

“To Nourish and Sustain our Faith”

An Exposition of Article Thirty-Three of the Belgic Confession

Article 33 -- The Sacraments

We believe that our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith.¹ He has added these to the Word of the gospel² to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.³ So they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing. Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments that Christ our Master has ordained for us. There are only two: the sacrament of baptism⁴ and the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ.⁵

¹ Gen 17:9-14; Ex 12; Rom 4:11 ² Mt 28:19; Eph 5:26 ³ Rom 2:28-29; Col 2:11-12 ⁴ Mt 28:19 ⁵ Mt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 11:23-26

We are a weak and sinful people. But God, in his grace, gives us tangible signs and seals of his promise to save us from the guilt of our sins and to free us from sin's bondage. These tangible signs and seals are the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. This brings us to a discussion of the sacraments, the means God uses to nourish and sustain our faith.

We move into a new section of our confession, those three articles dealing with the sacraments (Articles Thirty-Three through Thirty-Five). We begin by noting the obvious—at the time in which our confession was written in 1561, the sacraments were a very divisive issue, separating the Reformed churches from Rome, from the Anabaptists, and from the Lutherans—divisions which remain to this very day. Not only did the new Reformed churches need to summarize what the Bible teaches about the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (hence the production of our confession), but the author of our confession must also refute both the Anabaptist and Roman Catholic views on the subject, as well as differentiate the Reformed view from that of the Lutherans.

As we work our way through these three articles, it is surely proper and fitting to keep in mind that the author of our confession (Guido de Bres) was put to death by Roman Catholic authorities for serving communion to congregations of Reformed exiles. We should not forget that our confession was written in martyr's blood.

Scattered widely across Holland, the Anabaptists of the sixteen century rejected the doctrine of infant baptism, arguing that baptism is a public testimony of our faith in Jesus Christ and not our public ratification of the covenant promise which God makes to all of his people (infants included). According to the Anabaptists, only those who profess faith in Jesus Christ are members of the church, so that our

children are not members of the covenant community. This not only flies in the face of the entire Bible's teaching on the nature of the covenant, but people living at the time understood the Anabaptist rejection of the baptism of infants to be a form of anarchy, since the baptism of infants had been the universal practice of the Christian church for its first 1500 years and was the legal means of entrance into both church and state. To reject infant baptism (right or wrong) was to reject a bulwark of medieval life.

The Anabaptists were also very suspicious of one of the main theological assumptions of much of Christian theology, that God works through material means. As the Anabaptists understood matters of sin and grace, the Holy Spirit works directly upon the human heart, thereby circumventing the need for God's grace to be mediated through bread and wine, water, and ink and paper. Drawing heavily upon a dualism between Spirit and matter, the Anabaptists favored a much more mystical theology centering in a simple faith and an intensely personal and highly subjective understanding of the Christian life. The Anabaptists would be very comfortable in today's evangelical world with its stress upon a dramatic conversion experience and its rejection of a faith centered upon believing and confessing specific doctrines.

The Roman church, on the other hand, not only had an erroneous view of baptism—believing that the water of baptism regenerates by virtue of the work performed (*ex opere operato*)—but Roman's view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper had become so mutated that little remained of what the Bible actually teaches about the nature and character of the Lord's Supper. According to Rome, the essence of the Lord's Supper (the "Mass") is the transubstantiation of the bread and wine by a priest into the physical body and blood of Christ.

While transubstantiation is highly problematic in its own right—perhaps owing as much to Aristotelean philosophy than to what Jesus or Paul actually teach in the New Testament—what Protestants find most offensive about the Roman Mass is what is done with the bread and wine after they have been transubstantiated into Christ's body and blood. Acting in his official capacity as priest, the consecrated host is then offered to the father as an "unbloody sacrifice" which supposedly propitiates God's anger toward human sin.

This is nothing but a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction of God's justice in his sufferings upon the cross and amounts to what the author of Hebrews calls "crucifying the Son of God all over again" (Hebrews 6:6). This is why the *Heidelberg Catechism* uses such strong language in condemning the Mass in Q and A 80:

The Lord's Supper declares to us that all our sins are completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself accomplished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present under the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry.

Hard words, but the Mass is an offensive and unbiblical doctrine.

Many of us were born and raised in churches where the very mention of the “s” word (sacraments) brought a howl of outrage. In those churches in which I grew up, sacraments were something Roman Catholics did and any Bible-believing Christian rejected them—although my guess is that most of us were not really sure what sacraments were, but we didn’t want anything to do with them if Rome had them. It came as a huge surprise to me when I learned that all of the magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin) as well as all the Reformation confessions and the denominations which still hold to these confessions, not only teach that there are two sacraments in the New Testament (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), but that those churches (even evangelical churches) which reject the baptism of infants and the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper forfeit one of the marks by which we can tell whether or not a particular church is really a true church.

