

The Sacraments & Christian Maturity

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking
but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

~ ROMANS 14:17

WE BELIEVE that the modern Reformed tradition has improperly imposed sixteenth-seventeenth century cultural problems upon the New Testament teachings on the sacraments, that Scripture teaches the sacraments as physical gospel presentations (with similarities and differences to the Word), that the debates within the Reformed community over the sacraments are legitimate secondary issues, and that therefore the *clear* commands on Christian maturity in Romans 14-15 have an interpretive priority over *unclear* inferences from texts concerning the sacraments.

Let it be understood at the outset that by “Reformed community” we mean those who are persuaded of the five *solas* of the Reformation as well as the five points of Calvinism. Hence other groups that descend from the Protestant Reformation practice the sacraments in a way that all of us in the Reformed faith would regard as erroneous. For instance, the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments is troubling because of its proximity to Roman sacerdotalism. To the degree that a group strays from the doctrine of *sola gratia*—to that degree they will confuse the doctrine of *sola fide* as well. One’s view toward the sacraments is merely a reflection of this. Yet it is exactly here where the Reformation is always in need of further maturity—*semper reformanda!* Whether it has been on the traditionally Reformed or Baptist sides of the aisle, the social needs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries thoroughly colored the ways in which the tradition has interpreted texts on the sacraments. At the end of the day, such concentrations distract from the gospel and inculcate weakness.

Please note at the beginning that simply because an idea or practice has a tendency (in this case to cause weakness), *it does not follow that the effect of that tendency will manifest itself right away*. So please do not conclude from this that we are saying that anyone who practices the sacraments the way that Baptists or Presbyterians traditionally have, that they (some particular pastor or local body) will exhibit such immaturity. The gospel they preach and the faithful leadership present may often prevent such a natural slide. Our only claim is that this

weakening tendency *is* the nature of things. To practice any form of worship in such a way that the sinner's focus is on what he or she does rather than what Christ has done, begins to erode our grasp of the gospel and consequently our Christian maturity. We maintain that when the apostle Paul taught on Christian liberty in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, he was also teaching on Christian maturity: that the one is directly proportional to the other. With that introductory material in mind, we unpack our statement:

1) that the modern Reformed tradition has improperly imposed sixteenth-seventeenth century cultural problems upon the New Testament teachings on the sacraments...

The Reformed traditions sought to maintain enough of a state-church homogeneity to further their particular consensus, and the Baptist tradition swung the pendulum the other direction, in their desire to wrest the powers of the church away from the state. How does this affect one's view about the relationship between participating in the sacraments and official church membership?

The basic answer is that the Reformed and Baptist traditions began to overemphasize either the visibility or invisibility of true church membership, respectively. Neither overemphasis accounts for enough of the breath of Reformed soteriology into consideration at once. It is not that they do not believe in all of these things; it is just that their context did not permit them to juggle it all at the same time. Examine the following concepts and see if they cannot be held together:

- *The Visible Church*: the whole professing body of believers across the world and throughout history, including each individual, local church body.¹
- *The Invisible Church*: the whole elect body of believers across the world and throughout history, foreknown, purchased, regenerated and kept by God.
- *Regeneration Precedes Faith and Both Come through Gospel Preaching*: No one who understands Reformed theology would balk at either of these statements, yet we are getting nearer to the heart of the problem.
- *The Spirit Regenerates According to the Foreordination of the Father*: Again, no one in these traditions would disagree to this either.

¹ The visible church will naturally have other subordinate elements, at least one of which Baptists and the traditional Reformed will dispute—the eligibility of membership into the visible, professing body. A Baptist would argue that one must be able to profess to be considered in the class of “professing,” so that the “visible” comes to mean the exact same thing as the “professing.”

- *Neither the Waters nor the Merits of the Individual in Baptism Regenerate; Nor do they Justify.* Once again, no one would disagree with this in principle either.

Now let us take the above five truths and see where we start to equivocate. Ask a Presbyterian or a Baptist whether someone should be “re-baptized” and listen to their logic. At first glance, it sounds like they are saying two totally different things; but the more we hear it, the more, we believe, a common ground begins to emerge. Both are convinced—desiring different results—that the maturing believer follows a course of action *specifically so that the efficacy of their act will be maintained*. Of course, both would deny the doctrine of baptismal regeneration; yet both sides suspect that something of its effect may be getting “watered down” (no pun intended). Let me be clear that I am *not* accusing the modern Reformed tradition of believing in a “practical baptismal regeneration.” We are persuaded of their sincerity and therefore their orthodoxy. What we are saying is that, to the degree that we point a “disillusioned” believer back to something about themselves, rather than the work of Christ, we are encouraging them to wander a few paces back to Rome.

