

The Two Sacraments in the Service of the Law and the Gospel

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1. *Of Sacraments in general*

When we are dealing with the sacraments, it is very important for us to understand what do we mean by the word “sacrament”. The church of Rome confesses sacraments, the Eastern Orthodox church also has their sacraments and in fact they both have seven sacraments, while we confess two main sacraments, that we are dealing with today. Why this difference in number? Are we lacking something that these two church bodies embrace? *First* it has to be noted that the difference here lies in the fact that the church of Reformation is the Church of Holy Scripture. By saying this we by no means try to claim that there are no true believers outside Lutheran church, that would be unscriptural act. But what we do confess is that there is no authority over or alongside of the Word of God, that is the Holy Bible. Only through the apostolic and prophetic writings Holy Spirit reveals his will commands to the Church. Therefore the sacraments we use must have clear biblical basis. Five sacraments that within the outward church have been developed we must reject, even though some of them, like marriage, ordination and anointing of the sick are not without scriptural basis – they still lack the clear command of Christ to his Church. Church is not the foundation of sacrament, not even as the true and living body of Christ. The foundation is Christ and his Word.

Therefore we come now to *the second* difference in understanding sacrament: they deliver and confer Holy Spirit, the Spirit works them, in them and through them. How do we know this? It is because of the word of promise. Now we know that marriage most certainly is instituted by God and set forth in the Scripture, but it does not give Holy Spirit but calling and duty of a husband or a wife. So you see despite obvious similarities, there is a remarkable distinction between a biblical action of the church even instituted by God himself and a sacrament.

Third and perhaps most important attribute of a sacrament has to do with it being word (in capital letters) in it's visible form. This is the side on God's work, in which many people are offended. It is because of enlightenment and rationalism, most fundamentally because of wicked sinful human pride, that spiritual things are often considered only invisible. Of course spiritual things are invisible, but they are not bound to invisibility in the way that they are separated from material world. Many material things we do have very much to do with spiritual world. You can find this as close as yourself. Man is material, visible – but is he not also spiritual? In Gen. 2:7: **“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”**

We are by our nature physical and spiritual beings. Even in the garden of Eden God wanted to interact with man through visible and material world. But alas, since the sinfall our natural state towards God is spiritually dead. We cannot and we don't want to know God by our nature. By nature we are lost. So we see, that even though rationalists and fanatics get offended by visible aspect of a sacrament, it is the exactly the very face of God's overflowing grace towards us, his weak and doubtful children when he shows us his Word of Grace and Mercy. Even Luther in his Large Catechism and Smalcald articles cites the words of Augustine when he writes: **"Let the Word come to the element, and it becomes a Sacrament."** (Smalc. III, V, 1.)

2. The Sacramental Word

Since we are now speaking about our two sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, in the service of the law and gospel, we have to give a decent look at God's Word before dealing with the sacraments.

God has given his word to be preached for one reason only, and that is our salvation. He does that by preaching law, that shows our sin and condemns us as sinners. *"Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them"* (Deut. 27:26). This is how God kills our pride before him, he opens our eyes to see our spiritual death. Paul writes: *"When the commandment came, sin came alive and I died"* (Rom. 7:9–10).

But there is another blade in this sword, and it is more powerful than death itself: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Gospel is the very means of grace. When a soul frightened and terrified by the law hears, that Christ has suffered and died on the cross. Carried the load of sin of entire world – even your sins – it happens: The word generates faith, gives new life proclaiming to the one dead in his sins: come out! And the heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh, there is no more death, but only spiritual life, joy, happiness everlasting. That is how the word of God makes us holy, regenerates us.

The basic element of sacraments is the Gospel. The word generates sacraments and is prior to them, also working and effecting the same. (AP XIII, 5) Therefore the Gospel preached and read, even though it is not a sacrament, it is *sacramental*. In the word Christ is present *"Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."* (John. 13:20)

3. Baptism – the fundamental sacrament

We heard that the word of God is preached as the law and the gospel. It is universal preaching to be echoed in all the world, even in the darkest places imagined. But when we speak of the sacrament, we have entered into different context, which is the Church. The word of God creates the Church, where the sacraments are administered by called and ordained pastors. Why is this? Why the sacraments cannot be used outside the Church alongside the preached word? First, it is because they are pure Gospel. There is no preaching of law attached to them. Sacrament is forgiveness of sins in a visible form – absolution. They are the treasures of the church.