It was very difficult for me to come to grips with the fact that the Bible did not teach infant dedication nor command an altar call (the two sacraments of my evangelical upbringing), while the Bible is filled with references to baptism and the Lord’s Supper which I had never even considered until I became Reformed. I know that many readers have had the same experience.

This is why it is so important for us to go through our confession and remind ourselves of what the Bible actually teaches about these things, not only so as to be clear in our own minds and avoid doctrinal error, but also because the sacraments are a great source of spiritual nourishment and a constant reminder of God’s favor towards us in the person of his dear Son. As our confession summarizes the biblical data, four main points are addressed.¹ The first matter to be addressed is the critical question, “what is the purpose of the sacraments?” The second matter is the relationship of the sacraments to the word of God. Do the sacraments receive their efficacy from the church, from the minister, or from Holy Scripture? The third matter addressed is the fact that the sacraments are truly means of grace—as creator and sustainer of all things, God does indeed work through material means. Finally, our confession addresses the number of sacraments found in the New Testament—two, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We begin with the first matter addressed in Article Thirty-Three, which is the purpose of the sacraments.

Our confession states the matter concisely. “We believe that our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith.” Even from this brief statement a couple things should jump out at us. Our confession mentions the primary reason as to why God gives to us these sacraments; our insensitivity and weakness. Since we are still sinful, even though we are presently justified by the merits of Christ received through faith alone, we are all prone to hardness of heart and all of us feel the constant pull toward sin. But as Calvin once put it, through the sacraments Christ is offered and presented to us as a treasure of heavenly grace.²

God gives to us the sacraments precisely because we are weak and sinful. Since God promises to rescue us from the guilt and power of sin in the gospel, so too in the sacraments God confirms that the promise made in the gospel in a visible and tangible way. In fact, so tangible that we get wet. So tangible, that we actually hold in our hands and taste with our mouths those same elements (bread and wine) which Jesus gave to his apostles. And these sacraments are based upon the same covenant promise—“*Come to*

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 241.

² Calvin, Institutes, 4.14.17.

me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ” (cf. Matthew 11:28).

Our confession also makes the point that the sacraments are seals of God’s gracious promises as well as pledges of God’s good will toward us even though we remain sinners. The language of sign and seal comes from Romans 4:11, in which Paul speaks of the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision in relationship to the faith of Abraham. *“He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.”* It was Augustine who picked up on the use of what is known as sacramental language as used by both Jesus and Paul, emphasizing that sacraments are visible signs and seals of invisible grace.

I cannot see the blood of Jesus wash away my sin. But I can see the water of baptism every time it is applied to someone on the basis of God’s covenant promise—“I will be your God and you will be my people.” I cannot see Christ’s broken body and shed blood as recounted in the gospel. But I can take in my hands and hold the bread and then drink the wine which point me to Christ’s broken body and shed blood for me. In fact, these things are both signs (pointers) and seals (covenant renewal) of God’s promise to save me from my sins.

All of this is true, not because I am a priest, or because something weird happens to the bread and wine. Rather, all of this is true because the Word of God says so and because the Holy Spirit ensures that what God promises in his word is actually received by his people through the means of faith. The sacraments do indeed communicate invisible grace as signs and seals of God’s gracious promise to save sinners. These are the means through which God strengthens and confirms that very same faith he creates in us through the preaching of the gospel.

Obviously, some biblical background is very important at this point. In Corinthians 10:1-4, Paul appeals to the Exodus account and yet re-interprets it in the light of the coming of Christ. Says Paul,

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

Not only were the people of Israel (men, women and children) baptized into Moses (prefiguring our own baptism into Christ), but as they were being baptized they remained completely dry. In fact, that is Paul’s whole point—while the people of Israel were being baptized, they passed through the sea on dry ground. It was God’s enemies who got wet, not the people of God.

The essence of baptism is not immersion into water as our Baptist friends contend, rather the essence of baptism is that it is a sign and seal of our deliverance from sin. The same thing holds true of the Lord’s Supper. While wandering in the wilderness, Paul reminds us that the people of Israel ate manna and drank from the rock. But Paul goes on to say that the rock is Christ, who is the reality behind the means by which God sustained life in the wilderness (water and manna). The sign and seal (spiritual food and drink) are given by God to point us to the reality behind them, who is none other than Jesus himself. Jesus Christ is the reality of all truly biblical sacramental theology. What do we receive in the sacrament? Christ and all his saving benefits!

