
Practical Theology

On Seeking Holiness through the Sacraments Pt.1

Calvin defines the sacraments as testimonies “of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.” The sacraments are “exercises of piety.”

For Calvin, as for Augustine before him, the sacraments are the visible Word. The preached Word comes through our ears, the visible Word, through our eyes. The sacraments hold forth the same Christ as the preached Word but communicate him through a different mode. We don’t get a better Christ in the sacraments, but sometimes we get Christ better.

In the sacraments, God accommodates himself to our weakness, Calvin says. When we hear the Word indiscriminately proclaimed, we may wonder: “Is it truly for me? Does it really reach me?” However, in

the sacraments God reaches out and touches us individually, and says, "Yes, it's for you. The promise extends to you." The sacraments thus minister to our weakness by personalizing the promises for those who trust Christ for salvation.

In the sacraments, God comes to His people, encourages them, enables them to know Christ better, builds them up, and nourishes them in Him. Baptism promotes piety as a symbol of how believers are engrafted into Christ, renewed by the Spirit, and adopted into the family of the heavenly Father.

Likewise, the Lord's Supper shows how these adopted children are fed by their loving Father. Calvin loves to refer to the Supper as nourishment for the soul. "The signs are bread and wine which represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ," he says.

Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality.

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