

## “SIGNS OF GOD’S GREAT GRACE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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**Sermon Texts: Acts 2:37-42**

**Belgic Confession Article 33**

### **Introduction:**

Len and Bev, thank you for sharing your children’s sermon this evening. I think we all enjoy children’s sermons, don’t we, young and old alike. It’s remarkable how a simple illustration or object can to bring some great truth to light.

The Belgic Confession recognizes we are all like children in our understanding. God recognizes our crudeness and weakness, our need for visible, tangible pictures that appeal to our senses.

We come this evening to consider the second of the three marks of a true church. Remember the three marks, the true and faithful preaching of the Word of God, the true and right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline to bring to repentance those who are living in sin or error.

Three lengthy articles are devoted to the sacraments in the Belgic Confession.

### **What are sacraments? A sacrament is a sign and a seal.**

The Reformers preferred to use the words signs and seals, words taken from Scripture.

**Romans 4:11** [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Article 33 teaches us the Reformed understanding of the sacraments, that they are outward, visible signs and seals that confirm in our hearts that we are in the covenant of God’s grace.

In order for something to be a sacrament it must have three elements: a visible sign; an invisible grace signified by that sign (a seal, a divine action); and it must have been instituted by Jesus Christ.

Let’s consider these first two parts of a sacraments.

**First, they are signs**, pictures that give us a tangible, visible picture of the covenant to which they point. As signs they are divine communication, like God’s sign language. They symbolize the gospel to us in pictures.

In baptism not only do we hear about our cleansing from sin, but we see and feel and hear it as the water is poured.

In the Lord's Table not only do we hear about Jesus' death for us, but we see His body broken and His blood poured out, we touch it, smell it and taste it.

We were in Leavenworth last weekend for our anniversary. We took in the sights and sounds and beauty of the scenery and the interesting Bavarian culture. We have proof that we were there. Phama likes to collect key chains of the places we have been. And she likes to take millions of pictures of the places we have been. So we have tangible, physical, photographic proof of our time in Leavenworth.

We are a visual people, we like sight more than faith. People have always liked their gods to be visible, to be palpable, to be present, and to be manageable, even controllable. God says no to any images of Him because He is infinite and cannot be captured by any image. But God has given us tangible proof of His covenant of grace.

*Second, they are seals*, visible pledges of the invisible grace promised to us.

The sacraments are like that embossed seal on your birth certificate that says that it is real, it is official. They seal to us God's covenant promises, they both confirm and guarantee His oath.

The rainbow was given as a visible sign of God's spoken promises to Noah and all of us. God in His grace has given us visible evidence of the things we believe by faith.

As a key to a home confirms our belonging there and gains us admission.

As a deed to property confirms our ownership, our right of ownership.

As a marriage ceremony confers to us all the rights of marriage.

(The above illustrations are suggested by A. A. Hodge).

They are mirrors in which we can see the riches of God's great and generous grace.

Augustine called them "visible signs of an invisible grace."

By the Word and by sacraments we both hear and see that God is good.

**What is their purpose? What a sacrament does.**

Why do we need sacrament? After all we have Jesus, we have our salvation, we have the Bible, we have the Holy Spirit, we have the Church, so why do we need the sacraments?

We need the sacraments because we are sinners. Because we are sinners our sin affects our faith and makes our faith weak at times. We are like the man in the gospels who prays, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." We need the sacraments because of our weaknesses and infirmities. God is under no obligation to give us anything and that He does is great grace.

We are earthly people, made from dust, flesh and bones. We are sensory people, understanding and interrupting our world through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

In the sacraments the eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite and almighty God (Belgic Confession Article 1) stoops down and comes to us and helps us and is present with us.

They display to our senses what His Word speaks to our minds and His Spirit works inwardly in our hearts. This nourishes and strengthens our faith. This is our assurance that God is true to His promises and faithful in all He says.

They are pictures of the gospel, the pouring of the water, reminding us of the cleansing of our sin and the new righteousness that is ours in Jesus. The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup reminding us of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

As John Bunyan puts it, the Word of God enters our souls through the *Eargate* and the sacraments enter through the *Eyegate*.

In one sense the sacraments have the same purpose as the Word, to present Jesus to us, to make Jesus clear, to show us the *treasures of His grace*.

They show us Jesus and all His benefits. As the article says Jesus is the true object of the sacraments. These two alone witness to the resurrection and the gracious work of Christ.

