

Truth We Can Touch

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's interesting, isn't it, to think about the what-ifs. And as we come to think about the sacraments, I want to start with a what-if that will sound eerily familiar to you. In 2020, the government locked society down in response to the pandemic. For a good chunk of that year and the year after that, churches didn't meet like this on a Sunday, okay? Gathered worship stopped. But lots of things moved online. And Zoom and YouTube helped us to still hear the Word being read and preached, to pray and be prayed for, to hear recordings of the church singing to God. In fact, that's how we met, if you were there to remember that.

But what if, okay, what if churches had thought, this is great. We can put our services straight onto people's screens, right into their homes. People that we've never met can listen in to what's happening. We don't have to keep up the cost of running a place of worship. Let's run with this, right? Let's do online, and let's shut the doors of the church. And if people want to meet up for a bit of socializing, you know, outside of that time, fine. If people want to watch the service during the week, that's okay. Whatever works for them, that's fine. Or what if the government had said, no more gatherings of 10 or more people anymore? Or what if individuals and families had decided, oh, well, this just works better for us. We won't go back to church like normal, and services had shrunk to a handful of people. There were a lot of what ifs, aren't there, that would have changed our worship. And perhaps you think, well, why not?

All the parts of our worship that we've thought about up to now could, in theory, be put online. Much of our giving is already online. Our singing, our prayer, and preaching is live-streamed.

Plenty of Christians and churches do treat worship, gathered worship, as something you can do in front of a screen. So why not? What would be missing from our worship?

If we did. This morning, we're thinking about the sacraments. And the sacraments help us to see why the church can't worship virtually. And not just because you can't baptize someone online, or serve communion over a screen. I'm sure some creative spirit has tried. But because in our worship, Christ has given us physical things to share. Water, bread, wine, things which, when the church gathers on Sunday and we receive them with faith, He has promised to meet us and bless us. The physicality, something you can touch and feel, the physicality of the sacraments grounds our worship in a time and place. All the other parts of our worship involve our ears and our vocal cords. Baptism and the Lord's Supper insist that we bring our eyes, our noses, our hands, our taste buds to God's worship. Because He has said that He will meet us in things we can touch and smell and see and taste, as well as what we hear and say.

[4 : 0 0] I wonder if, as I described those what-if scenarios, you worked out what the bigger what-if is behind it. What if God hadn't given us the sacraments?

What would change in your faith, your life, our worship, our church? Or are these physical things, these sacraments, are they really optional extras? Good, if you can, but you don't worry if not. Now, we're not going to even try to cover everything there is to say about the sacraments this morning. If you do have questions, again, please stick around after our service tonight. We'll have a question and answer about our whole series on our gathered worship.

But what I hope this morning is that we leave with a firmer grasp on why baptism and the Lord's Supper are so precious and vital as parts of our gathered worship. I've got a what, a why, and a how this morning. So, firstly, what are the sacraments? What are the sacraments? If you're thinking, you know, this is a bit above my pay grade on a Sunday morning, that's okay. So, let's start with an easier question. In our series, we've thought about Sunday worship as a conversation between us and God. God speaks, we speak. So, here's the question, who is speaking in the sacraments?

When someone's baptized, when you take communion, which side of the conversation are we in? Now, I think this is the question when we come to the sacraments. I think this is the question that divides Baptists and Presbyterians much more than the question of who should be baptized.

Who is speaking in baptism? Now, forgive me if this is you and I get it wrong. You can pull me up afterwards. But Baptists, I think, would say that it's the person being baptized, that baptism is the expression of their faith and commitment to God. And who's speaking in the supper? I think Baptists would say it's us, as we remember Christ. Now, that's not untrue. We'll see there is a call for us to respond in baptism and the Lord's Supper. But in Reformed worship, in our Presbyterian understanding of Scripture, we would say that first and foremost, the sacraments are God speaking to us. So, that when someone is baptized or when we share communion, it's not a sign of what's in our hearts primarily, but what God has done for us in Christ. And the reason that we say that is because of the way Jesus gives us these sacraments in the context of God's covenant. So, Jesus and the eleven are up a mountain and they worship him, just as the elders of Israel worshipped God on the old covenant mountain,

[7 : 19] Mount Sinai long ago. Then Jesus speaks to them using a covenant pattern. Here's who I am. Here's who you are. Here's what you're to do. And here's the blessing that will follow.

Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, who I am. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you. That's who you are and what you're to do. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age, the blessing that will follow. And Peter, the apostle, clearly picked up on that because he also uses a covenant formula when he preaches on the day of Pentecost.

Repent and be baptized, he said, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children. It's a formula we find throughout God's covenants. And for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. So, baptism comes to us as a new sign of God's eternal covenant. Same with the Lord's Supper, when Jesus gives us the bread and wine, it's in the context of a covenant meal, the Passover, where he said, this is my body, take and eat. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Drink and remember me. So, the supper, again, comes to us as a new sign of God's covenants. And we call that covenant the covenant of grace. But then why does it need new signs? Or why do the signs change? Well, I've got a slide.

It's very unlike me. I've got a slide because I thought it would be easier to show you and talk you through it. So, before Christ came to fulfill our side of the covenant, to keep the laws that we had broken in our place and to suffer death for our sins. God's people looked forward to him in faith.

And they did that through the words of the old covenant, the promises and prophecies, but also through the signs of the covenant, circumcision, the Passover lamb. And they were no less saved for that. But now Christ has come to fulfill the covenant. We look back on his finished work.

[10:11] And because that, he is the turning point of all history, the signs of the covenant changed to reflect that. So, let me put it like this. Before Christ came, those covenant signs, circumcision, the Passover lamb, involved blood being spilled. For a boy or a man to become part of God's covenant family, something had to be cut off. And in every home, a lamb had to be killed each year, both as a reminder that to belong to God's family, blood had to be spilled. But because Christ's blood has now been poured out once and for all to pay our debt, to serve our sentence, the signs of the covenant of grace are now bloodless. Praise God, because it's finished. He's done it. Now, as we'll see, those signs mean the same thing. The big difference is that Christ's death brought one set of signs to the conclusion, that they were crying out for and longing for, and brought another set of signs into being.

So that God's covenant of grace people now are baptized with water and share in bread and wine, because that now is how God presents Christ and his benefits to us, now that he has come.

All right, in the same way that on Thursday, those of us who were here, we watched as Callum and Kirsten made a covenant. They made promises, they took vows, and then they took physical objects, metal rings, and they said, I give you this ring as a symbol and pledge, as a sign and seal of the promises that we've made. In that same way, the water, the bread, and wine are symbols and pledges of God's faithfulness to his covenant in Christ. They symbolize his covenant, and in them God pledges his commitment to his covenant. But okay, you say, how can water, bread, and wine do that? Right, very, very briefly. The reformers said, when the word is preached, preached, the water, bread, and wine act as visible words alongside of the preached word, so that just as Christ really speaks through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit, well, so when the bread and wine and water are set apart by the word, Christ really offers himself and his finished work to us by the Spirit through baptism and communion, right? So the stuff doesn't change. The water is just water out of the tap. The bread and wine come from Asda, but as they are set apart for use in gathered worship, they become visible words, symbols, pledges of the finished work of Christ that he holds out to us by the Spirit, right? The confession of faith calls it a sacramental union between these things in Christ.

And we receive Christ through the preached and the visible word in the same way we receive him. As the word is preached, we receive him through the water, the bread, and the wine as the Spirit applies the things of Christ to us, and as we take hold of them by faith. So understand that the water, the bread, and the wine of the sacraments, they are of no use to us on their own, right? They're not magical substances.

