

LESSON 27

Belgic Confession Articles 33-35 The Sacraments (II)

General:

In this lesson we take a closer look at the two sacraments which the Lord has instituted and note how by them we are fully assured of the promises of God.

1. The Comfort in the New Testament Sacraments

One easily notices a prime difference between the "sacraments" in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Whereas both Circumcision and Passover drew *blood*, such is definitely not the case in Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The reason for this is also evident: Christ's sacrifice of blood on the cross does away with any further act of bloodletting, Hebrews 10:14. While Circumcision and Passover pointed to the necessity and certainty of Christ's *coming* sacrifice, Holy Baptism and Lord's Supper confirm the reality of this sacrifice. From this point of view it can be said that the sacraments in the New Testament contain greater and richer comfort: "It is finished," John 19:30.

2. Holy Baptism

The Lord Jesus Christ instituted Holy Baptism (Matthew 28:19, 20) as a sign and seal which distinguishes His people from "all other peoples and false religions." The Confession therefore speaks of Holy Baptism as "the mark and emblem" of Christ.

The *sign* used in Holy Baptism is "plain water," and it portrays and signifies the *cleansing* by the *blood* and *spirit* of Christ (see also: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 26 and 27). Both the necessity and the certainty of this cleansing are stressed.

the blood: speaks of the washing away of *sins* – justification, Acts 22:16.

the Spirit: speaks of the renewal of life – sanctification, Titus 3:5.

By this Holy Baptism we are publicly "received into the Church of God" and ingrafted into His Covenant. We belong to Jesus Christ and are to dedicate our lives in His service. In this respect, the *Form for Baptism* teaches us that the Covenant of God contains "two parts" – His promises; our duties –

- a) the Lord binds Himself to us in the Covenant
- b) we must live in a new obedience and daily repentance (the Form speaks of a "being born again," John 3).

The Church received the command to baptize "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (the Trinitarian Formula). The *Form for Baptism of Infants* renders this as follows:

- a) the Father: adoption into the Covenant
- b) the Son: justification by His blood
- c) the Spirit: the ongoing renewal and ultimate perfection of our life.

This Holy Baptism is received once, and is not repeated, but retains its significance "throughout our whole life." Whereas from our side, we might "break" this Covenant, we can never undo the reality of our Baptism and the responsibility contained in it.

3. Infant Baptism

Christians have always agreed on the fact that *adults* who come to faith must be baptized (Mark 16:16). The question has been raised (e.g. by the Anabaptists) whether *infants* should also be baptized (see: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 27, Question and Answer 74).

The arguments brought in against *infant* baptism can be noted as follows:

- a) the Scriptures nowhere demand infant baptism nor record its practice
- b) faith is demanded as prerequisite for baptism, while infants cannot yet believe.

The Reformed confession replies as follows:

- a) Infant baptism is nowhere *forbidden* in the New Testament
- b) Baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant which is made with *believers and their children* (Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:39). In the Old Testament, circumcision was administered also to infants, and Scripture clearly teaches that Baptism has come in the *place* of circumcision (Colossians 2:11,12, where Baptism is called "the circumcision of Christ")
- c) Whereas the demand to believe is indeed extended to mature adults, Scripture clearly indicates that Baptism was administered to the whole *family* (Acts 16:15 and 33)
- d) If Christ Himself forbade hindering the children to come unto Him and declared them to be heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:14), we may certainly not withhold from them the sign and seal of His Covenant.

The main error of the Anabaptists (and others who reject infant baptism) is that they see the sacrament as confirming what is *in themselves* (namely, faith) while in reality the sacrament confirms what God grants *unto* His people, both adults and infants.

It is perhaps due to *infant baptism*, that in the Reformed Churches baptism by *sprinkling* became custom (see also 1 Peter 1:2, which speaks of

"sprinkling by His blood"), but there is no principle objection against baptism by *submersion*, as the *Form* indicates when it speaks of "the immersion in or sprinkling with water. "

4. The Lord's Supper

While Holy Baptism is also for infants who have not yet come to faith, the Lord's Supper is ordained and instituted for those whom Christ "has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church," i.e. for those who have come to faith, to a sound knowledge of the Gospel and a true confession of Christ's Name (see also: Lesson 1). This does not mean that the children are robbed of any benefit in Christ, for the essence of both sacraments is the *same*: the promise and assurance of the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ (see also: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 28, Question and Answer 76). While Holy Baptism publicly brings us into God's Covenant, the Lord's Supper is designed to keep us in the same Covenant.

The *signs* and *seals* used here are simply *bread* and *wine*, signifying respectively the *body* and *blood* of Christ. The underlying motif is that of *eating* and *drinking*, thus being nourished and strengthened.

As the body needs food and drink ("physical and earthly life"), so the *soul* ("spiritual and heavenly life") needs spiritual food and drink, "the bread of life" (John 6:35). As we eat and drink daily to support our physical life, so we repeatedly need the Lord's Supper to strengthen our spiritual life.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that bread and wine really become the true body and blood of Christ, while the outward properties remain the same (Theory of Transubstantiation). But the confession teaches that bread and wine remain as they are. We do however, receive "the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ," but this does not happen physically (by our mouth), for we receive Christ *spiritually*, by *faith*.

Christ assures us in the Holy Supper that *as certainly as* bread is broken and wine is poured, His body was broken and His blood was shed on the cross. And, *as certainly as*, bread and wine are given to us, so the full reality and benefit of this sacrifice is ours by faith. It is therefore not merely a symbolic occurrence without content (as one of the Reformers, Ulrich Zwingli seemed to suggest) but Christ *really* communicates Himself unto us.