OBJECTION 1: If someone is baptized when they don’t know what they’re doing, then they will be disillusioned about the gospel. Even if this doesn’t happen every time, it will at least be the tendency.

REPLY 1: Let’s assume that’s true. What are they primarily disillusioned *about* in your concern—the gospel or their baptism? If it is their baptism, then simply explain to them how that act is not the gospel. If it is the gospel, well, then isn’t that a tacit admission that what was really needed was a clearer gospel?

If the whole problem is the *timing* of baptism, how can the remedy be to keep moving the timing? When we are re-baptized at age 23 or 33, two strange things begin to happen: We keep sinning and we keep growing in spiritual truth. Will we keep jumping on the end of the Holy Ghost conga line every time we leak or every time we get enlightened? If your answer is “No,” then consider *why* that is your answer and simply apply it consistently. As we proceed we are going to notice this same misplaced anxiety popping up in all of the related issues. This will provide a massive clue as to the very definition of a stronger and weaker brother in Paul’s writings and how it applies to the sacraments.

OBJECTION 2: Membership in the church is only for those who publically profess their faith in the person and work of Christ, and give signs of conversion.

REPLY 2: Though we certainly favor having such a two-fold criterion for the deeper level of commitment called church membership: a) Can you produce a single scripture that clearly commands that? b) Can you then produce a single scripture

that restricts the participation in sacraments to those who meet those standards? You will search in vain.

OBJECTION 3: Even if one justifies that a dual-practice is biblically permissible, the majority of Christians have been either staunchly paedobaptist or credobaptist.

REPLY 3: First off, that math won't work. If we demand on being "staunch" about one or the other, then the other won't count (since it is wrong) and your majority is lost off the top. But secondly, both positions are technically modern and the church of the first four centuries, where we have evidence, allowed a diversity of practice. And it was not until the sixth century that Rome completely enveloped the empire with infant baptismal regeneration.

2) ...that Scripture teaches the sacraments as physical gospel presentations (with similarities and differences to the Word)...

Calvin opens off the section on the Sacraments in the *Institutes* with these words: "Akin to the preaching of the gospel, we have another help to our faith in the sacraments..."² to which we say Amen! Baptism and the Lord's Supper are indeed *a-kin* to the preaching of the gospel in that they say in visible drama what preaching says with invisible words. Calvin offers two definitions of a sacrament that really say the same thing. For our purposes, we will use the more concise definition. A **sacrament** is:

a testimony of the divine favor toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith toward him.³

He was not unaware of how that last part seems to exclude the usefulness of these signs toward those who could not express faith. His only point that there are two basic elements to a sacrament: 1) God's testimony and 2) our participation. The etymology of the word gives us our first glimpse as to how they have functioned throughout church history. The fathers begin to use the word *sacramentum* to render the Greek *mysterion*. As virtually all New Testament commentators agree, the word *mysterion*, so frequently used by Paul, referred to something that had been hidden for a time, but which, in the fullness of time, was to be made clear to all. This was the crux of the Apostle's argument against the proto-Gnostics in Ephesians 3:1-12: that the true *mysterion* was to be broken open to all. This concept will become important as we see how the modern Reformed traditions have projected their anxiety about boundaries between invisible and visible church upon the text. At any rate, the event of the Christian ministry revealing the mystery—in Word and sacrament—rests upon this rationale. J. I. Packer

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA 2008); p. 843

³ Calvin, *ibid.*, p. 843

comments that “As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel audible, so the sacraments make it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means. Sacraments strengthen faith by correlating Christian beliefs with the testimony of our senses.”⁴

When we speak of the sacraments as “signs” and “seals,” what we mean is their objective and subjective effect upon the believer. Perhaps we could add a third ‘s’ word for the unbeliever—“singe”—for that is what the preaching will do to the heart that is *not* regenerate: it will make it even harder and offended. So both the word and the sacraments are a *sign*, a *seal* and a *singe*. The New Testament also gives us a few glimpses of how the sacraments and preaching are similar in a negative way—i.e. how they work upon the reprobate. Hebrews 6 is really a classic example:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt [6:4-6].

