LD 25; Rom. 2:25-29; Col. 2:11-15; The Place and Function of the Sacraments I. The OT Signs and their Use II. The NT Signs and their Use

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, there are a few tried and true teaching tools that teachers are familiar with. As you might know, I start many of my sermons with a question. Question and answer is a very common teaching tool which we find in our Catechism as well. The second teaching tool is repetition. To memorize something by repeating it and reciting. In this way, you commit a body of information to your memory. We find this in our reciting of the Apostles Creed every week. The third common teaching tool is that of visual aids. Many students are visual learners- so the teachers try to use props or use pictures to illustrate a point. This use of visual aids is a very powerful teaching tool. But as you know, Jesus did not give us any pictures of Himself. He does not want us to use dead images of a fictional person to stir our hearts and souls. He does not want us to make our own graven images of Him! But that does not mean that He has left us without aid! Rather, the sacraments are given to us as a living means of grace. The sacraments are the God-ordained visual aids. They are the Christ authorized means of strengthening our faith. So we are not free to come up with our own ideas of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done. Rather, we are to learn from the means and signs that He has authorized! So today we begin our consideration of the Sacraments in the Catechism. This week we will see the connection between the OT and the NT sacraments. So we consider this theme: Jesus Christ gives the sacraments to His people to strengthen their faith. As we look at both the OT and the NT we will see that there are 2 signs given under each covenant. One sign that marks the people of God for a one time use and another sign given as a meal to be shared on a repeated basis.

**I. The OT Signs and their Use**

So then, what is a sacrament? A sacrament is a visible sign and seal as QA 66 puts it. They were connected to the covenant and given to God’s people to help them understand. These are given as tokens. Like a ring exchanged between a husband and wife at the covenant of marriage, the sacraments are tokens of God’s love for us. We begin by looking at the OT signs that were given to God’s people. Remember that as QA 65 puts it, these signs are designed to confirm the preaching of the gospel. They are the gospel made visible if you will. So the meaning and purpose of the sacraments are in line with the gospel promises. It is not that there is new information being given, but rather the truth of the Word is reiterated and reinforced. Sacraments were authorized by God and they were given for continued use and they applied to the people of God. In other words, man does not invent or institute these signs. And when we look at the OT people of God, we should expect to see their continued and consistent use on the pages of Scripture. To be clear, there are a lot of signs to be found in the OT. But two major sacraments lasted through the ages. So starting with circumcision, we see that this sign was given to be a mark of the covenant. The first time we see this sign given is in Gen. 17 to Abraham. Abraham was told that this would be a lasting sign of the covenant throughout the generations. Every male is to be circumcised. As a sign, it was given to the male children born of an Israelite mother when that child was 8 days old. It was a blood ritual in which the foreskin of the baby boy would be cut off with a flint knife. It was a serious and solemn event, and there were repeated warnings given to those who refused to accept this sign. Those who were not circumcised would be cut off from the people of God because he had broken covenant. One such example is found in Ex. 4 where Moses neglected to circumcise his own son and was almost put to death for this wicked neglect of his sacred calling as a father. So this sign was to be applied to all the male children living in the context of God’s people. As a sign, it pointed to a spiritual truth. The Israelites were a special, sacred people. They were set apart by God to be a holy people. The removal of the foreskin was a visual reminder of who these people were meant to be. But the external sign was never to be an end to itself. It was a picture of a spiritual truth. As we read in Rom. 2:29, circumcision is a matter of the heart and it is performed by the Spirit. So the external sign applied to the body simply pointed to the needed reality of cleansing. The heart of a man needs to have sin removed- and that removal of sin could only be secured by the shedding of blood and the cutting off of the old ways. A true Jew was then, not just one who had received the sign. But rather, the sign pointed to the needed cleansing that the Spirit alone can provide. As you know- a person could only be circumcised once. The external sign pointed to a needed internal change- a new life that the Spirit had to give. Next, the second OT sacrament is that of Passover. Just as circumcision was instituted by God at the covenant with Abraham in Gen. 17; so the sacrament of Passover was instituted by God at the covenant made with Moses and the Israelites in Exodus 12. On the very night on which the LORD lead the Israelites out of bondage, they were to celebrate the Passover. All of the Israelites were to keep this sacred assembly. Interestingly, no male who was uncircumcised would be allowed to partake of this meal. As a meal, the Israelites would eat the body of the Passover lamb as they celebrated their deliverance from bondage. The blood of the Passover lamb had been shed and now covered the doorpost of God’s people. This meal was one of remembrance and anticipation. They would celebrate the victory and deliverance over Pharaoh, Egypt and bondage. And they would be getting ready for the journey to the promised land of rest. Here again, the Passover meal was an earthly and physical event that pointed to a spiritual reality and truth. I Cor. 5:7 clarifies that Christ is the Passover lamb who has been sacrificed. At the Passover meal, there was nourishment but also purification that was taking place. The body of the lamb and the unleavened bread would be food that would sustain the Israelites for their journey ahead. But in order to prepare for the Passover, careful examination would take place to find and remove any yeast or leaven. As Paul also states in I Cor. 5- the leaven was a sign of sin- of malice and evil. This leaven or yeast is to be removed so that we might celebrate with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. So even the bread that was used was a sign of the removal of sin and the dedication to holy living. So those who participated in the Passover were being prepared to celebrate the coming Passover Lamb- even Jesus Christ- who takes away the sins of the world. It would be the body and blood of Jesus that would secure the necessary cleansing and deliverance that these OT sacraments were pointing to.