The Confession stresses that the Lord's Supper is a meal, "a banquet" or a "spiritual table." The believers jointly sit at a table to partake of the meal together. The significance of this is threefold:

- a) the believers together share in the benefits of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16 and 17)
- b) the believers together remember the Lord and "proclaim His death" (1 Corinthians 10:26)
- c) the believers together experience the unity of faith, "one bread – one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism speak of a necessary *self-examination* before attending the Lord's Supper. This examination consists of three things:

- a) knowledge of one's misery and confession of sins (*misery*)
- b) acceptance of the one sacrifice of Christ (*deliverance*)
- c) desire to live from then on in true love towards God and the neighbour (*gratitude*).

Those who come to the table in unbelief and sins, receive the sacrament to their condemnation (1 Corinthians 11:31). They do not receive the "truth of the sacrament," but are placed under the sanction of the Covenant. This should not discourage those, however, who do come in the true humility and certainty of faith. The *Form* for the celebration of the Lord's Supper stresses that the table is not for "perfect people" but for those who sincerely repent and desire to be strengthened. We therefore also note that the celebration of the Lord's Supper should not be based on subjective feeling, but is obedience to the *command* of Christ, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19).

The Lord's Supper, finally, directs us to the great *marriage feast* of the Lamb. We celebrate it "until He comes" in the certainty that He will come (1 Corinthians 11:26, Revelation 19:7-9).

QUESTIONS (Lesson 27):

1. What is the "difference" between the sacraments in the Old and the New Testament?
2. What is the sign in Holy Baptism and for what does it stand?
3. What is the relation between Holy Baptism and the Covenant of God?
4. What is the "trinitarian formula"?
5. What arguments have been brought in for and against infant baptism?
6. What is the main error of the Anabaptists with respect to Holy Baptism?
7. What difference in function is there between Baptism and the Lord's Supper?
8. What are the signs and seals in the Lord's Supper and for what do these stand?
9. What is the "Theory of Transubstantiation"?
10. How do we partake of Christ in the Lord's Supper?
11. What significance does it have that the Lord's Supper is a meal taking place at a table?
12. What constitutes the correct self-examination before attending the Lord's Supper?
13. What happens to those who do not come to the table "in faith"? Whom does the Confession give as examples in this respect?
14. To what ultimate reality does the Lord's Supper direct us?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 69, 72, 74, 75, and 78.

During the terrible years of the Second World War, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were inwardly torn by doctrinal strife, also concerning the Covenant and Holy Baptism. Since many do no longer seem to know the real issue at stake at that time, it is appropriate at this point to explain what exactly was the focal point of the doctrinal controversy which led to the establishing of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the Netherlands and the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Traditionally, the Reformed Churches have believed and confessed that Holy Baptism is a sign and seal of God's *Covenant*, and this is clearly stated in Article 34 of the Belgic Confession and Answer 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

This Covenant which God makes with believers and their children is a great privilege and the sign of this Covenant fully assures of God's promises. One really does belong to Christ, and must come to serve Him more and more.

The famous Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman, Dr. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), whose influence in the Reformed Churches was enormous at the turn of the century, struggled with the visible fact that certain children, though baptized, did not come to faith and serve their Lord. In the case of these children, baptism apparently had no result and God's promise was ineffective. Rather than come to the devastating conclusion that God's promise and call might indeed be ineffective (see Romans 11:29), Kuyper began to teach *two Covenants*, one with the *elect* (the so-called inner covenant) and one with the other members of the Church (the so-called outer covenant). Subsequently, there were also *two baptisms*, a real one and a false one. The one baptism meant *regeneration*, while the other was basically a waste of water. If there was "a seed of regeneration" in the children (see: Lesson 15), they would blossom into true believers; if not, they were not really baptized. Children were therefore baptized and assumed to be regenerated until the opposite was proven.

Two great *dangers* are apparent here:

- a) baptism which intends to give *assurance* of God's very real promises becomes a very independable matter. One never really knows if one is truly baptized and little appeal can be made to the *fact* of one's baptism
- b) the criterium for baptism again comes to lie *within man* (the seed within) and thus the Reformed doctrine has moved perilously close to the Anabaptist viewpoint. One might even remark whether *infant* baptism is still possible on such shaky grounds.

We do not baptize, however, on the basis of what *might* be in the children, but on the basis of God's promises to *all* His children. Moreover, the Scriptures do not teach various Covenants or Baptisms, but speak of one

Covenant and one Baptism. If a child grows up in rejection of the Gospel, this is not because the *promise* of God is untrue, but simply because of the hardening of his own heart. Even then, the reality of the Covenant and the fact of baptism remain. For God does not give empty promises or deceiving signs, but His Word is true and dependable.

At first, in 1905, the Reformed Churches agreed on a "Pacification Formula" in which the effect of Kuyper's theories was somewhat neutralized. But in 1942, at the Synod of Sneek-Utrecht, the teachings of Abraham Kuyper in this respect were elevated to Church *Doctrine*, and – although in conflict with the accepted Confession – were declared to be binding for all. Thus the schism was imminent. The schism became reality when candidates, professors and ministers were refused office or deposed from office if they did not submit to synodical decisions.

The Reformed Churches (Liberated) returned to the simple formulation of the Belgic Confession that Holy Baptism seals and signifies the promises of God given in His Covenant to all believers and their children.

It might be noted here that the Christian Reformed Church took the side of the Synod of Sneek-Utrecht and did not recognize the right and the plight of the Liberated Churches (1946 and 1950).