The context before and after this passage will prevent us from descending into the nonsense that this is teaching that we can lose our salvation—i.e. since it refers to those who “have fallen away,” and so forth. This is also a pattern we see in the teaching of Jesus. How many times does he say something like:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you [Mat. 11:21-23, cf. 24-25].

The principle to the pattern is that the closer one is to the flame of truth, the more one’s heart is singed if the sovereign grace of God passes him over. The brighter the light, the harder the clay that is not on the Potter’s wheel. It is in our contemplation of this truth that we begin to see yet another weakness in the modern Reformed view. When parents opt their child out of a sacrament specifically because of the possibility of incurring a greater judgment, notice what they have committed themselves to: they are saying that they will give their child less light so that they are not hardened! Do we apply this consistently? Surely we do not apply it with complete consistency. We do not withhold devotional time until a later age. We do not withhold parental discipline or parental examples until a later age. And if we did withhold any other thing for a later age, at what age would we like our children to begin their confrontation with the whole truth? We are asking this question rhetorically as if we are *not* so consistent. However, the argument can be made that in fact this attitude over church participation actually bleeds into the rest of our thinking as well. For the modern Western (including the

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL 1993); p. 210

Reformed) church has indeed handed their children over to Caesar, Doctor Spock and Madison Avenue. Does such a church bear witness to their lack of credibility on this very issue? That case can be made.

The Apostle Paul models for us the order of mission where he says, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” [1 Cor. 1:17], ironically enough, right after he had got done recalling one of those “household” baptisms [cf. 1:16]. He couldn’t even remember who exactly he baptized!

3) ...that the debates within the Reformed community over the sacraments are legitimate secondary issues...

All parties believe in credo-baptism (i.e. full immersion baptism for new believers). The only question is whether or not, in addition to believer’s baptism, all of the children of believers’ households should also be baptized. A further question emerges whether or not anyone who is baptized may or may not participate in the Lord’s Supper.

A word of caution is in order on the table. There may be many people out there who believe that *if* we ought to baptize the infants of believers, and *if* 1 Corinthians 11 is not really about membership controls, *then* all who are baptized as infants ought to also be included at the table immediately. This is a false conclusion for reasons that we will see. In fact the very label “paedo-communion” can be misleading. We would restrict the table from those who cannot be instructed by it; but we would differentiate between *instruction* and *profession*, allowing parents to decide how much is being understood by their children. That is their calling after all, and how we encourage them to live up to it goes a long way toward revealing which practice of the sacraments produces the most complete disciples. That is where we start to see how all of the arguments against a diversity of practice prove our point with a vengeance.

The case for paedo-baptism is as follows:

There are two main passages that spell out the infant baptism position (called paedo-baptism from the Latin, *paedo* – meaning infant). The passages are Colossians 2:11-12 and Romans 4:11. We will look at the passage in Colossians first. In it, the Apostle Paul says:

“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” [Col. 2:11-12].

Here is the basic reasoning: There is continuity within the whole Covenant of Grace. The covenant that God made with Abraham just *is* the unconditional New Covenant that Christ mediates, ushering the Gentiles into the promise already made to Israel [cf. Gal. 3:8, 29, Heb. 8]. So far, there is no disagreement between the Covenant-thinking Reformed and Baptists. Within this basic continuity, there is the further carry-over of the sign and seal of faith from national Israel to spiritual Israel (i.e. all believers in Christ). In the Old Testament it was circumcision; in the New Testament it is baptism. Our text in Colossians seems to draw the parallel between them. We now turn to the other “linchpin” text.

In the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul is laying the groundwork for justification by faith alone; and he uses the father of faith, Abraham, as his ultimate case study. After establishing that the ground for Abraham’s justification was his belief in the promise of God, Paul says this in verse 11:

“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” [Rom. 4:11].

Now, I want to point to a triad of words here: sign, seal, and righteousness. I highlight “righteousness” rather than “faith” in this connection because the argument points to the fact that this Old Testament act of circumcision was something that signified a righteousness already possessed by faith. Now when the Baptist points out that this sign must highlight a faith that is possessed *prior to* the sign [cf. 4:10], the Presbyterian can very rightly reply: “Why then did God command the father to give the sign to the male child on the eighth day? The infant cannot believe, and so according to God himself, belief is not the ultimate thing highlighted; the righteousness of God thus possessed is the point.” The focus on the gift of God over the response of man makes the gospel more objective in the sign. These are the foundational pieces for infant baptism: 1) that baptism is the New Covenant version of circumcision; and 2) that the element of faith is not thereby obscured—but rather placed within the superior context of grace—by the giving of the sign to infants.

