



## P R E F A C E



Since I grew up in the church, the sacraments were always a part of my world, though decidedly in the background. In my younger years my interest in them tended to focus on their immediate gratification in sight, smell and sound rather than on their meaning. This all changed when at Calvin Theological Seminary I was a member of a club called *Nisi Domino Frustra* (which I translate “without the Lord, futility,” seemingly a good motto for seminary education) under the wise and kindly tutelage of the now-deceased Dr. Henry Stob. The club’s purpose was a systematic study of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The pattern was that for each meeting the group was assigned a section of the *Institutes*, while one student was assigned to study it more deeply and present an outline of it for the group. I was assigned, much to my disappointment at the time, the chapters on the sacraments. But it was in those weeks of poring over Calvin on the sacraments that a deep and lasting appreciation of their theology and spiritual significance grew and continues to flourish in me. In Calvin’s theology of the sacraments I saw at the heart of his theology what Brian Gerrish called “grace and gratitude.”

Over the years in my reading and study as well as my preaching, my interest in sacramental theology continued to deepen, but it wasn’t until I enjoyed a sabbatical through a gracious grant from the Louisville Foundation in 1998 that I was able to devote some significant time and effort to sort out my thoughts on the subject. Naively, I decided to write





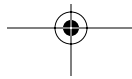
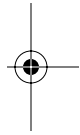
a book on the subject, having no real conception of the enormous undertaking it was going to be. As my three-month sabbatical came to an end with a ridiculously incomplete manuscript, I was left with snatching an evening here and there, or a week of study leave graciously offered by the congregation I have served through this entire project. And I cannot forget those refreshing two-day retreats I regularly took at the St. Gregory's Abbey, an Episcopal Benedictine monastery near Three Rivers, Michigan, where reflection on the sacraments blended in with the daily offices and Eucharist.

Why another book on the sacraments? Surveying the field, I find that while there are shelves of books devoted to the sacraments, they fall into several categories. There are the light and the heavy—those meant for spiritual growth and those seeking theological rigor. Some emphasize biblical thought, while others delve into historical and theological development. Most books on the sacraments are written by those who are deeply embedded in the traditionally sacramental churches—Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and a few Reformed. But there is a general absence of books from a more general evangelical Protestant perspective. Evangelicals apparently are not very interested in the sacraments, which seems to correspond to their lack of interest in ecclesiology in general. Sacraments do not count for very much in evangelical circles, as we shall discover, because evangelical theology offers them very little room. The emphasis is on personal faith in Christ through the proclamation of the gospel. The sacraments merely affirm, or for others, only give further personal testimony, to that faith.

I have come to believe that the reason evangelicals fail to appreciate the sacraments and to understand their biblical importance is that evangelicalism suffers from an inherent dualism—or worse, what Philip Lee calls Protestant gnosticism.<sup>1</sup> Evangelical theology tends toward a cleavage between the material and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, which I find to be too insensitive to the world as God's creation and to the incarnation of Jesus Christ into our actual fallen humanity. In this essentially dualistic worldview the sacraments, which by their very nature function through material elements, cannot bear the weight of spiritual reality. Therefore, they are either suspect be-

---

<sup>1</sup>Philip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).





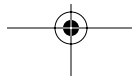
cause it seems heretical to think that water and bread and wine do actually unite us to Christ, or they are merely show-and-tell lessons, not worthy of any more study than a Sunday school flannelgraph.

My title, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, is meant to set out the thesis that the sacraments derive their meaning from Christ and that it is Christ who through them, by the Holy Spirit, unites us to himself. I hope to present an understanding of the sacraments here that is thoroughly biblical, Reformed and evangelical. That is, I strive for a theology of the sacraments that is grounded in the Bible, informed by the Reformation principles of *sola gratia*, *sola fidei*, *sola scriptura*, and harmonizes with the evangelical spirit of personal faith in Christ that has been so profoundly influential in the last century. Though I come at this study from a Reformed perspective by training and conviction, I also hope to be ecumenically sensitive since, unfortunately, the sacraments that should unite us still separate us.

The plan of the book is to begin with the concept of the world as a sacramental place by virtue of its creation by God and its ultimate recreation through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This will be followed by four chapters that set forth a general theology of the sacraments. Then I examine each of the "gospel sacraments" in turn, dealing first with their biblical background and then providing a contemporary analysis of their theology and practice.

I express my sincere gratitude to Rodney Clapp (now with Brazos Books), who first encouraged me to write this book; to the Louisville Foundation (with funding from the Lilly Foundation), which supplied the grant for the original sabbatical study time; and to Bruce Winter and the staff for their hospitality at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England, where we spent the three months. Thanks is due also to the patient editing staff at InterVarsity Press as they guided me through this process so new to me.

I am also grateful to my beloved and always-encouraging congregation, the South Bend Christian Reformed Church, for their enthusiastic support of my study. They endured years of my preoccupation with this work, not to mention the many sermons in which I tried out my still embryonic ideas (in a congregation with more than its share of philosophers and theologians, no less). I also thank a supportive and per-





ceptive but anonymous reader of an earlier draft who also put me in touch again with the fine theology of T. F. Torrance.

The most faithful and perceptive reader of this work-in-progress was my wife, Jeanne M. Logan. Beginning on sabbatical in wonderful Cambridge, England, she patiently worked her way through ponderous drafts and informed me when it just didn't make sense to her highly literate but theologically untrained mind. She helped me shave away some of the jargon and lighten ponderous sentences. Whatever of either jargon or pretense remains is my own fault. But I'm grateful most of all that, for some reason, she loves me in ways that can make the impossible seem possible.

