

GOD'S PICTURES OF SALVATION

Text: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 25 **Read:** Romans 4:7-12

1: Where faith comes from

The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts (John 3:5; 1 Co 12:3)
by the preaching of the gospel (Ro 10:14-17)
confirmed through the use of the sacraments (Ge 17)

2: Sacraments are holy, visible, signs and seals of God's promise of salvation

Holy (1 Co 11:23-26)
Visible
Signs (Ge 17; Ro 4:11)
Seals (Ro 4:11)
To what purpose? (Mt 26:27-28; Acts 22:16; Ro 6:3; 1 Co 10:16)

3: Christ instituted 2 sacraments in the New Testament:

Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Mt 28:19-20; 1 Co 11:23-26)

And so: Use the sacraments to confirm & strengthen your faith!

LD 25 ser 5

Dear Congregation

Some of us love hearing people speak on subjects we're interested in – we love the spoken word. Some of us love the written word – we're the bookworms. And some of us really struggle with both of those – maybe we love listening to music, or watching movies, but speeches and books just aren't for us.

But what does that mean if you're in that group when it comes to the gospel. God has given us his word in a book, and it's a message that is usually shared through speech – where does that leave you if you struggle with these?

And nowadays there are resources that can help with that. Those that struggle to read can get the Bible on CD. Those that struggle to listen to a speaker can get good gospel video resources.

But then what about before the electronic age – where were those people left then?

And taking these things into account, as well as others, alongside the written and spoken gospel message God has given us the sacraments – visual presentations of the gospel, even if they do need to be explained by the gospel.

Point 1

As we start into this new section in the Catechism, this Lord's Day leads in with a transitional question. The Lord's Days before this one have dealt with faith, and so this Lord's Day starts by asking *where that faith comes from*.

It's a bit like asking a couple with a new baby where the blue eyes came from. Or like challenging your average Aussie the big question of where the universe came from. We know things have a cause. They don't just happen by themselves.

And so, when it comes to faith too, it's worth asking where does faith come from. What is the first cause?

It's the question that Jesus gives Nicodemus the answer to in John 3 as he visited Jesus secretly by night.

Jesus talks to him about the need to be born again to enter the kingdom of God. He explains that being born again is being born of the Spirit. ***Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit.*** The Holy Spirit is the one who works faith in our hearts so that we come to repent of our sins and trust in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

Paul says that same thing in 1st Corinthians 12, 'No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.'

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit uses a tool to achieve this – the gospel. It's not as if, in some magical mystical way, one moment it's not there, and the next it is. We were talking about this in catechism a few months ago – asking how God brings salvation to remote tribes on distant islands that have never had the gospel before. Does he just suddenly, mystically grant them salvation? Or does he do that through some particular means?

And we had to conclude from what the Bible teaches, that the Holy Spirit doesn't do this in some magical mystical way. He uses God's word – he uses the gospel. Paul in Romans 10 quotes Joel 2 that 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' And then Paul asks, 'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?'

I know that we would all love everyone to be saved, including those in the world today who still haven't heard the gospel. And none of us want them saved as much as Paul did. But he didn't then just hope that the

Holy Spirit would somehow mystically work in their heart faith in a God and a Saviour that they knew nothing about. He went out as a missionary, taking the gospel to them so that they could hear it, and believe, and be saved. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel - that has been brought and shared - to work faith in the hearts of those not yet saved.

If you have a heart for the lost, and we all should – whether overseas or here in Australia, then make sure you're trained so that you can share the gospel with them and challenge them to respond.

And *that's when the sacraments also begin to play a part*. The call in the book of Acts is 'repent, believe, and be baptised'. Repentance and faith come first, then the use of the sacraments.

And so the sacraments aren't a way to lead people to faith – the gospel applied by the Holy Spirit does that, but they are a way to confirm or strengthen faith once it has come to life.

I was wondering during the week about just how that works. When I think about the things over the years that have strengthened my faith, I suspect that it has mainly happened through coming to know the Bible a whole lot better, and in having a lot of my questions answered over time, and in reading books or hearing speakers who compare worldviews and demonstrate the strengths and consistency of the biblical worldview, and the weaknesses of others.

And I wondered how the sacraments play a part in that confirming and strengthening.

But imagine being Abraham after he was given the sign of circumcision. Maybe he didn't hear from God for years at a time, but he had God's covenant sign carved into his flesh. Every day again, a number of times each day, he would be reminded of God's special relationship with him and his descendants through that sign in his flesh. That would have been a powerful reminder for him of his special relationship with God.

Or imagine being among the nation of Israel as they left Egypt, after the discovery of the death of every firstborn son in Egypt. Israel had just celebrating the first Passover meal the night before. They had painted

the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Wouldn't the Passover feast every year again have been a powerful reminder for them - food for faith and trust?

And then what about the first New Testament believers after Pentecost? The Apostles had walked and talked with Jesus. They had baptized others on his behalf. Wouldn't every baptism from then on, maybe even every wash they took, have been a powerful reminder that he had washed their sins away by his blood?

And they had celebrated the Last Supper with him, watched him turn it into the Lord's Supper, eaten the bread with him, drunk the wine – common elements of their every main meal. Wouldn't every main meal from then on, as the bread and wine were shared around, have been a powerful every day reminder of what he had done for them, and especially the Lord's Supper as they celebrated it as a church community?

And the sacraments today possibly don't seem to carry the same power for us as they did for those first generations of believers that had seen the reality of what they represented, and yet they still represent exactly the same truths. And we can work at using them in exactly the same way, as powerful pictures of the gospel, illustrations and reminders of historical realities when God worked on our behalf in mighty ways, to free us from our sin and win for us eternal life.

Point 2

So, *what then is a sacraments?* What makes a sacrament a sacrament? And as the catechism summarises for us, a sacrament is a holy, visible, sign and seal of God's promise of salvation, that God himself has instituted.

A sacrament is holy - it is something that has been set apart for special use in the service of God. Other people and tribes and nations have used symbols like circumcision and special meals to mean other things, but among the people of God, God has set these practices apart for special use in his service. And so, as Paul reflects on the Lord's Supper in 1st Corinthians 11, he reminds us of Jesus breaking the bread and saying, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' He reminds of Jesus taking the cup and

saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

As well as that *a sacrament is visible*. We can hear words, we can read words, but we can’t see them. And in a visual age like ours, the visible is at least as important as it has ever been. And God gives us visible pictures of the gospel in the sacraments. And not only visible, but symbols that we can touch, and taste, and smell.

And *sacraments are signs and seals*.

The Old Testament sacrament of circumcision was already *described as a sign* in Genesis 17. It was a symbol that pointed to the reality of the covenant relationship between God and Abraham and his household and descendants.

Signs are things we can see that point our attention to things that we can’t. When you come across a big green sign on the roadside that says, ‘Perth 100’, then even though you can’t see Perth, you know that it exists, and that it’s 100 kms away.

And in the same way, sacraments are physical signs that point us toward unseen spiritual realities – the covenant relationship we have with God.

And *sacraments are seals*. In Romans 4:11 Paul writes that Abraham ‘received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith ...’

And we’re not talking about fridge seals, or the furry swimming type you might see at the zoo. This seal is a pledge, a promise, that something is genuine, and that the benefits are dependable.

And so you might think today of something like the deed papers of a block of land, or the digital signature on the latest download off the internet. These are proofs that the item is genuine, and that the benefits can be trusted.

And in the same kind of way the sacraments are seals that speak to the reality and benefit of God’s promised salvation.

And the *purpose of the sacraments* then is so that, also through this visible representation, we might all the more clearly understand the promise of the gospel. They speak of the washing away of sins, and the receiving of eternal life through Jesus' death on the cross. They represent the unity that we have with God and other believers through Jesus as our Saviour and our King.

(As we saw last Sunday morning), blazing radiant light has often been a visible representation of the unseen glory of God's holy and gracious character. And in the same kind of way, sacraments are visible representations of the unseen reality of forgiven sin and eternal life.

And so the Bible sometimes puts the sacrament and the reality in the closest possible relationship. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, 'This is my body, ... this is my blood.' In Acts 22 Ananias says to Saul, 'Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on [Jesus'] name.' In Romans 6 Paul writes, 'all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death' And in 1 Corinthians 10 he writes, 'Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And ... the bread ... a participation in the body of Christ?' You could almost be forgiven for mistaking the sign for the real thing. But it just shows how closely the real thing and the sacrament should be connected – if you are saved, the natural follow on from that is to participate in the sacraments.

Point 3

And so the only question left for today then, is *how many sacraments are there?* The Salvation Army don't celebrate any. The Roman Catholics celebrate 7. How many should we observe?

And as you read through the New Testament, you find that Jesus only instituted 2 sacraments - baptism and the Lord's Supper. At the end of the gospel of Matthew, in the Great Commission, he instructs the church, through the disciples, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them. And at the Last Supper, as he institutes the Lord's Supper, he instructs, do this in remembrance of me.

And so, in the Old Testament you find Israel using 2 sacraments – circumcision and the Passover – visible representations of God’s special covenant relationship with them. And in the New Testament they are replaced by 2 other sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper – visible representations of the forgiveness for sin and eternal life given to us through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus.

The call throughout the book of Acts as the gospel begins to go out to all nations is, ‘repent, believe, and be baptised’. And you begin to read in Acts of how the believers would break bread together - the early description of the Lord’s Supper. And then by the writing of 1st Corinthians, it has become known as the Lord’s Supper.

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And so the encouragement that comes out strongly in this Lord’s Day is that we regularly *come under God’s Word* – that we read it or listen to it and think about it every day by ourselves, and then also together with others at Bible Study and church. And that we regularly *pray that the Holy Spirit uses* that word to renew our thinking, and transform our lives, so that we are increasingly remade in God’s image.

And that we *regularly make use of the sacraments* that God has given us, to confirm and strengthen the faith that the Holy Spirit has planted in our hearts.

As you participate in the sacraments yourself, or as you see others participating in them, make use of them as visible pictures of spiritual realities. As we put our faith in him through Jesus Christ, God has washed our sins away by his Son’s precious blood. And God feeds us for eternity with the spiritual food that his Son is.