

THE SALTSHAKER

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Office: 828-253-6578—Email: crpchq@gmail.com—Website: www.covenantreformed.net

Signs and Seals

By Rev. Sean McCann

I read a story this week of a white mother who was traveling with her biracial son when she was challenged by the airline to prove that he was in fact her child. The airline believed they had reason to doubt that the child was hers, so they requested she produce a birth certificate as proof. Despite her protests, the airline officials needed to see corroborating evidence to calm their doubts. (This is apparently a common procedure to prevent child trafficking, but that did little to calm the understandably upset mother.)

In a strange way this story reminded me of how we are called to make use of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In a sense these physical signs serve as corroborating evidence to confirm the truth that we are children of the heavenly Father, a truth that many of us struggle at times to believe. We are like the airline official, but in our case we doubt our own parentage and need some sort of proof that the Father really does love us and that we are forever his. In response to our disbelief God presents corroborating evidence – in the form of the sacraments – to calm our doubts and confirm our sonship.

God knows that we struggle to believe the beautiful promise of the gospel. Even though his word is enough to establish us in the truth, to quiet our doubts, and to bind up our wounds, we still cry like the desperate father, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Perhaps the reason we most often struggle to believe is found in the very nature of faith itself: "the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). We understand the world through our senses, so if we haven't seen something with our own eyes, we remain doubtful. By the gift of faith we are enabled to overcome this skepticism and see with eyes of faith, yet those eyes so often falter and doubt begins to creep back in. God knows how feeble we are, and instead of demanding more out of us and requiring even stronger faith, he graciously condescends to our weakness. God stoops down to accommodate us by

more fully declaring the promise of the gospel in ways that we can grasp with our senses.

He strengthens and nourishes our faith by giving us physical items that we can see, touch, and taste. These physical items are the sacraments, which he has joined to his word. As these signs are presented to our senses, they confirm the very truths that he declares in his word. Just as my wedding ring confirms that my wife really does love me (even on those days when I am quite unlovable!), so too do the sacraments confirm God's heart towards us. Or as Sinclair Ferguson has reworked the old hymn: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the *table* tells me so."

How do the sacraments accomplish this purpose of confirming the love and forgiveness of God? The Shorter Catechism offers a helpful explanation: "by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers." Let's explore each of those:

Christ and His Benefits Are Represented

A sacrament has two parts, the first being the "outward and sensible sign," while the second is the "inward and spiritual grace thereby signified" (WLC 163). Paul teaches about this when he distinguishes between the circumcision that is "outward and physical" from the inward circumcision that is "a matter of the heart" (Rom 2:28-29). The sacraments represent the grace of God that is extended to his people in Christ. In this sense then, the outer and visible sign represents and pictures the inner and invisible reality. So while the waters of baptism don't actually wash away sin, they do "signify the remission of sin by his blood" (WLC 165). Just as a physical sign points to something else, so to do the sacraments point to something else: Jesus Christ. On their own, sacraments are merely powerless signs, but by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit they become effective means of salvation (WSC 91).

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Upcoming Events

July and August

July 1	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
July 1	Noon	Elder Groups
July 8	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
July 15	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
July 15	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
July 22	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
July 29	6:00 pm	The Lord's Supper
August 5	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
August 5	Noon	Elder Groups
August 12	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
August 19	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
August 19	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
August 26	6:00 pm	Evening Worship

Weekly Events

Sunday:		
Opening Exercises	9:30 am	
Sunday School	9:45 am	
Morning Worship	11:00 am	
Evening Worship	6:00 pm	Except for 1st Sundays

Wednesday Evenings:

Home Prayer Groups	6:00 pm
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Bible Study

For Men:		
Men's Prayer Breakfast	8:00 am	2nd & 4th Saturdays
ROMEOS	8:00 am	Every Thursday
<i>(Retired Old Men Eating Out) at J&S Cafeteria, River Ridge</i>		
For Women:		
Carol Belz's Home Fellowship Hall	9:30 am	Every Tuesday
	10:30 am	Every Wednesday

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Christ and His Benefits Are Sealed

In Romans we read that Abraham “received the *sign* of circumcision as a *seal* of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom 4:11). In that day a seal was made of wax, clay, or soft metal and was placed on a document to signify its authenticity. This language of a seal brings to mind the covenant that God makes with his people. God has bound himself to his people though a contract that involves requirements, blessings, and curses. The covenant of grace promises that all who repent and believe in Jesus will be forgiven and adopted into the family of God. To this promise God adds his seal to ratify and confirm our right to all the blessings and promises of the covenant. Today we have a notary affix his or her seal to our signature on official documents to confirm that it is indeed ours. Just as the seal on a document gives the reader confidence that it is true, so do the sacraments give us confidence to trust the promises of God.