A couple of other biblical passages need to be considered as well. The two sacraments of baptism and

the Lord's Supper are the visible signs and seals of God's fundamental covenant promise, which is so clearly articulated in Genesis 17:7—"And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." The sign and seal of that covenant was circumcision, which, according to Colossians 2:11-12, has been replaced by baptism. But the covenant promise of Genesis 17:7, is itself a reiteration of the earlier promise God made to Abraham as recounted in Genesis 15:3, when the LORD said to Abram,

And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

All of you who believe in Jesus Christ are the fulfillment of this promise. You were represented by those stars which Abraham saw in the sky.

What was Abraham's response to God's covenant promise? In verse 6, we read of Abraham, "*he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*" Although he believed God and was justified, Abram now asks the age-old question, a question which all of us have certainly asked at one time or another: "But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" How can I know that the promise is true? In verses 9-15 we read,

[YHWH] said to [Abraham], "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

Why this? Why was this bizarre ritual necessary for God to make a covenant with Abraham? Because it points to sacrifice which is so much greater. When the firepot and torch passed through the severed animal halves, God was telling Abraham that he will take upon himself the covenant curses graphically depicted by the severed animals. Whenever God swears on his oath that he is our God and we are his people, both the covenant blessings and curses should come to mind. We are under the covenant curse because of our sin—we deserve the fate of those severed animals because we have broken the covenant while God has remained ever faithful to his word.

Somehow and in some way the curse must be removed from us if God's covenant promise is to come to fruition in our lives. The whole point of the gospel is that God took that covenant curse away when Jesus

died for us and in our place on Calvary's cross. When we see the water of baptism applied or when we take and hold in our hands the bread and wine, we are reminded that in Jesus Christ, God kept his covenant oath, and that God has taken away the covenant curse when Jesus Christ was symbolically torn apart on Calvary's cross, bearing in his own flesh that curse which I so richly deserve, but yet, will never be forced to endure because of Christ's suffering on my behalf.

When, in Abram's dream, the torch and firepot passed through the severed animal halves, we get one of the first pictures in redemptive history of what it will cost to save us from the guilt and power of sin. Remember that in the words of institution, Jesus says to us "*this is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.*" When we take the sign and seal of the covenant of grace in our hands—the bread and wine—and hear the words, "*given for you*" we can be certain that God has kept his covenant promise. Jesus has taken that curse in his own flesh and he's taken it for you. He now ratifies that promise again through these very words. "Take and eat." "Take and drink." It is now safe to approach God. Things are okay, peace has been established. Not because we deserve anything, but because God is gracious and is mindful of our insensitivity and weakness.

The second point made by our confession is that the sacraments draw their efficacy from the word of God. "He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit." As one writer points out, the content of the word of God and the sacraments are identical—Christ and all his benefits. What is different about them is that the preached word is audible and the sacraments are visible.³ This is why you will often hear Reformed theologians speak of the sacraments as the "visible word." But one point needs to be added here so that we are clear. Because the sacraments draw their efficacy from the preached gospel, there is no true sacrament apart from that gospel. These are not rituals we perform expecting some magical effect. The sacraments are signs and seals of the promise of the gospel, which gives them their efficacy. They nourish and sustain that faith created by the gospel.

This point is clearly made in the New Testament. In Ephesians 5:26, Paul speaks of how Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, "*that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.*" In Romans 2:28-29, Paul makes the point that the sacrament is useless without the inward reality of the gospel. Paul tells us that "*no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*" And then in Colossians 2:11-12, the apostle writes, "*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*" True circumcision is that done of the heart of which the cutting of flesh is the outward sign. The same holds true for baptism. The sign is useless, apart from the reality—the thing signified.

Notice, too, how perfectly these signs and seals reflect the realities of the gospel on which they are based. Baptism is a wonderful picture of the washing away of sin. But the water of baptism cannot actually wash away sin—only the blood of Christ can do this. But where the water of baptism has been applied, so too we confidently believe that the blood of Christ has also been applied. Why? Because the word of

³ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 244.

God promises this! Where the signs and seals are present, by faith, we believe that the reality is present.

Just as our bodies need nourishment, so too do our souls. The bread and wine are our spiritual food and drink, every bit as much as the water and the manna sustained Israel during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai. If this is the case, then the argument for infrequent communion—"you don't want to celebrate the Supper too often or it won't be special" is emptied of its force.

