



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 25 - June 22, 2008

- 65 **Q.** *It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his blessings: where then does that faith come from?*
A. The Holy Spirit produces in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.
- 66 **Q.** *What are sacraments?*
A. Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal on that promise. And this is God's gospel promise: to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ's one sacrifice finished on the cross.
- 67 **Q.** *Are both the word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?*
A. Right! In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments he assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.
- 68 **Q.** *How many sacraments did Christ institute in the New Testament?*
A. Two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Each age of the church's history has its issues. First it was the Jew-Gentile question. Then came the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century at Nicea. Shortly after that, the church wrestled with Pelagianism and human inability. Then the person of Christ got hammered out at Chalcedon in the middle of the fifth century. During the Reformation justification was the key issue. In the 19th century eschatology got hot. In the 20th century, the authority of Scripture was challenged and subsequently clarified. Today the issues involve the uniqueness of Christ in a pluralistic world and the unchanging standards of biblical sexuality. There will always be something.

Obviously, my list is truncated and grossly oversimplified. I've skipped over a lot of important controversies, and I've made it sound like certain issues get settled, even though every important Christian doctrine is always being challenged by some splinter group somewhere or some crazy blogger out there. But my general point is still valid. In every age, there are certain theological issues that bubble to the top. In the 16th century, the doctrine of the sacraments was one of those issues.

I'd wager a guess that most of us don't think a lot about the sacraments. Sure, there are the high church folks who are always talking about "their baptism" and Eucharistic this and that. But for non-denom evangelical Joe, the sacraments are *terra nova*. So I can imagine saying to some Christians, "Easy, settle down. There is much more about justification and holiness and suffering and heaven and hell in the New Testament than about the sacraments. Let's not fight tooth and nail over this stuff and let's not make sacramental theology the essence of the Christian faith." But to most Protestants I would say, "Let's take a look at these sacraments a little more carefully. Maybe there's a reason the Heidelberg Catechism spends 7 weeks on them and Calvin wrote over 200 pages about them in the *Institutes*. Maybe we are missing something in our worship services by breezing through the sacraments quickly (and infrequently). Maybe our people feel unclean because we haven't made enough out of the waters of baptism, and maybe they feel spiritually malnourished because we haven't fed their faith with the bread and the cup." In other words, don't mentally

check out that next time the loaf is broken or some baby is doused.

After 17 weeks and 41 questions and answers on the Apostles' Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism switches gears in Lord's Day 25 to talk about the sacraments. Next to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the Reformers fought Rome over the sacraments more than any other issue. And while they also fought among *themselves* over the sacraments more than any other issue, the Reformers did agree on a number of key points. We see four of them in this Lord's Day.

First, we are not saved by the sacraments but by faith alone. In the Medieval church, many Christians had a superstitious view of the sacraments. This is why the Reformers objected to the Latin phrase *ex opere operato* ("from the work having been worked.") The Catholic Church taught the sacraments worked objectively based on the dispensing of the sacraments themselves. To the extent that *ex opere operato* insists on the validity of the sacraments despite the moral unworthiness of the one administering it, we are on solid ground. But from the Catholic understanding of *ex opere operato* many churchgoers expected the sacraments to impart grace by some kind of hocus pocus, irrespective of their faith. That's why the Catechism emphasizes grace alone or faith alone or the cross alone in Questions 65, 66, and 67. Ursinus and the rest of his colleagues wanted to be clear: you are not saved just by virtue of having been baptized or having received Communion; you must have faith.

Second, and this point is closely related to the first, Lord's Day 25 explains that the sacraments are confirmatory signs. We come to faith through hearing the gospel, not through the water of baptism, nor from taking the bread and wine. The sacraments do not create faith; rather, they confirm it (Q/A 65), make us understand the gospel promises more clearly (Q/A 66), and assure us of our salvation (Q/A 67). As we'll see in the weeks ahead, the sacraments are meant to nourish our faith, strengthen us, prop us up, and assure us of God's favor. They are holy signs symbolizing the spiritual realities of the gospel, and seals reminding us of God's sure promises.

The whole point in this sign and seal business is that we can *see* the sacraments (Q/A 66). Hence,

Augustine's oft-quoted definition that the sacraments are visible means of an invisible grace. We often forget amidst the calls for sensory worship and appeals to visual learning styles that God has already given us his own self-appointed means of using our senses in worship. He's given us the sacraments that we might see, smell, taste and touch the same promises of the gospel we hear proclaimed in the preaching of the word.

Third, the Reformers agreed, against the Roman Catholic Church, that the number of sacraments instituted by Christ was only two: baptism and the Lord's Supper (Q/A 68). The Catholic Church has five other sacraments, none of which are explicitly instituted by Christ or attached to a promise. *Confirmation*—anointing for salvation in the triune name—is nowhere commanded in Scripture. *Holy Orders*, or the laying on of hands, has biblical precedence but besides having no attendant promise, the ordination scheme in the Catholic Church is an elaborate post-biblical design. *Penance* hints at our need to be reminded of the forgiveness of sins, but remembering our baptism does the same thing. *Extreme Unction*, or last rights or anointing the sick with holy oil, has its roots in James 5, but the sign is not commanded by the Lord. *Marriage* as a sacrament is based on a mistranslation of Ephesians 5:32 in the Latin Vulgate. By contrast, baptism is required of every disciple as symbolic of the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38) and the Lord's Supper was clearly instituted by Christ (1 Cor. 11:23ff) and celebrated regularly, if not weekly (Acts 2:42).

Fourth, the Reformers agreed that the sacraments could in no way add to or repeat Christ's one sacrifice on the cross. Q/A 66 and 67 use this language explicitly, and for good reason. As we'll see again in Lord's Day 80, Catholics saw the Mass as a reenactment of Jesus' death (his actual physical death in the bread and wine transubstantiated into his real body and blood). With all due respect to our Catholic brothers and sisters, we ought to be vigorously opposed to this teaching. The Catechism is right: "our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross."