

“THE EFFICACY OF THE SACRAMENTS”  
COLLOQUIUM: GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008

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I am grateful for the invitation to contribute to this colloquium. It has provided me the opportunity to develop heretofore rather inchoate thoughts into firmer convictions and settle my own mind in regard to certain aspects of sacramental efficacy and so the blessing of the sacraments in the life of the church. It is, I take it, a practical and pastoral interest that brings us together. I very much hope it is that first and foremost and not a polemical one. Polemics have far too long dominated this field to the detriment of the spiritual life of God’s people. I remember being struck by A.B. Bruce’s observation the first time I read it. He was speaking of the Lord’s Supper in particular, but his remarks apply with equal force to baptism.

“The history of these controversies is very humiliating and their consequences most disastrous. Through them the symbol of union has been turned into a chief cause of division. The church has remembered her Lord and obeyed his commandment of love as members of families sometimes remember a deceased parent, casting angry glances at each other across his grave, and retiring to the house whose head they have buried, to squabble about the meaning of his will.”<sup>1</sup>

I trust we are not here to squabble! But, that said, we may not find ourselves in complete agreement either. Let us at least acknowledge that we all bring to the subject views shaped and, perhaps in some ways, misshaped by our ecclesiastical tradition and our own experience. Most of us are no longer content to observe the Lord’s Supper as infrequently as did our ancestors in the Reformed church. The largest part of us have found our tradition wanting in this respect. We observe the Supper more frequently. More and more of us are observing it every Lord’s Day. That change in practice has had profound effects on how some of us understand the Lord’s Supper and its working. Whatever anyone may say about the efficacy of the Lord’s Supper, for example, no one can deny that a sacrament observed twice or four times a year will not have the same effect, will not even be understood to be the same thing as a sacrament observed every Sunday as a regular part of Lord’s Day worship, as regular a part as hymns, prayers, and the sermon. Sacramental practice may very well shape the debate in our circles more than theology does. “The efficacy of what?” we may well ask: the efficacy of a ritual of infrequent and ceremonious observance or the efficacy of our weekly worship service of which the Supper is one part?

But I wish more of us were also willing to admit that a large measure of the problem we face in coming to a unanimous mind about the sacraments and their efficacy is the Bible’s own way of speaking about these rituals. Is it not the case that Holy Scripture addresses these rituals and their use in ways that we typically do not? We pride ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Edinburgh, 1877, 357. “Loofs says, sadly and finely, that the history of the doctrine of the Supper has been itself a Leidensgeschichte.” P.T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, London, 1917, 254.

on our Biblicism without always recognizing the gap that has opened between our practice and that described in the Bible. It is an interesting observation that none of the baptisms reported in the New Testament (and none of the circumcisions in the Old Testament!), so far as the evidence goes, was performed in a worship service. Virtually all our baptisms are performed in Lord's Day services. Perhaps that difference in practice is an inconsequential detail. Have we even considered the question? Are our people, are even our preachers likely to say to interested seekers, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins"? Do we appreciate that we do not say what the apostles said? Are we as likely to baptize immediately upon profession as was the case in apostolic Christianity? Do we find it as natural to describe the nature of salvation itself by reference to the ritual of washing with water? Are we as ready to speak of these rites without constant qualification as the Bible does? It is certainly true that baptism and the Supper can be empty rites whose observance, so far from being a means of grace actually increases guilt. The Bible says that often enough. But it also frequently speaks of the sacraments and of their efficacy in ways we do not or only rarely. There are inevitable tensions created by the Bible's revelation of baptism and the Lord's Supper. A heartfelt recognition of the fact that in this discussion as in so many other discussions of biblical doctrine we find ourselves in the world of "both – and" rather than "either – or" would, I believe, help us to appreciate other points of view. After all, we are talking about different constructions of sacramental efficacy among Trinitarian, inerrantist, five-point Calvinist, paedobaptist Presbyterians!

It is clear to me, for example, that baptism is the ritual by which the covenant between God and an individual believer (whether infant or adult) is ratified, signified, and sealed. The name of the individual being baptized, of course, is found nowhere in Holy Scripture. It is by baptism that an individual by name is enrolled in the covenant community and by baptism that the covenant is formally established between the living God and a specific person. It is a ceremony of initiation. That is simple enough. But that way of thinking about baptism, true as it is, hardly ends the controversy. Nor does it do justice to the fullness of the Scripture's teaching. To think of baptism simply as a ritual initiation does not adequately account for the forceful language employed in the New Testament to describe baptism's meaning and effects. When our *Westminster Confession of Faith* acknowledges that in the Bible the "names and effects" of salvation itself are attributed to the sacraments [XXVII, ii] or when it artlessly declares that "by the right use of [baptism]" the grace of salvation is "really...conferred by the Holy Ghost," it is clear that we are obliged to view baptism as more than simply a formal initiation into the covenant community. It is an instrument of divine grace, an instrument the Lord wields in working his wonders of salvation. Surely that is a point of great practical importance to God's people. To speak of baptism merely as a sign of the covenant condemns baptism to recede into the distant reaches of a Christian's memory, and eventually to disappear altogether. My observation is that their baptism is, for many of our people, a matter of little spiritual consequence. But this does not seem to be a result contemplated in Holy Scripture. There baptism remains an important part of a Christian believer's understanding of his life and calling. David dismissed Goliath because he was uncircumcised; Paul summoned believers to surmount their sins by appeal to their baptism.

In a similar way, I think it is clear, given the explicit connection the Savior himself drew between the peace or fellowship offering and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:28; Exodus 24:8), that the Supper is an instrument of covenant renewal. As in Exodus 24:1-8 – a covenant renewal ceremony explicitly described as *worship* – so in any well-ordered Lord's Day service, word and sacrament combine to recapitulate and renew the covenant between God and his people.<sup>2</sup> As the Scripture teaches us in many ways, nothing serves better to sustain, purify, deepen, and gladden any important relationship than simply the recapitulation and renewal of those promises, commitments, and affections upon which the relationship was established in the first place. A happy, satisfying, and romantic marriage, for example, is sustained and nourished by the constant renewal in word and deed of the covenant that first brought it into being. It is a law of Christian experience: what begins the life of faith is also what preserves and nourishes it. Surely this is the Lord's Supper: Jesus Christ offering himself to us again, and by eating and drinking we receiving him again. In the actions of the Lord's Supper we confess our faith in Jesus, we offer our thanksgiving for the gifts he has lavished on us, and we look forward to the consummation of our salvation when Jesus comes again. He draws near to us and we practice our faith in him. At his invitation we participate once more in his life-giving death and resurrection. But to say that the Lord's Supper serves to renew our covenant with the Lord is not adequately to answer the question of its efficacy. God's people, with those definitions in hand, still wonder precisely how these rituals *work*, what they are to expect from them, and where the blessing of them is to be found.

I venture to say that the question that has been posed – viz. “What do the sacraments actually accomplish in their administration?” – has too long been principally the domain of systematic theology and this has contributed both to the overly polemical nature of the consideration of the question and to the substantial measure of confusion or, worse, indifference that has existed and still exists today among the saints. It is certainly my impression that Christians in our PCA pews have only a vague impression of the workings of the sacraments and would be hard pressed to explain why they are important enough to argue about them as violently as Protestant Christians have through these five hundred years. They are clear that ritualism is unbiblical: the investing of confidence in the rites themselves, shorn of faith in Christ and the engagement of the heart. But what is the right evangelical use of the sacraments and what practical difference do they make? Christians want to know the answers to *those* questions. The definitions and explanations provided by systematic theology and contained in the church's confessional summaries, if they have not deepened the confusion, certainly have not overcome it.

For fear that any statement of the limitations of dogmatics will be taken amiss in the current environment, let me say that I am and remain deeply committed to the importance of systematic theology. I have some sixty manuals of systematic theology on my library shelves and many more individual studies of the various loci of Christian dogmatics. Systematic theology has its rightful place. There is no doubt that it has contributed something necessary and important to the church's understanding of the sacraments. But theological definition, the special province of dogmatics, leaves much unaccounted for.

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<sup>2</sup> C. John Collins, “The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice,” *WTJ* 66 (2004) 1-23.

Definition provides an essential foundation, but that is all. Systematic theology has not helped us very much to answer the question that we are seeking to answer today. This is a fact easy to demonstrate; a fact any ordinary Christian could confirm. Nevertheless the discussion of the efficacy of the sacraments has remained largely on the terrain of dogmatics. It is my intention in what follows to move the discussion forward on to different terrain.

Do we not all agree that, however defined, the sacraments are instruments of the divine work of grace in the life of believers. If they belong to dogmatics, they also belong to spiritual and liturgical theology. They belong to the theology of the Holy Spirit and his work in the church and in the believing heart. But, if so, must we not accept that belonging to *this* work, complex, mysterious, and mystical as it is, the working of the sacraments will not lend itself to easy generalization? Questions of the type – “How does this work?” “What happens when we do this?” and “What is the result of it?” – are the least likely to be adequately answered with theological definitions. And such definitions, inevitably broad generalizations, by shaping our consideration of such questions through catechesis and preaching, however unwittingly, limit our appreciation of biblical reality at the key points of practice, experience, and expectation. Is it not finally in these respects – practice, experience, and expectation – that God’s people expect us to explain the *efficacy* of the sacraments?

Let me illustrate what I mean by my assertion that there is a significant difference between confessional definitions and the real-world experience of divine grace by drawing your attention to several matters that bear indirectly on our subject. We are, after all, talking about the outworking of salvation, and, in particular, what we are accustomed to call *sanctification*, using the term in its broadest sense. But we do not open a systematic theology to learn how to surmount our temptations, draw near to God, or to worship God in that way best suited to bring his blessing down upon our heads. But the sacraments – rituals of the life of faith and of Christian worship – belong to the practice of the Christian life and of godly worship. In what ways do the sacraments nourish our faith and devotion? Is this question not another form of the question we are asking today? What is the efficacy of baptism and the Lord’s Supper? We want to know what spiritual help, what blessings these rituals are appointed to convey. Answering such questions enables us then to know the right way to practice the sacraments and how to integrate their working into everything else that belongs to our pursuit of God and holiness. But, to ask the question in this way is to place the subject beyond the generalizations common to systematic theology. Just as we don’t open Louis Berkhof or Francis Turretin to learn how to preach the Word of God or listen to a sermon, so we do not expect to find in such works instruction in how to practice the sacraments, how to integrate them into our liturgical life, and what to expect of our use of them.

To ask after the efficacy of the sacraments is to ask a question about the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification in a believing life. As you all know, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines sanctification as follows:

“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man, after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.”

I do not disagree with that definition; it is true as a broad generalization. But I often find it necessary to remind my people that as an account of the progress of a Christian life it is, taken by itself, seriously misleading. As a generalization it leaves out so much that it does not, in fact, describe anyone’s actual experience of the Christian life. It is perfectly obvious, as Holy Scripture makes clear with dismal regularity, that this work of God’s free grace does not, in fact, produce consistent, regular spiritual advance. If the *Confession* tells us that the “several lusts...are more and more weakened and mortified; and [believers] more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces” [*WCF* XIII, i], a believer may be forgiven for thinking that he is to expect unbroken upward progress in the things of God. But, as every Christian learns to his or her dismay, progress proceeds instead by fits and starts. Sanctification, both according to the teaching of the Bible and the observation of the Christian ages, seems primarily to be compacted into spiritual crises – of illumination, of repentance, or of ecstasy – which are separated in a believing life by periods, sometimes long periods of stasis. What is more, the definition of the *Shorter Catechism* does not prepare us for the incontestable fact that many real believers finish their lives in this world at an elevation of holiness, zeal, and devotion considerably lower than once they had attained. Isaac, Gideon, David, Solomon, Asa, and Hezekiah come to mind.

“Dr. Bonar used to tell, with great solemnity, what was said to him at the beginning of his ministry by an old friend and minister: ‘Remember, it is a remark of old and experienced men, that very few men, and very few ministers, keep up to the end the edge that was on their spirit at the first.’”<sup>3</sup>

The fact is, if a believer is taught that the Christian life proceeds by steady advance upward – the unmistakable impression of our confessional definitions – he is going to find that his experience does not match this theological description. That is a recipe for confusion and discouragement. But it is in precisely this way that dogmatics fail us also in respect to the sacraments and their place in believing life and worship. Sanctification is a great deal more complex a reality, its ways and means too inscrutable to lend themselves to definition and generalization.

This becomes clearer still when we consider the confessional definition of the sacraments as “means of grace.” It is in this way that our Standards identify both the nature of the sacraments and their efficacy. They are the “outward and ordinary means,” together with the Word and prayer, by which “Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.” But this is so much a generalization that is positively misleading in some important respects.

Consider first, as an example of a related issue, the *Shorter Catechism*’s answer to the question: “How is the Word made effectual to salvation?” We are asking a similar

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<sup>3</sup> *Andrew Bonar: Diary and Letters*, 349.

question about the sacraments today so it bears noticing how the Standards describe the efficacy of the Word, and all the more given the emphasis in the Reformed tradition on the sacraments as “visible words” and upon the intimate relationship between word and sacrament.

“The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”

Now that is a statement that is both true and false, true enough in what it affirms but false in the impression it leaves. It is a mistake built upon another mistake. It was certainly a mistake at the outset to limit the means of grace to the Word, sacraments, and prayer. Are there really but three means of grace? What of the nurture of children in the Christian home? Nurture is certainly more than simply the ministry of the Word in another form. It includes discipline, which the Scripture says explicitly is a means of salvation (Prov. 23:4; 1 Sam. 3:13; 1 Kgs. 1:6). It also consists of a parents’ example, which must be a very large part of the way the love of Christ is formed in the hearts of covenant children (1 Cor. 4:15-16; Col. 3:21; Psalm 103:13; Titus 2:10). Surely it is true that children in a Christian home grow up believing in large part because the gospel is adorned before them by their parents. In any case a vastly larger number of Christians have come to faith – remember we are talking about the means God employs to convince and convert sinners – through the nurture provided by their parents than by listening to sermons in church. Kuyper was correct to observe that the “weak spot” in the account of the means of grace in our Standards, as in much of its presentation of the *ordo salutis* is that only adults are in view.<sup>4</sup> It cannot be to the credit of our confessional summaries that they leave unmentioned the way of salvation experienced by far and away the largest class of Christians: covenant children who trust in the Lord from their mothers’ breasts.

But there is more. Though the catechism seems to suggest that at the very least most *converts* find faith listening to the preaching of the Word, that too is very doubtful. Most of the paradigm conversions both in Scripture and church history did not take place under preaching or as the direct result of preaching. Whether Zacchaeus or Paul, Justin, Augustine, Luther, Wesley, C.S. Lewis, or Charles Colson, the gospel was finally brought to bear on the heart and they were convinced and converted by other means, though preaching may certainly have played some role in preparing the ground. Certainly the gospel witness of ordinary believers to their unsaved friends and neighbors is another means of grace and that witness has been a principle means of “convincing and converting sinners,” since first Celsus sneered that no thinking man would embrace a philosophy that was spread by “women gossiping Christ at the laundry.” Though the catechism question seems to suggest the contrary, surely a small fraction, even of converts, have come to faith in Christ while listening to a sermon. I do not say this to decry preaching or to minimize its importance in any way. I am a preacher of the Word and I believe that both Scripture and experience teach us that preaching is an indispensable means of evangelism and *the* indispensable instrument of discipleship, or at least of adult discipleship. My point is simply that our confessional summaries do not do

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<sup>4</sup> *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, vol. IV, Kampen, n.d., 62-63.

justice to the various, richly layered, complex, and often indefinable ways taken by the Spirit of God to accomplish his saving purpose in a human life. It is not true that there are but three means of grace. It is not the case that preaching is the primary means of converting sinners.

It is against this background, then, that we approach the descriptions of sacramental efficacy that we have in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms*. We are told that baptism serves “to signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” and that in the Lord’s Supper “his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are...made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.”

But those statements are again generalizations. I do not disagree with the definitions but I am certainly willing to admit that they do not help ordinary believers to love the sacraments or to expect much from them.