The nature of the Lord's Supper as spiritual nourishment explains why both Calvin and Ursinus insisted upon a frequent (weekly) celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is the natural climax of the preaching of the gospel. This is because what is promised in God's word is to be taken and held in our hands as we eat and drink. That is how real God's promises are for his people. We can touch them and taste them, for where the sign is (bread and wine), so too there is the thing signified—Christ's body broken for me; Christ's blood, shed for me.

The third point made by our confession is that the sacraments are truly means of grace. Building upon what has already been asserted, our confession now makes the point that "So they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing." This point is the corollary of the previous point. Since the sacraments draw their efficacy from the word of God (specifically the preaching of the gospel), it follows then that if the gospel is proclaimed and believed, the sacraments are what God says they are: visible signs and seals of invisible spiritual realities. This is why we believe that wherever the gospel is preached and the signs and seals are present, so too is the spiritual reality, which we can only grasp through faith. What is audible—"I will be your God," becomes visible, "take and eat."

But just because we splash water on a child or go through the ritual of eating bread and wine, does not mean that the benefits promised us in the word are automatically communicated to us, as if by magic. According to Rome, an absolute pagan receives grace through the sacrament because the sacrament is rendered efficacious by virtue of the authority of the church and the office of the priesthood, regardless of the spiritual state of the recipient. But if the sacraments only draw their efficacy from the gospel, then we cannot assume that God works magically through them. In fact, the opposite is true. Because the sacraments confirm the promise of the gospel, they not only nourish and sustain faith, but they also summon faith. This is why we have no business receiving the sacraments if we do not believe God's promise to save sinners, or if we mistakenly think that God will accept us because we are good enough or righteous enough to partake.

The sacraments are efficacious only because the word says so, and if we come to receive them with the empty hands of faith, eager to take the good things that God has for us, we will receive everything which God has promised, namely all of the saving benefits of Jesus Christ. The sacraments are not for those who think they deserve to receive them or who think they have earned the right to partake. The sacraments are for sinners, unworthy people who come to God believing his promise and eager to receive whatever he gives us.

The fourth and final point made by our confession is that there are only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Obviously, this was an important matter in 1561 because of Rome's view that there are seven sacraments. Our confession affirms, "Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments that Christ our Master has ordained for us. There are only two: the sacrament of baptism and the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ." Not only is the nature and character of the sacraments an issue, but so is the number of them. Both Rome and the Orthodox churches confuse church ordinances with sacraments,

largely because they do not place confidence in the gospel, but in the power and authority of the church. According to Rome the five additional sacraments are confirmation, penance, holy orders, marriage and extreme unction (“last rites”). Of course, none of these are assigned to this category by Jesus Christ, who is that one who offers himself through the sacraments.⁴ Therefore, if Jesus does not command these things, nor even speak about them in the New Testament, then Jesus is not in any sense communicated to us through these things, despite Rome’s assertion to the contrary. These five additional “sacraments” must be rejected upon the authority of God’s word.

It is because we are weak and sinful people, that God graciously stoops to reach down to us through his word and sacrament. Through the water of baptism, through the bread and wine of the supper, God signs and seals his covenant promises to us. These two sacraments center in God’s gracious pledge that he is indeed our God and that we are his people. When we baptize and celebrate the Lord’s Supper, God’s covenant promises are ratified anew in our very presence. Because we are so insensitive to the things of God, and because we have so much trouble believing God’s promises precisely because they are so gracious, God not only speaks to us through his word, but he feeds and nourishes us through the body and blood of his own dear Son, after we have been plunged through the water of baptism, at which time, God incorporates us into his church and makes us heirs of all of his promises. Because we are weak and prone to sin and doubt, God graciously renews the promise of the gospel, in the signs and seals of the sacraments. Thus these things nourish and sustain that faith which God creates in us through the preaching of the gospel.

The sacraments are not incidental to the Christian life, nor do they contradict our doctrine of justification *sola fide*. In fact, the sacraments fit hand and glove with the gospel. For God has promised to save us from our sins, and this promise is confirmed and renewed every time we witness a baptism and every time we take and eat. For when we hear those words, “this is my body, broken for you,” we are reminded that Jesus Christ has turned aside God’s anger toward our sins. That same Savior who has died for me—taking away the covenant curse which I deserve—invites me to the font and to the table where he feeds and nourishes me, and where he swears on his sovereign oath, “I am your God and you are my people.” What glorious words for sinners such as we.

Come all you who are weary and burdened, for here you will find rest and refreshment.

⁴ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 247.