As we take hold of Christ by faith, as they're set apart by the word, that they become spiritual nourishment to us. And Christ does really hold himself out to us in them. Now, it's important to be clear. That has changed, hasn't it? Yes. It's important to be clear. The Bible is very clear that you can be saved, be a Christian, simply by trusting in the gospel, that you do not need to be baptized and take communion to be saved. So the thief on the cross is the natural example. He was neither. But Jesus said, today you'll be with me in paradise. But the Bible is equally clear that that's not normal, and that to deliberately not be baptized or take communion is a sin, because belonging to God's family should involve both. As in the old covenant, so in the new. So baby boys were circumcised at eight days old, and the prayer for them was that that outward circumcision would in time become an inward circumcision of their heart by the Spirit and faith. And so with baptism, we understand that the babies of believers should be baptized as the outward sign of God's promises to them in Christ. And our prayer is that in time, that would become an inward washing and cleansing of their hearts by the Spirit as they put their faith in Christ. And those verses from Colossians help us to see circumcision, baptism. They are both helping us to see Christ, the substance of Christ and his benefits, the old self being cut off and put to death, and us being raised in newness of life in Christ. Right, that's our union with Christ.

[16 : 39] And there, those converting from outside of the church, they put their faith in Christ, they're renewed, and then, as they were in the old, would be circumcised, now and then you would be baptized.

And if that once-for-all baptism speaks about our once-for-all union with Christ, well, the Lord's Supper that we repeat regularly speaks of our ongoing communion with him.

So when you trust in Christ, the bread and wine are served to you, you eat and drink with faith, well, then the Spirit feeds your heart on Christ and his grace. So that as Paul says there in 1 Corinthians, that the bread and wine are a participation in or a communion with the body and blood of Christ. Right, make no mistake that Christ is risen and seated in heaven, but through this meal, we are by the Spirit brought near to him to be fed by him in our hearts.

Now, if you didn't follow that, that's okay. You're fine. By God's grace, you actually don't need to understand that to benefit from these things. That's wonderful, isn't it? The important thing is where we started. That baptism and communion are not us telling God how much we love him and how much we're committed to him. Baptism and communion are God telling us how much he has loved us and how committed he is to us in Christ. So that for us to share these things in worship, to receive them with faith, is to receive Christ and his blessings that he has won for us through his death and resurrection.

So hopefully, that whip through sacramental theology is helping us to see how precious these things are, how vital they are as we come to God. But perhaps you're wondering, well, if I don't need these things to be saved, why do we have them at all? Right, what do they add to our worship that we don't just have in the preached Word only? Well, why do we have the sacraments? Back to our thought experiment.

[19 : 13] What was missing from our online services? Right, not only the sacraments, right, but the physical gathering of God's people being in the same place. Now, we know very well after that, don't we, that seeing each other's faces on a screen and hearing each other's voices is not the same as being in a room together. Why? Because we are not souls trapped or wrapped in skin and bones, right? We are not spiritual beings confined to a physical body. We are spiritual and physical beings. We are embodied people. And God gave us senses to feel, to taste things. He gave us a sense of physical presence, didn't he? We know it feels different, even if we're not touching, if you're not touching the person next to you, but it feels different to be sitting next to someone, to be in somebody's physical presence.

And when it comes to our faith, our bodies are no less part of us than our souls. We do not have a virtual disembodied faith because we are not virtual and disembodied people, right? In lots of religions, the goal is for the soul to be set free from the body. That is not Christianity, right? God does not, save us from our physical bodies. He saves us body and soul from our sin to be resurrected in a new creation. But I don't need to convince you of that because the ache and pain of yet another Zoom call and yet another Sunday online taught us that, didn't it? That we are not spiritual beings trapped in physical bodies, but we need our bodies to come to worship. So God does not tell us, friends, when we come to worship him to leave your body at the door. He doesn't say, just bring your ears and your vocal cords and your brain and that's it. He says, when I meet with you, I want the whole of you here.

And I want to fill your senses to see and feel the sprinkling of water and to touch and hold and taste the bread and to feel, to hold and to taste the wine as you drink and as you hear my word.

