

Reinforcing Teaching of the Sacraments

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[Metro North/Dodge-Washington Joint Conference Inn on Maritime Bay, Manitowoc, WI, January 16, 1996]

Dear Brothers in our Epiphany Lord:

I found it refreshing to open my Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Christmas Day to read an article by Cal Thomas entitled, "Ancient Truths Endure in a Modern World." Thomas maintains that the birth of Jesus Christ originates with God and defends the accuracy of Bible history. I applaud both points. Then he makes the unfortunate statement, "Faith is a matter of the will. People choose to accept or reject evidence."¹ We expect to hear such decision theology from the Reformed branches of Christianity. We also expect to hear silence on the efficacy of the Sacraments from these Reformed sources. Baptism? It doesn't reflect God's grace but is a faith decision on the part of the believer, thereby losing its significance as a divine act and becoming a human work. Holy Communion? "What Holy Communion means in modern Protestantism, no one knows. For many it is the fellowship which members of the congregation have and which is expressed by the common sacred meal."² We will receive no assistance from non-Lutheran Christian denominations to reinforce the true Scriptural teachings regarding the Sacraments. I believe that we would benefit from a thorough review on the Scriptural principles of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. In my 13 1/2 years in the ministry, I recall only one conference paper devoted to a Sacrament, and it focused on close communion and fellowship issues. I would like to suggest such a study for future conferences. The importance of the Sacraments cannot be underestimated as David Scaer asserts in his article, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church":

From the Lutheran perspective baptism and the Lord's Supper are not isolated as ordinances or rituals from the life of the church; but to employ another famous Lutheran phrase, these sacraments exist "in, with, and under" the church's life. The sacramental action and efficacy permeate every corner of the church's life, as the sacraments are the actual working of Christ for salvation in the church.³

Since my assignment is reinforcing teaching of the Sacraments, I must make the assumption that we all agree on the Scriptural principles regarding the Sacraments which we confessed on the day of our ordination and which are summarized *in This We Believe*:

We believe that also through baptism the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to sinful man, regenerating him (Titus 3:5) and cleansing him from all iniquity (Acts 2:38). The Lord points to the blessing of baptism when he promises, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). We believe that the blessing of baptism is meant for all people (Matt. 28:19), including infants, who are sinful (John 3:6) and therefore need the regeneration effected through baptism (John 3:5).

We believe that all who partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and blood of Christ "in, with and under" the bread and wine. This is true because, when the Lord instituted this sacrament, he said, "This is my body given for you....This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19,20). As we partake of his body and blood, given and shed for us, we by faith receive the comfort and assurance that our sins are indeed forgiven and that we are truly his own.⁴

In my preparation of this essay, I became immersed in introspection: What do these Sacraments mean to me personally? If I am going to reinforce the importance of the Sacraments to my flock, I must first be

convinced of their importance to me. If Word and Sacrament is the beating heart of my ministry, I must make sure that I as minister have no heart arrhythmia! Therefore, brothers, I am going to speak in the first person singular throughout much of this essay, verbalizing personal thoughts and experiences with respect to these Sacraments. I know that you have your own thoughts and experiences, too. I invite you to ponder them. I believe that our personal experiences with the Sacraments hold a treasure chest of ideas on how to reinforce the Sacraments upon God's people.

Take Them Personally

Yesterday was my birthday—the big 4-0! While I didn't have the opportunity to celebrate with my family, I do have another birthday coming. On February 12, 1956 the sainted Pastor Herman Cares sprinkled water on my forehead which combined with the Word of God to give me spiritual rebirth (Titus 3:5). On that Sunday morning I was clothed in a white baptismal dress which had been in our family for 57 years. It symbolized the righteousness which is mine through the forgiveness of my sins.

On February 12, 1956 I became a member of God's family. I was not naturally born into His family – my inherited sin disqualified me. The dear Lord adopted me with an adoption He won't revoke! I was baptized in Christ...in connection with Christ...in the sphere of Christ. And "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26). I possess all the blessings of salvation which the Savior came to win for me. Like a college basketball player at NBA draft time, the Lord has selected me to be a part of His team. I'm wearing His uniform.