Christ and His Benefits Are Applied

The many benefits that are applied to us in the sacraments can be grouped under these headings: access, identity, and purpose. First, just as a branch draws strength from the vine, so to do we have *access* in our union with Christ to draw strength from him. Spiritual nutrients flow from the vine to branches through the life-giving sap of the word and sacraments and thus strengthen and increase our faith. Second, the sacraments serve both to set

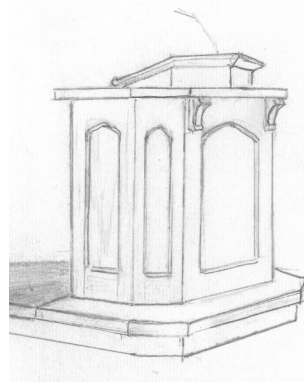
us apart from the world and to bind us together as the family of God. We no longer *identify* with our worldly families, but are united through Christ with our spiritual family and so receive these visible markers of our adoption. And finally, the Larger Catechism says that the sacraments “oblige us to obedience,” meaning that they bind us in devoted service to Christ and his body. Imagine a solemn military ceremony in which a soldier is set apart from the civilian world and given a new *purpose* in the service of his country. In the same way the sacraments mark us out for a higher calling and greater purpose. In Romans 6 Paul follows this line of thinking when he argues that baptism has marked Christians as those who have died to sin and live for Christ.

Through representation, sealing, and application, the sacraments confirm the love and forgiveness of God. This doesn’t happen because of any virtue in the elements or the one who administers them, but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

In the next few newsletter articles I plan to explore the meaning of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but for now let us aim to receive these beautiful, ordinary signs and seals with a deep sense of gratitude to God for his covenant faithfulness and condescending mercy.

The Sacred Desk

By Rev. Sean McCann



One of the primary themes of the opening chapters of Acts is how the exalted King Jesus poured out his Spirit to enable the breaking in of his kingdom through gospel preaching and witness. After charging his disciples to be his witnesses to the very ends of the earth (1:8), he ordained the miraculous event of Pentecost in order to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit’s power would enable the disciples to proclaim the mighty works of God to “every nation under heaven” (2:5). With the establishment of this new era of the Spirit, we are now prepared to read about the spread of the gospel throughout the remaining chapters in Acts.

However, if we are expecting to see an unhindered march of these gospel heralds unto victory, then we will be sorely disappointed. As we will see in the coming months, as Luke recounts the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem and beyond, he explains that accompanying this spread was a

rising persecution. What began at Pentecost with mere mocking (2:13) quickly escalated to the arrest of Peter and John (4:3). They were released after being threatened and charged not to speak any more about Jesus (4:18, 21), only to be rearrested and kept overnight (5:19-20). The Jewish council grew more enraged after they were freed from prison by an angel, so again they were charged not to speak, and this time beaten (5:40). But these powerful leaders were rendered powerless in the face of Spirit-enabled boldness as more men arose to preach the good news. The violent persecution of the Way rose to a fever pitch with the stoning of Stephen (7:58), which set off a “great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (8:1).

What are we to make of all this suffering? Alan Thompson helps us to understand: “The Lord reigns and is accomplishing his saving purposes, yet his reign remains contested, the fullness of the kingdom is still ‘not yet’.” The accomplishment of God’s saving purposes in this ‘not yet’ period of the kingdom therefore helps to explain why suffering is intimately related to two of the dominant themes of Acts: the spread of the word and the establishment and strengthening of local churches.”

As we pray for church growth and global evangelization, are we prepared to face suffering like this? May we too be made like those early disciples who were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (5:41).

Preaching Schedule		
Date	Morning	Evening
July 1	Acts 4:1-22	
July 8	Acts 4:23-31	John 20:30-31
July 15	Acts 4:32-5:16	John 21:1-14
July 22	Acts 5:17-42	John 21:15-19
July 29	Andrew Shank	John 21:20-25
Aug. 5	Acts 6:1-7	
Aug. 12	Pastor Sean on vacation	
Aug. 19	Acts 6:8-7:53	TBD
Aug. 26	Acts 7:54-8:3	TBD

46th in Atlanta

By Joel Belz

I think I was 10 years old when I attended my first Presbyterian meeting. Dad, who was pastor of a small Presbyterian church in rural Iowa, thought it was good discipline and good training for his children. Besides, it lightened Mom’s daily load to have Dad take responsibility for us kids. There were four of us by then, with four more still to come.