Now what a gift that is. What do we say when someone gives you just the right present? What do you say? You know me so well. Doesn't he know us so well? Doesn't he get who we are that we need more than words in our ears? That we need to be filled, to taste, to feel something to look at? And of course he gets us. He made us.

And in these things he's working to redeem us, body and soul, all of us together. So rightly, the reformers, they said no to so much that was going on in the church 500 years ago. There was so much to look at and do and smell. They removed stained glass windows, sometimes violently.

[22 : 55] Right? They whitewashed the walls. They took away the altar for sacrifice and putting a pulpit for preaching. The church had seven sacraments. Five of them they said, no, that's not a sacrament.

But in that renewal and reformation of worship, they recognized that God had given two physical, visible signs. Two sacraments. Two sanctioned windows through which to look and see Christ.

Two approved things. Two approved things. To touch, to feel, to receive Christ by faith. The water, the bread and the wine, they meet us, don't they, as the creatures that we are.

I said we can be saved without them, but that doesn't mean we can do without them. You can just about be a Christian without being baptized, but a church cannot be a church without baptism. You can just about be a Christian without taking communion, but we cannot rightly worship God without sharing communion. Because Jesus tells us very clearly to do these things and that he will meet us in these things. The water, bread and wine, they teach us, don't they, so much about God and his grace and our salvation. And they mark out who is his. Right? Wedding rings aren't marriage, but they tell the couple and everyone else that this person is married. In the same way, the sacraments are not the gospel. And they say, God is not the gospel. Yet we can see who is in God's family because they have been washed with water and sit at a table to eat bread and wine together.

Now, that's most obvious, isn't it, when we do it? Calvin's preference was to have communion every week. We don't do that. But when we do, a lion is drawn, isn't it? Those who are born into God's promises or born again into Christ are marked out once by water. Those who have taken hold of Christ by faith are marked out again and again by the supper. So, as much as we need those physical footholds for our faith, the world needs those visible lions, doesn't it, to distinguish who is in the church and who is in the world. So, let me encourage you, don't neglect the sacraments.

[25 : 47] Right? You might not share my or our position on infant baptism. That's okay. But don't not bring your child to be baptized out of convenience. And if you are a Christian and you haven't been baptized, don't not get baptized. Make it a priority. If someone is being baptized, be here to witness it, share in it. And if we're sharing communion and you are a Christian and a member here, make it a priority to be here. Tell each other, come. Come. Even if you're not taking it, come and see it. Come and be part of it. These things are part of our God-given worship. They are not a bolt-on. So, let's cherish the sacraments. You know, I wonder, do you love the sacraments?

There's one for the journey home. If you think love is going too far, I wonder, what does it say? What does it say about how we value God's promises and his presence and his gifts?

So, as we finish, let's think briefly about how we receive the sacraments. How do we receive the sacraments? What should you be thinking when there is a baptism happening or when we take communion? It's not obvious, is it? I think it's harder with baptism, unless it's you or your family. It's easy to think they're worshipping and we're watching, but how do we worship God when someone's being baptized?

Well, I think baptism and communion come with four reminders. And not just in the sense that we remember what happened in the past at the cross, but in the sense that we kind of call to mind what the cross has achieved so that we experience the power of his death and resurrection today.

So, we bring to mind his past grace in the present, in the sacraments. Baptism and communion are so much more than that, but they're not less, are they? That they are visible reminders to us of what Christ has freely done for us. While we were lost and dead in sin, that from his side flowed blood and water for the washing clean of our hearts if we simply put our trust in him. If we had been there, we would have denied knowing him and betrayed him. We know that because the followers who were there did those things. And yet, the night before that, he broke bread and poured wine and gave it to people who would betray him and would deny him and told them that what he was going to do, he was going to do for them. And in the weeks after his resurrection, he sent those very people out to go and tell the good news, to baptize followers of him and teach them everything that he taught them. Do we see the sheer grace, the sheer grace in these signs and seals that his grace to us is not for people who deserve to be baptized or deserve to sit at his table, but people like us who have forfeited the right to be with God and yet are welcomed back into his family?