The traditionally Reformed argue that by carrying over the sign to the infant, we tend to highlight the act of God, not the response of man. Hence, paedobaptism is more grace-glorifying. The Baptist will say that this assumes too much: i.e. that the kind of grace exemplified by God to Abraham looked just like it does in households of the New Covenant. But we are given quite a bit more information in the New Testament about what God was really up to with the descendents of Abraham, things that speak directly to this matter.

At any rate, let us look at some more elements to the paedobaptist logic. First, there is the argument from New Testament household baptisms. Four times in Acts (and once in 1 Corinthians 1), an entire household is baptized where salvation is said, or at least implied, to come to all [10:22, 16:15, 30-34, 18:8]. Moreover, 1 Corinthians 7:14 faintly seems to suggest that children of believing households can be in some sense made “holy.” If this is only reference to visible, temporal sanctification (i.e. parents setting their children aside unto the Lord), well, then that simply strengthens the point that such a thing still matters in the New Covenant age. Finally, we should not have expected the initial audience of the apostles to interpret the sign and seal of baptism any other way than what circumcision had always been. After all, the first Christians were Jews—Jewish believers who presumably gave birth to children well before the first Pauline letters were ever written. It would be unreasonable to suppose that the apostles would have remained silent on explicitly correcting this analogy had the analogy been false. J. I. Packer asserts: “But if infants share covenant status with their parent, it is fitting, other things being equal, to give them the sign of that status and of their place in the covenant community, and it would be unfitting for the church to withhold it. This fitness is demonstrated by the fact that when circumcision was the sign of covenant status and community inclusion, God commanded it explicitly (Gen. 17:9-14).”⁵ This promise was continuously made in the Old Testament to the whole covenant line, to one of the patriarchs, their children and their children’s children. Peter seems to draw back on this same language in his Pentecost sermon: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” [Acts 2:39].

The case against paedobaptism is as follows:

The covenantal Baptist can accept the entire unity of the Covenant of Grace and still point to passages like Romans 2:25-29 and 9:6-8 to argue that the New Testament begins to emphasize the activity of God on individual believers over the physical keeping of the covenant. Moreover, baptism by immersion more accurately and dramatically portrays the work of Christ to which the sign is supposed to point. Infant baptism cannot function this way at all. Therefore the gospel is not as clearly told through infant baptism. In addition, even if Peter’s language in Acts 2 was an allusion to the Old Covenant language, the final words in verse 39 strongly suggest the Baptist interpretation, since the emphasis on the “far off” children are those who are “called” by God. In other words, the promise is *not* for one’s physical descendants but for one’s spiritual descendants.

Do the grace-glorifying aspects of paedobaptism hold any water in our bigger picture? (I mean the notion that because credo-baptism stresses the timing of the

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL)

human response while paedobaptism highlights the promise itself, that this makes the older covenantal version more grace-centered.) Well it might be an airtight argument if that fourth chapter in Romans had nothing else to say on the matter. But as we examine the rest of that chapter we will see more of what we have already been examining: that the New Covenant function of the sign centers on the believer *not primarily* to highlight the believer's action but to highlight the nature of the promise.

This is precisely where the rest of Romans 4 points. The very next verse continues: “and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised *but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith* that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” [4:12, italics mine]. Abraham was called out of the land of the Chaldeans and into the land that would be Israel. Paul is saying here that he serves as a type for his spiritual descendants exactly in this way, and that the sign points to that and nothing less. These children of Abraham are to receive the kind of sign that highlights grace *coming through faith*, not grace as an empty shell. Paul says later, “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring” [4:16]. The offspring are the invisible elect who will all believe, not the physical descendants.

Now what about the passage in Colossians? Remember this is the parallel between circumcision to national Israel and baptism to the spiritual Israel. The argument is that there is a perfect analogy of signs. As we look closer we can see that this is not an analogy between signs at all. The paedobaptist sees here an analogy between two physical things: the signs of circumcision and baptism. Is that clearly the case?

