In other words, only by taking into account everything that the Bible has to say about Baptism will we find a complete biblical view of Baptism. Likewise Holy Communion, Theology Proper, Christology, or any other doctrine. Nor will we be surprised that when an error is allowed to infiltrate any doctrine, it will almost certainly affect other doctrines. This is the case in the Evangelical views of the sacraments we have discussed. The whole systems of Baptist theology and of Reformed theology suffer from errors not just regarding the sacraments but also regarding faith and other matters. The more narrow focus of this essay on the sacraments is useful and even necessary, but the entire matter is more complex than what can be related here.

Such facts call on us to be vigilant about scriptural doctrine as we teach it and preach it. We will want to warn our people about the dangers of false doctrine that they will likely be exposed to, since much of Christian media presents an Evangelical understanding. We will want to present in our Bible studies opportunities for the students to apply appropriate Bible passages and to wrestle with issues. In our preaching and teaching we will want to take care not to cite a system of doctrine as a final authority, but to present what Scripture says because Scripture, and therefore God who inspired it, says it.

The temptation remains for pastors and staff ministers to study the Word of God only (or especially) for the sake of others or only for "professional" use. As we fall into such a

63. John R. Stephenson, "A Lutheran Response [to The Reformed View]" in Smith, *Lord's Supper: Five Views*, 85.

temptation, we may well narrow our focus to specific issues or “proof passages” that are pertinent to our presentation. But our understanding of proper hermeneutics requires us to seek a broad biblical awareness and familiarity, to say nothing of our own need for gospel comfort and encouragement. The exhortation to regular, devotional study of God’s Word is ever appropriate. This perspective is only further encouragement: that it provides a broad biblical framework for using Scripture to interpret Scripture.

The same is true of our study of the Lutheran Confessions. I am personally thankful that the writing of this essay compelled me to spend time with these writings. While they must retain their place as the *norma normata* in our theology, they are a treasure trove precisely because they faithfully teach and proclaim the truths of Scripture. The confessions will not take the place of faithful study of the Scripture, but will hold before us the example of godly and faithful men whose diligent study of the Scripture has been a blessing for many generations.

Deutschlander’s encouragement is appropriate:

Thus all that we believe, teach, and confess should be grounded and rooted in God’s own Word. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) was a motto of the Lutheran Reformation. It remains our aim to this day, that nothing taught in our churches be contrary or in addition to the Word of God. It remains our goal...to study the Scriptures and draw from them alone the doctrines that we, by God’s grace, continue to believe, teach, and confess.⁶⁴

Faithful study of the Scripture will continue to provide us with the confidence and the comfort that in the sacraments God seals, offers, and gives to us his full and free forgiveness, purchased and won on the cross and received through faith. May God bless us all to be able to share that good news with many, to his glory.

64. Desutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 83.

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