Even when we aren't observing the sacraments, the font and the table are here every week to remind us and strengthen our faith in the covenant promises of God secured for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. These pieces of furniture are symbols of truth, take this to heart, especially when your faith is weak, when you are doubting and questioning, when you are wonder where God is and what He is doing or why He isn't answering.

Remember your baptism and who you belong to. Remember the table and what He has done for you.

### **Which is more important, the Word or the Sacraments?**

That can be a dangerous question and sometimes even the wrong question.

But with regard to the Word and Sacraments it's a good question to ask. All you have to do is take one of them away to see where we would be. The sacraments without the Word would be meaningless. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but in this case the picture without the Word would make no sense to us. The Word is fundamental and has priority. Without hearing there is no faith.

The Word has preeminence. The Word is for all to hear, the sacraments only for those who believe. The sacrament comes alongside the Word and assists the Word, opens our eyes and helps us to understand.

It is like a seal on an important document. The seal by itself is nothing, meaningless. But when it is affixed to an important document it confirms and authenticates what is written.

As the article says, “He [God] 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.”

### **What is the effect or efficacy of the sacraments?**

Paragraph three of Article 33 addresses the concern of the effect of the sacraments and says they are not vain or insignificant. Why does this need to be said? Because some people had veered off into a ditch over this.

There are two ditches on the road to understanding the power or effect of the sacraments.

*One ditch* is those who say the sacraments are merely empty signs, pictures without any power.

*The other ditch* is those who say the sacraments have power apart from anything else. By the time of the Reformation the doctrine concerning the sacraments had evolved into error. The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church taught that the sacraments were not just signs but also the cause and effect. They weren't just signs of grace but the cause of grace; they had the power of salvation without the necessity of the Word or even of faith.

The saving and sanctifying power of God worked directly through the water and the elements. This is where the idea of baptismal regeneration came from, that baptism saved the infant from hell.

The Reformers drew us back to Scripture and the necessity of faith, of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit. The sacraments are means of grace or channels of grace when they are used in the manner ordained by God. Through the Holy Spirit by faith in Jesus, God confirms blessings to us and conveys His grace.

The power of the sacrament is not in the elements or in the person, but in the Holy Spirit. As Article 33 says, “God works in us thorough the power of the Holy Spirit.”

We talk about the *spiritual presence* of Christ in the sacraments. God is present doing something for us and in us through the sacraments. Paul speaks of the Supper as a communion of the body and blood of Christ (I Cor. 10:16). It's a participation, a fellowship with Christ.

Faith is essential to make the sacraments effective in conveying grace. The grace conferred doesn't rest in the sacrament or the elements themselves

**Romans 2:28-29** For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 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.

Without faith the sacraments become judgment on us, they are not grace. We must seek by the Spirit's help to be covenant keepers and not covenant breakers.

### **The number of sacraments.**

The final paragraph addresses another controversial issue. Over the centuries the number of sacraments had grown from two to seven. The Reformers took us back to the Biblical foundation, that Christ had instituted only two Sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Table.

It is not in thunder and lightning, not in burning bushes, not in angelic visitation, and not in special visions or visitations to just a few or only the spiritually elite. But in common elements to any who by faith trust in Jesus.

The Quakers and the Salvation Army don't observe any sacraments. They talk about internal baptism and heart communion. Some Mennonites add a third, footwashing.

Jesus instituted two sacraments and only two.

### **Application and conclusion.**

God alone reveals who He is and how He is to be known. God alone commands how He is to be worshipped and represented in the world. God chose Word and sacrament as the means to represent Him in the world and the signs by which He is to be worshipped.

To this we can add nothing and no more. Thanks be to God for His great grace revealed to us in these two gifts of His grace.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, you are so glorious, so transcendent, so above and beyond, and yet you condescend to our weakness, to our very senses. You come to us in such simple ways using such simple means, things we can actually grasp and understand. Yet there is such mystery, so much we fail to grasp. Help our small minds and weak faith to feed on the mysteries of these spiritual things. Grant us again and again the grace we need and you so freely and graciously give. Teach us more and more to live by grace, to live dependent on your grace. Thank you for all your gifts and especially the gifts of the sacraments you give to your people. Draw us nearer to you through them, fill us with your Holy Spirit and continue to transform us by the renewing of our minds that we may worship you and love you and serve you freely and joyfully all the days of our lives.