So how should we proceed to answer the question? How do the sacraments work and what do they achieve? Well, how does preaching work? Certainly every faithful preacher hopes that the sermon he preaches to his congregation will have power to change hearts and alter lives in eternally significant ways. And, to be sure, some sermons are powerful in just that way. The sermon becomes the instrument of the Spirit’s converting grace, or it breaks the back of some sin in a believer’s life, or it lifts him up at a time of great spiritual discouragement, or it gives her for the first time a clear sight of her duty or calling. I have always imagined that it was the priest’s sermon that rescued Asaph from his punishing doubts that day when he “entered the sanctuary of God.” (Psalm 73:17). It was a sermon on the judgment of the wicked and the consummation of history that sent that good man out of church that day six inches above the ground. But every preacher here today knows it is not always so. It cannot be expected to be always so. It has never been always so for any preacher, no matter his gifts and graces. I don’t suppose Peter ever preached a sermon again in his entire life that produced three thousand conversions. More often preaching is spiritual nurture and by and large it works as parental nurture works in a godly home: slowly; imperceptibly shaping a mind and a heart after the image of Christ; reinforcing the good, correcting the bad. Sometimes sermons have no discernible effect; sometimes even real Christians respond badly to good sermons. Much of preaching’s influence cannot be traced. Its mystical element – that element every preacher knows from the Holy Spirit’s working in and through him as a preacher of God’s Word – is beyond calculation. It is to be prayed that the Holy Spirit’s blessing will attend the preaching of his Word, but clear and unmistakable evidence of that blessing is not to be demanded.

How does prayer work? Well we all know something of the mystery of prayer. It is powerful to bring help immediately in some cases; in others we have prayed for years to no avail. Prayer is the privilege of all privileges – to have the ear of the Almighty whenever we want it – but, that privilege notwithstanding, we must admit with Thomas Shepard that there are times we would rather die than pray and with Alexander Whyte

that there is nothing we are so bad at all our days. This is the mystery of sin to be sure, but it is also the mystery of God's ways with the soul. How different they are than what we expected and, indeed, what we hoped for. We do not give up, we continue to pray, we do not doubt God's magnificent promises made to prayer, but we are left having to believe that more has happened and more has been accomplished than can be seen or felt. And if this is true of an individual believer's prayer, surely it is equally true of the church's prayer, her public worship.

Well is this not precisely the efficacy of the sacraments? Is this not what God's people need to understand? They work as do all the other instruments that the Holy Spirit employs to fashion in us what is pleasing to him. They rarely work as we wish they did. Powerful and life changing experiences of ecstasy or conviction are rare at either the font or the table. They are an instrument of spiritual nurture – the Lord's Supper in particular, but even baptism in its repetition and the church's repeated witness of it – in the same way teaching, discipline, and example are instruments of the nurture of faith and holy love in a Christian home. They work slowly, steadily, fitfully. They depend for their efficacy on a variety of factors only some of which are the believer's direct responsibility. And, as with the other means of grace – whether a parent's nurture of a child, a believer's witness to an unbeliever, the preaching of the Word, or the practice of prayer – much of the effect of the sacraments, both momentary and cumulative, must occur below the level of our conscious realization. Much is done by the Holy Spirit without our knowledge. As no one directs the beating of his own heart or the motion of his lungs so we do not direct, we do not even observe the workings of the spiritual life at that level where the Holy Spirit affects them. We pray but we do not hear his unutterable groanings. We take and eat the bread and wine but we do not know how that becomes the nourishment of our *souls*. We know that we ought to govern our hearts so that we offer the Lord faith, love, and obedience in the practice of our sacramental worship. But, the ways of the Holy Spirit are inscrutable. There is much more here than meets the eye and God's people must content themselves to know that God will be true to his Word. Given our Savior's promise to be present with us when we meet in his name, given his assurance that the bread and wine are his body and blood, given his command to perform that ritual as part of the church's ritual, must it not be true that

“...while we are keeping the ordinance of the Supper the Lord Jesus quietly pours in more life into us, whether we feel little or much.”<sup>5</sup>

Here too we live by faith and not by sight. Who can say how the prayers of the saints are woven into the fabric of that divine providence that rules the world? In the same way, who can say what difference baptism or the Lord's Supper has made to the spiritual life of a particular Christian? If there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, what will heaven do for one godly family or one godly congregation who rejoices in the grace of God pledged to parents and their seed? Surely a God who in his anger was willing to destroy Moses for his indifference to the circumcision of his son, is a God who stands willing richly to bless those who in faith and love are so far from indifference that they

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Bonar, *Diary and Life*, Edinburgh, 1960, 332.

chafe until their babies have been baptized. But who can tell how that blessing will come?