“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” [Col. 2:11-12].

Let's lay out our options. There are really only two logical possibilities: Either there is a real analogy here, but not between two physical things, or, there is no analogy here as the water baptism (the sign) is paired with the circumcision that Christ performs (the substance to which the sign points). In either case, this seems inconclusive for paedobaptism. Whichever option we choose, it is not an analogy between two physical signs. The meaning of “baptism” here is not quite as clear as the meaning of circumcision. For “circumcision,” Paul leaves us with no doubt that the one being discussed is the one that Christ has performed (i.e. not the outward sign). With baptism, though it is not as explicit, I think it is safe to go with our first option—that there is a real analogy, but one between the two spiritual realities. In fact they are two aspects of a singular spiritual reality (particularly if what Covenant Theology says about Israel and the Church is true!)—the baptism performed by Christ and the circumcision of the heart performed by the Holy

Spirit upon one new man. But if this is true, then it still begs the question as to how it is applied externally, and thus this text cannot logically be used to show how. The closest we can come to an application seems to support believer's baptism: i.e. that we are "raised...through faith."

The case for paedocommunion is as follows:

1) HISTORIC – **a.** Between the third and twelfth centuries, the Western church—including early church fathers, such as Cyprian and Augustine—endorsed the practice, and was removed only because of the emergence of the erroneous doctrine of Transubstantiation. Moreover, the Eastern Orthodox Church has always done so; **b.** Advocates of the Federal Vision, many of whom are accomplished and recognized Reformed theologians, currently practice paedocommunion.⁶ Contemporary practitioners insist that where the Reformed tradition has restricted the Lord's Table from small children, they have been wrong.

2) SYSTEMATIC – **a.** The sacraments are signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace—which work is of God, not of the efforts of man—and so the view toward the Lord's Supper as a membership control draws our attention away from the work of Christ and toward our performance in it; **b.** Both the Word and the two sacraments have the same basic effect of enlightening and hardening; **c.** Just as covenant children have the sign of circumcision carried over to baptism, so the event of the Passover sees the right of the whole household carried over; **d.** The majority view in the modern church is incompatible with the doctrines of grace, which teach that *no one loses justification* [cf. Rom. 8:30]: hence the "judgment" spoken of in 11:29 refers to those who (like in Hebrews 6 with the Word) partake in the visible church, yet are doubly guilty because they reject Christ in the face of the strongest witness.

3) EXEGETICAL – **a.** The lone verse which allegedly speaks against it is 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. In this passage, while verses 28-29 may certainly be applied to those who cannot examine themselves, the context seems to suggest that the particular sin of eating and drinking in an "undiscerning" manner is what is meant by "unworthily manner." It is a sin of haughtiness and exclusivity. Such context surrounds the liturgical and warning portions of the text; **b.** Due to this (a), it is exceedingly difficult to prove that "examine" (v. 28) and "discern" (v. 29) *must* be extended from the "wicked" to the "ignorant"⁷ by simply repeating the text. That seems to commit the fallacy of circular reasoning. Both sides agree that the text is there and that it means what it says. It simply begs the question to leave it at that.

⁶ We are not unaware that within the Federal Vision there is a somewhat subtler version of a new perspective on Paul—that is the doctrine of justification—but we mention this merely to submit it into the record on the issue of the sacraments. Nor can anyone argue without a fallacy that because they get justification wrong that they *must* get the sacraments wrong.

⁷ The Westminster Confession used this language of the "ignorant and wicked" in Article , Section 8, though it does not expound upon its relevance to this text.

The case against paedo-communion is as follows:

The case against paedo-communion is based on upon one text, but one which the church has overwhelmingly viewed in one way for a long time. 1 Corinthians 11:27-30, taken by itself, seems very strongly to say that anyone who partakes of the Lord's Supper must examine himself. By logical inference, anyone who cannot examine belongs to the class of people who cannot partake. Self-examination seems to be a necessary condition for admittance.