That uniform gives me identity. I am a child of God whom He made a member of His team not because of my playing ability, but solely because of His grace. He gets all the credit for my blessed status as a forgiven child of God. I play on His team and I want to play well. My baptism inspires me to daily crucify my sinful flesh and live for Jesus. Because of my baptism, I long to live a life of repentance:

For what else is repentance but an earnest attack upon the old man (that his lusts be restrained) and entering upon a new life? Therefore, if you live in repentance, you walk in Baptism, which not only signifies such a new life, but also produces, begins, and exercises it. For therein are given grace, the Spirit, and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and become strong.⁵

My baptism gives significance to my everyday life and ministry. I can awaken every day and tell myself, "I am baptized!" I am buried with Christ Jesus through baptism into death that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, I too may live a new life (Romans 6). My baptism gives me the qualifications and the empowerment to carry on my life and my ministry. I recall a Seminary professor's recommendation that if we future pastors feel a need to display our qualifications for our office, we shouldn't display our diplomas. We should display our baptismal certificate instead.

I have personally experienced the comfort of baptism. Ten years ago my two oldest children were hospitalized repeatedly for asthma. When they were in respiratory distress, my wife and I cherished the promise of our Savior: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16a). If our children would have died, we knew that their souls would be with Jesus.

I had the opportunity to officiate at the funeral of a 7 month old girl, a victim of SIDS. What a privilege to extend solid comfort to the family based on the specific promises God's Word attaches to baptism. What comfort would we have without the marvelous grace of God?

Unlike Holy Baptism, Holy Communion is a faith strengthener (not a faith creator) done repeatedly (not once in a lifetime). It is easy for me to identify myself as a distributor of this Sacrament. Combine worship services with private communions and I commune over 100 Christians every month. Am I only a distributor of this heavenly meal? To reinforce the importance of this Sacrament upon my sheep, I need to see myself as a communicant.

In Holy Communion, I meet the sheep of my flock on common soil. The communion rail removes the invisible wall between pulpit and pew. I prepare for the Sacrament in the same manner as I have instructed them – with honest self-examination. Am I sorry for my sins? Do I believe Jesus died to take away my sins? Am I intent on living for Jesus? I join them in the confession of sins and although I assure them of their forgiveness in the words of absolution, I know that I too am absolved of my sins.

As I receive this Sacrament, I concentrate on the words, "given for you...poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins." My Savior is coming close and getting personal with me. He whispers the sweet words of forgiveness in my ear instead of shouting them out to the assembly of believers. In Holy Communion, my Savior shakes my hand and says, "Your sins are forgiven." My weak faith needs the strengthening which Holy Communion gives. I am well aware of the inner struggle with my sinful nature and my need for this Supper. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, "Thus faith is conceived and strengthened through absolution, through the hearing of the Gospel, through the use of the Sacraments, so that it may not succumb while it struggles with the terrors of sin and death."⁶

Ah, how hungers all my spirit
 For the love I do not merit!
 Oft have I, with sighs fast thronging,
 Thought upon this food with longing,
 In the battle well-nigh worsted,
 For this cup of life have thirsted,
 For the Friend who here invites us
 And to God Himself unites us. (TLH 305 v 4)

Stress the Miracle

Water + Word = spiritual rebirth presents an irrational equation to the human mind. The Sacramental union of the visible and invisible elements defies logic. How can a little baby believe? How can Jesus' body and blood be present in, with, and under the bread and wine since He ascended bodily into heaven? We may want to conceal our beliefs because they transcend human reason and are discounted by other branches of Christianity. I propose that we need to emphasize the miracle more forcefully.

A month ago residents of Wisconsin were fascinated by Reggie White's "miraculous" recovery from a hamstring injury. Was it a miracle? I don't know. But I do know that God performs a miracle at the baptismal font – a miracle of grace! Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). To be born of water and the Spirit is just as miraculous as a grown man entering his mother's womb to be born a second time. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this miracle through the union of water and the Word. The Word combines with the water of Holy Baptism to perform a miraculous cleansing: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Ephesians 5:25b-26).

How can a little child possess saving faith? Through a miracle! It is always a miracle when the Holy Spirit gives life to the spiritually dead whether at the age of 9 days or 90 years. I have witnessed a miracle with my own eyes in the life of a caustic, insolent 90 year old man whose wife was one of my members. He accepted my ministrations to his housebound wife but vociferously stifled my attempts to evangelize him. In the days before he died, I had the opportunity to bring him the Word. In his weakened condition, he made a confession of his sin and of his belief in his Savior. I couldn't believe it! His family couldn't either. But I am convinced that at five minutes to midnight in this man's life, the Holy Spirit performed a miracle...the same miracle He performs on an infant through Holy Baptism.