What I didn’t know then was that Presbytery was just spring training for the real event. The real event was the church’s General Assembly. These days, a Presbytery in our denomination typically includes 45-60 delegates from 25 to 60 churches—all from one region, like western Carolina. A General Assembly in our denomination includes as many as 1200 delegates from 1900-2000 local churches all over the U.S. and Canada. It is quite a gathering.

You should hear them sing! One delegate told me he thinks it’s a foretaste of heaven. A highlight of this year’s Assembly was the singing of Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus* by a 200-voice choir gathered from half a dozen churches—all Korean—from the Atlanta area. But getting the music just right for the tastes of maybe 2000 people isn’t easy.

If the staging of a PCA General Assembly is meant to display the unity of Christ’s church—and I think that is a worthy goal—the gathering also exhibits the differences among us. The role of women in the church continues to provoke lively discussion. And there’s significant disagreement about what constitutes appropriate worship in our churches.

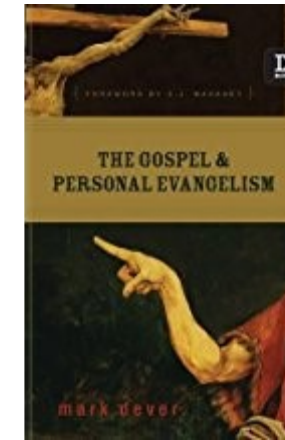
General Assembly, while not exactly a Supreme Court for the PCA, is designed to help the church at large reach a workable kind of unity on a variety of issues. Should women be allowed to serve on the board of Covenant College? The Assembly said no. How deeply should a church’s elders get involved in the messy issues of spousal abuse—and in a host of other related judicial issues? Abuse of various kinds is a frequent and troubling issue, the Assembly seemed to be saying, and the people of our churches need bold help from our teaching and ruling elders. Are there practical suggestions PCA people might find from their leaders to promote racial reconciliation in our churches and in our culture at large? Yes, a special committee on that very issue submitted a 67-page report with all kinds of down-to-earth proposals for enhancing race relations in the PCA. (Teaching Elder Irwin Ince, a pastor from Washington, D.C., served as moderator of this year’s Assembly. He was the first African-American to hold that office.)

Through an extensive network of committees, the General Assembly also reviewed the work of its various committees and agencies. For example, CRPC’s pastor, TE Sean McCann, served on the committee that examined the work of Covenant Seminary over the last year. In that manner, the Assembly is very much a hands-on enterprise, keeping participants busy from their arrival on Monday afternoon through a final worship service on Friday morning.

The PCA’s 2019 General Assembly is set for June 25-28, and will be held in Dallas, Texas. I hope CRPC might be represented by our pastor—and a ruling elder as well.

The Gospel and Personal Evangelism

by Rev. Sean McCann



There are many wonderful books on the difficult topic of evangelism, and at different points during the last few years our church has studied two of the best. Last year we read *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J.I. Packer for the Pastor’s Book Club, and before I came here in 2016 there was a group studying *Tell the Truth* by Will Metzger on Sunday evenings. These authors are very helpful when considering a theology of evangelism (Packer) and for developing a method of

God-centered witnessing (Metzger). In addition to these two, another of my favorite books on this topic is *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* by Mark Dever. I appreciate this book for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the candor with which the author deals with the struggles that so many of us face in evangelism.

Early on in the book the author considers some of the most “common excuses that we use to justify our nonevangelism.” These include thoughts like: “other things seem more urgent,” “I don’t know non-Christians,” and “people don’t want to hear...they won’t be interested.” After dealing with each of these individually, Dever passionately challenges every Christian to “plan to stop not evangelizing.” After prayer, he considers the second most important step in evangelizing to be planning: we should plan *who* to speak with, *when* to make time for them, and *what* to say. These plans certainly do not quench the (at times) spontaneous leading of the Holy Spirit, but since “we plan for so many less important things; why not plan for our evangelism?”

The rest of the book considers familiar topics such as the content of the gospel, the reasons for evangelizing, and how we should evangelize. Dever also considers the topic of what *isn’t* evangelism by offering a convincing argument that while things like personal testimony, social action, and apologetics all have their place; they should never replace the specific task of evangelism. Pastor Dever’s goal with this book is admirable, and one that I share with him: “I pray that as you come to evangelize more, you will help your church to develop a culture of evangelism. What do I mean by a culture of evangelism? I mean an expectation that Christians will share the gospel with others, talk about doing that, pray about it, and regularly plan and work together to help each other evangelize. We want evangelism to be normal – in our own lives and in our churches.”

Will you join me in praying that our church would be marked by a growing culture of evangelism?