Moreover, there is no evidence from all of the Old Testament texts that small children participated, *ceremonially*, in the feasts of Israel. In the lone New Testament case study, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph “went up according to custom,” but only includes Jesus when he was twelve [cf. Lk. 2:41-42]. The Passover was a *memorial* meal—meaning that it required reflection [cf. Ex. 12:14, 13:9-10]. As Berkhof stated, “Children, though they were allowed to eat the passover in the days of the Old Testament, cannot be permitted to partake of the table of the Lord, since they cannot meet the requirements for worthy participation.”⁸

Some Assessments

First, to the baptism debate:

The Baptist demands to know why, if there is such an unbroken tradition for the practice of baptizing infants, we do not see it explicit in the New Testament or the teaching of the first few centuries of church fathers. The Presbyterian looks at the exact same evidence and demands to know why, if there were such a priority against it, would the Jewish authors of the New Testament (written to first generation believers—also, mostly Jewish) not have explicitly forbidden such a natural inference from circumcision to baptism.⁹ Moreover, as Anthony Lane points out, while there is no clear case of an infant baptism in the New Testament, neither is there any case of what we would today call a “believer’s baptism.” It is better to call them “converts baptism.” Lane explains:

Baptism was not optional. It was not left up to the conscience of the individual believer. It was not delayed until the convert’s genuineness was proved. Instead it was part of the gospel message.¹⁰

Another item that may easily escape our notice is that there is not a single instance of a delayed baptism for a child in the New Testament. The moment the Baptist

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 656

⁹ Bruce Ware believes that Colossians 2:12 does just that: cf. *Baptism, Three Views* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2009); pp. 27, 46; yet, for all of the exegetic merit, this is an inference from a theological construct of Paul—not a clear moral imperative of Paul.

¹⁰ Anthony N. S. Lane, *Baptism, Three Views*; *ibid.*, p. 143

moves to argue that this is implied, we might ask why he does not allow his Reformed brethren to make that same inferential stretch for *his* case. In short, once we define our terms thoroughly, neither side can support their case from any single example in Scripture. The idea that “baptism tends the front door of the church, while the Lord’s Supper tends the back door,”¹¹ may be a useful contrivance, but it is just that.

Moreover, individuals can be warned of particular sins and discouraged from communion on a case by case basis. In fact, they must. According to the majority-Reformed view, the reason that children are barred and adult-sinners are barred is so distinct, that the one has nothing to do with the other. Capable offenders are restricted from the Table because of a sin that they are capable of examining in themselves; children are restricted precisely because they are incapable of such self-examination. Therefore, it cannot be from the “back door” that we are protecting children in that rationale.

If we baptize too early, we reason, then we risk communicating an official status to a profession that was less than genuine. It rarely occurs to us that baptism is not meant to speak of our performance at all. The closest texts we can use to justify the Baptist view are Matthew 28:20 and 1 Peter 3:20 because the one refers to baptizing disciples and the other links the act with “the pledge of a good conscience.” But neither text proves sufficient. While the Great Commission text demands that we baptize every disciple, it does not restrict baptism for those for whom we cannot tell whether they will be disciples. In other words, the relationship between baptism and discipleship is logical rather than chronological. While the passage in Peter wards off baptismal regenerationists by distinguishing the saving work from the water, it does nothing to demand that our *act* ensure a good conscience. If anything, such a position moves us closer to the baptismal regeneration view. In fact, both the Reformed and Baptist strands of the Protestant Reformation are closer to baptismal regeneration (or at least baptismal sanctification) than the Bible is. These are bad inferences and projects whose time for exposure has come.

What are Baptists who take church membership seriously willing to concede on this point? Well, Dever admits a margin of error: “At the end of the day, we simply have to admit that the wheat will grow with the tares (Matt. 13:24-43) until the Lord returns. But that fact doesn’t give us license for pastoral irresponsibility in the way we take new members into our churches. We need to be faithful to do all we can to externally ensure that no unconverted person becomes a member of our local church.”¹² Amen to every word of that! But the question at hand is still two-fold: 1) Are the sacraments meant, in the New Testament, to function in the same way as membership controls, and 2) Is this usage of the sacraments really the only

¹¹ Dever, *ibid.*, p. 90

¹² Dever, *ibid.*, p. 65

way (or even the best way) to do just that? We think we have an easy answer on our hands to both of those questions. And the fact that the modern Reformed traditions have so monumentally blown this one is no hindrance to our clear perspective.