God's miracles continue in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Conscious of my spiritual slavery, I seek a redeemer. However, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him – the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough" (Ps 49:7-8). No "man in a body" can redeem me. But "God in a

body" could...and did! "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (I Pe 2:24). I need Christ's body! Now He comes to me in consecrated bread and says, "Take and eat; this is my body" (Mt 26:26b) – a miracle! It's a miracle I want to see repeatedly by coming to His Supper regularly. I don't want to forget what He has done for me with His body.

I also need Christ's blood. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (He 9:22) sends shivers down my spine. I don't have nor am I able to acquire the perfect blood mandated for forgiveness. God holds the solution to my problem: "In him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Eph 1:7). My Savior comes to me in consecrated wine and says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28) – a miracle! It's a miracle I want to see repeatedly by coming to His Supper regularly. I don't want to forget what He has done for me with His blood.

We eat this bread and drink this cup,
Your precious Word believing
That your true body and your blood
Our lips are here receiving.
This Word remains forever true,
And there is naught you cannot do,
For you, Lord, are almighty.

Though reason cannot understand,
Yet faith this truth embraces:
Your body, Lord, is everywhere
At once in many places.
I leave to you how this can be;
Your Word alone suffices me;
I trust its truth unailing.

(CW 312 v 4 & 5)

Aglow with gratitude for God's miraculous grace in the Sacraments, we ministers of the Word will share our experiences. We will also want to explore other ways to keep the blessing of the Sacraments before our people. Following are some suggestions. As we proceed into the FOR DISCUSSION part of the essay, I welcome your additions.

Suggestions for Reinforcement

- 1) Sermon series on the Sacraments
- 2) Refer to the Sacraments regularly in your sermons
- 3) Refer to the Sacraments in counseling sessions
- 4) Mention the Sacraments when you are encouraging others in their Christian living
- 5) Conduct a Bible class series on the Sacraments
- 6) Periodically publish from the Catechism "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism" and "The Sacrament of Holy Communion" in your bulletin or newsletter
- 7) Talk to parents about baptism when you visit a new mother in the hospital
- 8) Distribute tracts to new parents/new members about the Sacraments
- 9) "Family Time" exercises for students in confirmation class
 - a) Ask mom/dad to share information about your baptism. Who was involved? What did God do at your baptism?

- b) Ask mom/dad why they chose to have you baptized. What have they continued to do to nurture the faith you received in baptism?
 - c) Find out the date of your baptism. Celebrate it as your spiritual birthday to remind yourself of the occasion when the Holy Spirit gave you spiritual life
 - d) Put something in your bedroom (plaque, framed baptismal certificate) to daily remind you of your baptism
 - e) Talk about how the blessings of baptism show themselves in your everyday life
 - f) Ask your mom/dad their memories of the first time they partook of Holy Communion. After many years of receiving the Lord's Supper, what does it mean to them now?
 - g) Ask mom/dad what occupies their thoughts as they partake of the Lord's Supper
 - h) Ask mom/dad how they prepare themselves to receive Holy Communion
 - i) After you are confirmed, why will you want to partake of Holy Communion often?
- 10) Have confirmands memorize prayer/hymn verse for before/after partaking of Holy Communion
 - 11) Encourage the use of baptism/communion prayers
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 - 20)

I close this portion of the essay with some poignant comments about the Sacraments by Harold Senkbeil from his book, "Sanctification: Christ in Action":

The sacraments at first glance seem to be a curiosity – like old family heirlooms in a house full of modern furniture. Their chief value seems to be in their age, and not in their practicality. No one would like to throw them out since they've been in the family for so long, but they don't really seem to fit, either! But the sacraments, far from being relics of a by-gone era in church history, are actually part and parcel of the Christian gospel for all time.

If the pressing issue today is finding out where in the world God is, there is nothing more practical than understanding what he intends to accomplish through the sacraments. Along the way on this journey I have emphasized that you can't find God in your own heart or emotions. Rather, the reality of God and the power of his presence is only found in the person and work of Jesus. In every case in God's dealings with mankind, it is God who makes the first move. This is true also in the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not intrusions into the worship service; properly understood, they are God's intrusions into our lives! In fact, they are based upon and extend God's intrusion into this world of ours in the person of his Son.⁷

By God's grace, we will keep Word and Sacrament the beating heart of our ministry!