[29 : 37] I think seeing a baby baptized is as much a reminder of that as seeing a believer's baptism. You need to see before us in our very eyes that before we had any knowledge of God or any capacity to love him, that he loved us and made promises to us in Christ to bring us back to himself.

So we call his grace to mind when we see that, not only to them, the person being baptized, but to us all, that we would trust in him and his grace.

The sacraments remind us too of the family that we belong to. And when someone's baptized, they get a new name, not in a kind of mystical sense, but they are baptized, aren't they, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So think of an adoption. When a child is adopted, that child will take his or her new family's name. You're one of the Joneses now, whatever. So in baptism, we take the name of the Lord our God to show we're part of his covenant family now, get a new identity. And if we've been adopted through faith in Christ, that's reaffirmed, isn't it, every time we take communion, that we are in a family. Now, Paul's really clear, the passage that we just read, that the Lord's Supper is not a private act of devotion, right?

He says, doesn't he, don't do your own thing and leave everyone else behind. Have an eye on the people around you because Christ is feeding his family. We instinctively take that warning about eating and drinking unworthily as a personal warning, don't we? Partly it is, but in its context, he's talking about how we treat the other people at the table with us. Remember, you're only at the dinner table because you're part of God's family by his grace. So have that in mind as you eat and drink.

It's a reminder, thirdly, of God's call to live as Christ's people in the world. I said our Baptist brothers and sisters were right about this. We had to get it the right way round, but there is a response called for in baptism and the supper. And we thought about the ways that these signs mark us out in the world. Well, imagine taking the engagement ring or the wedding ring, but instead of behaving like someone who's married or engaged, sleeping around with strangers or having someone on the side.

[32 : 30] A ring is just a ring, but wearing it changes things, doesn't it? How we think of ourselves, how we live, how we behave. Sleeping around would be wrong with or without a ring, but with a ring, it is infinitely worse.

So being baptized and taking communion, friends, should change the way that we live and relate. Paul pointed the believers back to their baptism when they were giving in to sin, didn't he?

How can you continue in sin when you were buried with Christ in baptism? Perhaps you were too young to remember being baptized. But with every baptism you see, it should remind you of your engagement to be the Lord's. Every communion should be a reminder of the invisible wedding ring that you were wearing as one of his people. It should mark out your life as someone who's promised to Christ and called to live for him in the world.

And finally, it's a reminder of Christ's promise to be present. The sacraments are not signs on the motorway pointing to the destination. They are tokens of his presence with us now, like getting home and finding the bath run and a meal prepared.

Go and baptize disciples, he said, and I will be with you to the end of the age. Take this bread, drink this wine, and I will drink with you again in the kingdom of God.

[34 : 10] Christ himself promises to meet us in the water, the bread and the wine to bless us and wash us and feed us as we put our trust in him.

So we're not going through the motions as if this is just something we have to do until he comes back. We are meeting with our risen living savior every time we receive the sacraments.

We worship, don't we, a Jesus who is not dead and buried, but is risen living and active. And so bring these things to mind.

Whenever we celebrate the sacraments, whenever we share communion, whenever someone is baptized, remember his grace, your family, your calling, his presence.

Let's pray together that we would love these windows of his grace through which we see and hear and touch and taste the Lord Jesus.

[35 : 26] Our Lord and our God, how we thank you for meeting us in ways that we can grasp. Father, we thank you that you have created us to enjoy ye.

And Father, we thank you that you have given us baptism and the Lord's Supper, that we would grow closer to you and know you in these things. So Lord, we pray again that you would enlighten our minds and hearts.

Lord, we pray that we would love these things. And we pray that we would not receive or take them in an unworthy manner, just doing it because we do it.

But Lord, that we would love them because Christ is present with us through them. And that he blesses us in them. So bless these things to us, we pray.

We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.