Now to the debate over the Lord's Supper:

No one debates whether or not 1 Corinthians 11 is really the crucial text. If Paul extends his restriction to the ignorant (not merely those who bear the particular sin of the Corinthian church) then the text clearly prohibits the table for small children. If not, then it seems that there is no exegetical warrant for this practice of prohibition. We would simply say that the burden of proof is squarely on those who would see it as a restriction to the ignorant since it does not specifically say that, and while it *does* designate a specific sin of adults before and after the liturgical portion of the text. The modern interpretation of this text (which, remember is the lone text we have to go on) is exceedingly weak. It is instructive that Fred Malone's little treatise against paedo-baptism, *A String of Pearls Unstrung*, rests his rejection of infant baptism (in his own personal journey) upon his conclusion from the biblical evidence that the children of Israel most likely *did* participate in the Passover meal. His next inference? "Why is New Testament regulation sufficient to define the subjects of the Lord's Supper but not infant baptism?"¹³ But if that begs the very question we are asking, then his unstrung pile of pearls rests precariously upon a falling house of cards.

We should also distinguish between an **instructional** function to covenant participation versus a **supernatural** function. The distinction parallels the distinction familiar to all Reformed theologians between the external (gospel) and internal (effectual) call in the process of regeneration. If we can understand that, then we can understand why many paedo-communicants are doing what they do.

Jospeh Pipa thinks that the typical paedo-communion rationale brings down their whole house of cards: that if the father is to examine the child, then such an examination refutes the automatic status of the child's covenant right anyway. But this seems to ignore the instructional-versus-supernatural distinction we have made above. The father examines the child to see *whether or not the practice is useful*—not to transmit some value that is the child's by virtue of his nature, but—to the instruction that is the parent's duty in other areas (i.e. Bible study, prayer, corrective discipline, etc.). In other words, if the father asks, in effect, "Is it taking?" he would mean whether or not his training is effective, not whether or not the child is "eligible" in the sense of "good enough" or "old enough." Pipa engages in faulty reason, concluding that the child is tested for eligibility by his father when that is precisely the standard that the father denies as a factor.

¹³ Fred Malone, *A String of Pearls Unstrung* (http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/malone/malone_text.html)

Calvin was perfectly aware of much historical support for the practice, but argued that the emergence of **sacradotalism** by the third century—tying salvation more closely to the church’s means of grace—unduly inflated the logic for it. And Sproul’s commentary on the Confession does not comment on the “ignorant and wicked” phrase in Section 8. It is difficult to find any real compelling argument against it besides citing “majority report.”

The truth is that a great many in the Reformed tradition do agree with us on the gospel-presentation view of the sacraments. Solomon Stoddard utilized the Lord’s Supper at Northampton to *aim at* conversion and nourishment, not to ensure that it had already happened. You can do no such thing!

You see the Reformed tradition has very quickly and correctly asserted the doctrine of *sola scriptura* when it has found itself in the minority. The moment that a series of votes and a collection of papers build a sufficient majority, these things outside of Scripture begin to assume the level of unquestionable authority. And when that happens, then the heart of the Reformation has been abandoned.

4) ...and that therefore the *clear* commands on Christian maturity in Romans 14-15 have an interpretive priority over *unclear* inferences from texts concerning the sacraments.

If we begin reading at Romans 14:1, we notice first of all that the chapter is broken down into the admonitions: “Do Not Pass Judgment” and “Do Not Cause Another to Stumble.” In other words, Paul does not stop at calling things “secondary” and subtly suggesting that it would be nice to be nice about them. He is flat out saying that Christ died for such convictions and for them to be walked out in diverse manners. When we stand in the way of *this*, we are opposing Christ and ruining his people. We will also notice that in all of the straightforward commands given, he never once qualifies the practice with the words “...in separate buildings.” Not once.

By “opinions” (*dialogismon*) in verse 1, he means those things over which we “opine,” or speculate, things for which there is not a sufficiently good case in Scripture that it is a salvation issue. Note that it is where we get the word “dialogue.” Such secondary matters include **doctrines** such as the age of the earth, form of church government, timing of baptism, cessation/continuation of spiritual gifts, school of apologetics, the exact nature of the millennium, or corporate worship liturgy. They also include **practices** such as alcohol consumption, wardrobe, dating, divorce and remarriage, method of education and discipline of children, family-integrated worship services, and adherence to a political philosophy or party. Then notice that he connects the welcoming with the motive *opposite* quarreling over opinions: **welcome him, but not to...**The implication is

that the tendency for many is to be motivated to welcome people only in order to commend something secondary about the faith. Even this may mask itself as well-intended, but it cannot avoid descending into a quarrel, since there is so much of a divide over the issue. After all, *if only* that hippie could see that government redistribution actually empowers the richest and prevents upward mobility of the middle class, *if only* that single mother would spank her kids and stop looking for guys here or there, and *if only* that biology student could see that the word *yom* can only mean a twenty-four hour period in Genesis 1, then he would be on our side! Yes if only—if only they were saved and taught by the Spirit in the company of loving brothers and sisters, maybe then they *would* consider all those things with a much more flexible soul.