**II. The NT Signs and their Use**

Now that we have had a brief overview of these two OT sacraments, we continue by considering the NT sacraments given to us by Jesus Christ. These 2 OT sacraments were shared by the people of God. Even if preparatory, there was one sacrament that was a one-time sign of membership and another sacrament that was for repeated fellowship and communion. So lets turn to Col. 2 where we find baptism and circumcision together. Col. 2:11- in Christ we were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision- which is a putting off of the flesh. So Jesus cuts off or puts to death the old man- and buries this old man in the grave. The old man is drowned in the water of baptism- v. 12 says- and a new man is raised to life. So baptism is sign of the same spiritual truth as circumcision. The old man put to death and the new man raised to life- the sinful nature is drowned in the water and the new man washed and made clean. So the spiritual truth of baptism and circumcision have this in common- putting off the old and the cleansing of the heart. So baptism is a sign that we are new people. It is a mark shared by the people of God that signifies a new identity and a new heart. It manifests this truth- these are the people of God who are joined to Christ and to His people. Baptism sets a certain people apart from the world. New birth- or regeneration- is the spiritual truth that the water of baptism puts on display. Next, we see that the Lord’s Supper shares a similar design and purpose with the Passover meal. The Lord’s Supper or communion is designed to feed and nourish the congregation of Christ. This Supper is to give us strength for the journey ahead. Just as we need physical food on a regular basis, we need to be spiritual fed by the body and blood of Jesus on a regular basis. Perhaps we can make a link between baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism marks the beginning of new life- the Lord’s Supper marks the retaining and growth of this life. Just as we are born again once which is followed by a life of growing in grace and knowledge- so we are baptized once followed by a life of fellowship and feeding at the Lord’s Supper. I Cor. 11 says that the Lord’s Supper is designed for a corporate and spiritual purpose. It is not just a normal meal of food that you could have at home. Rather, it is a spiritual event designed to take place in the context of the community of Christ. It is a sacred meal of remembering with God’s people. But it is also a joyful communion in celebration of the new covenant we share in His blood!

To be clear, there are some differences between the OT sacraments and the NT sacraments. Circumcision was experienced only by the boys- where now baptism is for the entire family. Both circumcision and Passover were bloody rites and rituals. But having received the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, no other blood needs to be shed. The OT sacraments were temporary and passed away when Jesus Christ instituted the New. But the meaning carries on- that these sacraments are designed to strengthen our faith so that we better understand the promises of the gospel. Paul says in I Cor. 10 in reference to the OT people of Israel, that they too ate the same spiritual food and drink. In other words- the OT saints were partaking of the same spiritual truth as we do today! So the purpose of both the LS and Baptism are this- to strengthen our faith! Just as the OT sacraments would not replace Christ- so the NT sacraments are designed to lead us to Christ! As QA 67 puts it, both the gospel and the holy sacraments teach us that our entire salvation rests on Christ and His one sacrifice. So the sacraments are never to distract us but rather point us to Christ! These are to strengthen our faith- as we remember and receive. The only way they benefit us is if they are accompanied by and received with faith. In other words, the sacraments are not like a spiritual vending machine where we put in our money and get the desired product. We don’t just push a button and get the reward. Press here to grow in grace and holiness. To be sure, the sacraments are means of grace, but they must be received and used with faith! As our form puts it, faith is the mouth by which we partake of Christ. Both life and death are here found. In baptism the old man dies. In the Lord’s Supper, the grapes are pressed and the grain crushed. Sins need to be put to death- and this is what Christ does by His shed blood. But there is also new life found! Washing and being made clean at baptism. Nourishment and revitalized life at the Lord’s Supper. Jesus’ body is our true food and His blood our true drink! So let us all learn to receive and partake of these means- as we grow in our dependence and trust in Christ all the more. As covenantal sacraments, we are to receive and participate in these. They are to be used exclusively by God’s people.

To conclude, the sacraments in the OT and in the NT have a shared focus. Helping God’s people understand the promise of the gospel. These are the God-ordained visual aids- teaching tools by which we can understand and appreciate the truth! Jesus Christ gives the sacraments to His people to strengthen their faith. So circumcise your heart- wash and be clean, take and eat, remember and believe! Do this and you will be saved!