The first sacrament man receives is Holy Baptism. We remember that Baptism was instituted first, when the Word of God came to John in the wilderness and sent him to baptize people after they confessed their sins (John 1:6,33). He was John the Baptist. But the true Baptiser is God the Holy Spirit, who works in and through baptism. So there is no doubt that when a person is baptized, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, he receives every blessing that the word of God promises to those who believe. Even though it is a man who performs the baptism, it is God who is at work. This is why it is clear that children, infants must be baptized and receive Holy Spirit: they are born spiritually dead *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”* (John 3:6), and God will work saving faith in them too. Here we see especially in the case of those baptized as infants, how baptism is not only a door to the membership of a local congregation. It is also that, but it is much more. Baptism is the door to the kingdom of God, grace, the heavenly realm.

Here we as parents and godparents find the most high calling to teach and guide a newborn Christians to learn, live, and to memorize, how precious gift they have received for the rest of their eternity! Sin hangs on to us every day of our lives, old Adam will not surrender and fights against Holy Spirit and regeneration every day. This means, that we need the Means of Grace every day. We need through them to be assured us that we do not belong to the world that will one day be condemned, but into heavenly Kingdom. That is why God has given his word in so many different ways. You need to hear law every day, because of the old Adam (and old Eve, as I sometimes try to wake up also our dear ladies). Remembering your own baptism, how Holy Spirit himself descended upon you in the water of regeneration as it did descend on Christ in his baptism – and remained! This declares most bright light of the gospel to your heart. In baptism you have received Holy Spirit, Christ – the Word incarnate, and the name of triune God. How’s that for a defence against the accuser? Every time when law accuses you of your sins you can confess them, and say: I am baptized and so I in Christ I am most certainly forgiven.

4. Holy Communion – Sacrament for the weak

You have already heard and also hopefully learned a great deal of the grace that Christ has gained for us and how he wants to deliver us everything of it. It is important to understand, that Christ Jesus didn't become man, suffer and die on the cross to gain himself anything. He did it all because of you and me. And what he gained: victory over death, sin and satan he now wants you to have it. All he wants to do, is to give it out to you, to pour himself to you, like a loving father, who wishes that his children lack nothing from him, but have everything he is willing to give.

Here we come to the other sacrament. Just as the preached word calls everyone to repentance and faith in Christ, and baptism touches and regenerates an individual, so the Holy Communion encloses the whole congregation in Christ. Like mentioned before, when we are born anew to believe in Christ the Savior, we are transmitted from the darkness into the light. We begin living the heavenly life even here on earth. And devil hates it. Devil hates us, and he will wage a war against us. He accuses and uses his every fiery dart to make you doubt God's grace and his word.

To defend you from this, Christ has instituted Holy Communion. Remember this, both of the sacraments are pure Gospel – no law attached. Devil tries to fool you and make it look like law – most bitterly devil tempts pastors, who conduct the sacraments – but Christ says: take, eat. Take, drink. Here I am for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. You might remember, how we with first people, Adam and Eve fell under sin and death? Remember? What happened first? (they listened and believed the words of satan) And then? (they ate the forbidden fruit). And what happened? (they fell under God's wrath and condemnation). Now when we consider the Holy Communion, we can see Christ working with us in the same way, but accomplishes something a totally different. He comes to us, who struggle with our sin and weakness, and speaks to us through his Gospel. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28) He calls us not to believe devil's lies, but his promises of Grace. He offers himself, for us to eat and drink, so that we take part in him, who is Everlasting life. He is the true fruit of the tree of life. In his life, passion and death Christ annihilated every work of satan. In Holy Communion he gives this all to us: "Take, eat. Take, drink." It is a permission to eternal life from the Son of God.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to come back where we started. The Word. When we understand correctly the distinction between written, preached and meditated word of God and sacraments, we are blessed to see, that the word and sacraments are so intertwined, that whenever you read, hear or meditate the word of God, you are at the same time participating the same power which once was poured over you in baptism and which conjoins you in Christ's true body and blood in Holy Supper. It is to this Paul refers in his epistle to Ephesians saying: *"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my*

*prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him having the eyes of your hearts enlightened**, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and **what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead.**" (Eph. 1:16–20)*

Amen.