Here is a portion of this biblical truth that we tend to miss, and the theme is everywhere in the New Testament: The man who focuses on externals in the name of holiness is always the weaker brother! A good study of Paul's letter to the Galatians gives us a glimpse as to why this is. An even more careful study of the life of Jesus will do the same. Verse 2 spells out the principle: the weak person is an abstainer because the weak person is a "stainer." Paul informs Titus that "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled" [1:15]. Everywhere he looks, the weaker brother sees stains. He cannot yet see the finished work of Christ as clearly as he should and so he walks around on eggshells about virtually everything. Notice the operative word **may**—which in this context clearly calls attention to an ability that he possesses that the weaker brother lacks. The implication is that this is where we want to move toward in moving to Christian maturity [cf. Heb. 6:1-2].

The attitude Paul calls us to here is motivated and modeled by God himself, so he concludes with the reasoning: **for God has welcomed him**. After the first command in verse 1 to "welcome him," verse 3 gives two more: **Let not**. There is a "let not" to both the freeman and the abstainer, indicating that either one could wind up playing the weaker brother. We have already seen from verse 2 that the one who abstains is weaker, yet the one who eats in freedom renounces that freedom the moment he does not use it to serve everyone in love [cf. Gal. 5:13]. He too would no longer be completely free but bound by the need to pass judgment in that case. That is only another attempt to justify oneself.

Greater rationale is given in verse 4 for our reason to not pass judgment: Jesus Christ is his Lord or Master and the suggestion is that his Lord is willing and able to make him persevere to final glory. But do not miss the link that Paul makes from verse 4 to verse 1—the one who quarrels and commends these quarrels is the same person who passes judgment. On the authority of Scripture, every Christian needs to know that the Spirit has judged the intentions of his heart here [cf. Heb. 4:12]: that what is really going on in our hearts when we so aggressively "welcome"

people into a secondary matter is an attempt to make divinely judicial distinctions between ourselves and the new brother (should he disagree with us).

Verses 5 and 6 should be taken together so that we do not get the idea that Christian charity demands some degree of relativism. This is not what Paul is saying in verse 5. By each person being **convinced in his own mind**, he is merely demanding that we have convictions about these secondary matters, not that they are insoluble or inconsequential. The next verse gives us more help, teaching that two different views on the same matter (so long as it is not over what we called earlier an “essential”) may glorify God since the motive behind each can be worshipful of the one, true God. Someone may ask why God would permit such a thing. Perhaps it was to encourage the cultivation of Christian charity in the teeth of the main things which jeopardize it.

The same Paul who tells us to not make brothers stumble on their way to the gospel over these matters, tells us to have the highest possible conviction on these matters. So there is a simple way to process both sides of this coin as the definition of maturity:

1. *Don't ruin a brother or sister on their way to the gospel!*
2. *Don't fail to sharpen a brother or sister on their path in the gospel!*

Understanding how to walk out both of these principles together, in one local body is the heart and soul of Christian maturity. It teaches parents to shepherd their children into the depths of the main and plain doctrines. It teaches them to construct their own worldview without second-rate dependence on group behavior or simplistic slogans. It creates maturity by first creating a mature mind. It prevents the church from become an irrelevant herd of second-handers.

There is an enormous practical application here. To the degree that we train people's attentions on something they do, their faith will be weakened, they will be less free, and consequently the whole church will be less effective in culture. Every culture has their superstitions, their gut and circumstantial expectations of cause and effect; and we all naturally read those into the Bible. The modern West has had its own superstitions and it has convinced itself that they were the immutable order of things. That time is over. We will either get over them or else be made a relic ourselves. Where we teach Christianity as a superstition, we are cultivating a superstitious people. And superstitious people are a weak people.

David Wright, ed., Bruce Ware, Sinclair Ferguson & Anthony Lane, *Baptism: Three Views* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2009)