Only rarely do we feel the power of his working. Only rarely is the veil drawn back for us to see baptism and the Lord's Supper as the divine acts of grace and spiritual power that they are. Faith must see, baptism by baptism and Lord's Supper by Lord's Supper, what the eye cannot.

Holy Scripture often draws attention to the fact that baptism is a divine act. The officiant may be a mere man, but it is Christ's act: authorized by him, performed in his name by those appointed to act on his behalf. The emphasis falls on the fact that baptism is what the Lord himself does to and for his people (Gen. 17:10-11; Joshua 5:9; Matt. 28:18). Suppose at one of our churches on a Lord's Day a baptism is scheduled. Suppose that at this baptism, alone among all the baptisms that have been performed through the Christian ages, this favored congregation was granted to witness the baptism by sight and not by faith. Just as the minister was preparing to begin the ritual, a great tearing sound caused all to look up. The ceiling and the roof of the sanctuary were parted and down through the opening descended the Lord Christ himself. Seraphim hovered above his shoulders. The people of God were on their faces before him, but he told them to rise to their feet and to watch carefully what he was about to do. He took the baby in his arms and pronounced the divine name over the child, he made the promise of his gospel and covenant to that child by name, and by name summoned him to the life of faith and godliness. He spoke a few words to the parents about the sacred stewardship he was entrusting to them and how they would answer to him on the Great Day for that child's faith and life. Then he poured water on the head of the child, blessed him, handed him back to his parents, and ascended back through the parted roof and with a loud crash the roof came back together and everything was as it had been.

That baptism would become the great memory of that child's entire life even though he would have no active recollection of it. Scarcely a day would pass without his parents reminding him that the Lord Christ himself had taken him in his arms when he was a baby and had declared that this little boy belonged to him from the headwaters of his life! As he grew up he would lie under the mercy and the specter and the glory of that baptism. His whole life would be colored and shaped by it. When he was bad the memory of it would correct him. When he was discouraged it would comfort and inspire him. Could anyone see such a baptism and not know for a certainty that Christ would be attending to the life of that boy and that his blessing would rest upon him? That is baptism and that is its effect, or should be. But we see through a glass, darkly, not yet face to face.

And what of the Lord's Supper? I remember distinctly my first communion. I was sitting in the balcony and I dropped the plastic cup after I had drunk the grape juice. It dropped down below the pew in front, one step lower, and I had to get down on my knees to retrieve it. I also remember my disappointment. Having waited for the communion for so long – I was fourteen at my first Lord's Supper – I was expecting *something*, I'm not sure what. To say it was an anti-climax is an understatement. But, what if the Lord Jesus had

been visibly sitting at the head of the table that Sunday morning? What if I had actually taken the bread and the wine from *his* hand? It would have remained, of course, ordinary bread and ordinary wine, and I would have eaten it as I do every Sunday. But surely having received the elements from *him* I would have been in no doubt that something very important was happening, something that must be a great blessing to me. I might still not have been able to identify precisely what the blessing would prove to be, how my life would change, but I would have had no doubt that Christ had given me a great and important gift, something of his very self. Sometimes I have felt as if I could almost see the Lord Jesus at his table – and those are wonderful moments – but usually I must remember that he is there, as he promised he would be, and that beyond calculation as the Lord's Supper's working remains and will remain, our Savior would not have given us this ritual if he did not intend to make it an instrument of his working in our hearts and lives.

What is the efficacy of baptism and the Lord's Supper? It is very much the same efficacy as that of a parent's nurture, of a minister's preaching, or of a Christian's prayer. In it and through it the Lord does his work to remake us after his image: a slow, inscrutable, mysterious work. A work that advances at one moment, retreats the next, and idles for some time thereafter. A work that is often better measured by others than by ourselves. A work that will be seen for what it was only at the Last Day.

We mistake the question altogether if we think of the sacraments as *things* and not as the acts of our Lord and Savior, working out his own purposes of love and grace in us. *He* is the efficacy of the sacraments and whatever use *he* makes of them, Lord's Day by Lord's Day, that is their efficacy and their only efficacy.