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For Discussion

1. What are you doing to reinforce teaching of the Sacraments to your flock?

2. React to the following statement: "When we are at the Lord's Supper we are returning to Baptism; when we remember our Baptism we are hastening to the Word of grace; when we hear the Word of grace we receive a desire for the Lord's table."⁸
3. In an article entitled "Communicating Baptism's Power" Pastor Bryan Gerlach says, "The lack of symbolism and ceremony surrounding our baptismal rite may be one hindrance to a greater appreciation of baptism."⁹ He offers the following suggestions on how to symbolically and ceremonially voice the powerful theology we possess. (Your reaction, please!)
- a) Let people see and hear the water during the baptism, the "washing of rebirth and renewal" (Titus 3:5). The Bible prescribes no mode for baptism; therefore any application of water is valid. But this does not suggest a minimum use of water.
 - b) The paschal candle is a historic sign of the interconnection of Easter, baptism, and our redemption. If your church has never used one, consider using a paschal candle this Easter. Place it near the baptismal font. After Easter, light it for each baptism.
 - c) Consider giving a baptismal candle. It is lighted from the paschal candle, taken home and lighted on anniversaries of the person's baptism as a reminder of the ongoing blessing and power God gives in baptism.
 - d) Banners and other art, whether installed permanently or placed just for baptisms, can help the baptized to appreciate baptism.
 - e) Include special music from the choir or soloist in baptismal ceremonies.
 - f) Some parishes include a solemn reading of the names of those baptized over the last year on New Year's Eve (along with deaths and marriages).
 - g) Offer a quality framed certificate to hang in a child's room.
 - h) Have someone prepare a simple, white baptismal garment with an opening in the center for a child's head. Put it on after the baptism while the choir or congregation is singing (cf. Galatians 3:27).
 - i) After the baptism the pastor may take the baby and hold him or her toward the congregation. With the joy our baptismal theology gives, he may announce: "Your new brother or sister in Christ."
 - j) Help people understand the connection between the pastor's sign of the cross and baptism. Also, teach the relationship between the Invocation and baptism. The purpose of the Invocation is not to "begin" the service by saying everything that follows will be in the name of the Triune God. Rather, the Invocation is to recall the baptism at which many first heard it. The Invocation calls to mind our death and rebirth in Christ which allows us to assemble before the Lord to worship him.
4. React to the following observation on communion registration: "It is very important that the so-called announcement, or registration, for the Holy Communion be utilized by every pastor. Under no circumstances should it become a perfunctory taking of names with a few words of stereotyped well-wishing. In this connection it may be said that one may well use cards announcing the celebration of the Eucharist, with a well-worded invitation to all communicant members. Direct reminders sent by mail have proved their value in many congregations."¹⁰
5. React to the following observation on communion frequency: "We ought to have the celebration of the Lord's Supper far more frequently, in keeping with its blessed purpose. If we do not give our members the opportunity to receive the Sacrament frequently, we need not be surprised if they do not come often. In large congregations we ought to celebrate the Holy Communion every Sunday and, where the number of communicants exceeds 400, at least twice a month."¹¹
6. What are the advantages/disadvantages of a private baptism? A baptism in the worship service?
 7. Share ideas of what you do in your adult/children instructions to encourage regular use of the Lord's Supper.
 8. What are some spiritual/mental blocks that restrain some Christians from coming to the Lord's Supper?
 9. Have you ever refused to baptize a child? If so, why?
 10. What words do you speak as you distribute the Lord's Supper?

Endnotes

- ¹ Cal Thomas, "Ancient Truths Endure in a Modern World," *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee: Journal Sentinel Incorporated, December 25, 1995), p. 10A.
- ² Hermann Sasse, "The Sacrament of the Altar," *The Christian News* (New Haven, MO: Lutheran News Inc., September 25, 1995), p. 7.
- ³ David P. Scaer, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. Vol 45, No. 1-2 (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1980), p. 40.
- ⁴ *This We Believe* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1967), p. 15-16.
- ⁵ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 750.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- ⁷ Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989), p. 149-150.
- ⁸ Manfred Metzger, "Preaching and the Sacrament," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 11 (Philadelphia: Times and News Publishing Co., 1959), p. 306.
- ⁹ Brian Gerlach, "Communicating Baptism's Power," *Parish Leadership*, Vol 1, No 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 15.
- ¹⁰ Paul Kretzmann, "Raising the Average Attendance at Holy Communion," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol 6 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), p. 376.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

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