

USE YOUR ALLUSION:
HOW REFORMED SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY MAKES SENSE
OF SACRAMENTAL LANGUAGE IN JOHN 3 AND 6

EUGENE R. SCHLESINGER

I. *Introduction*

The numerous enigmatic phrases that issue from the lips of the Johannine Jesus frequently leave his interlocutors perplexed. These include: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5); and “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:53-54). But the perplexity caused by these statements has extended far beyond their effect on Jesus’ original audiences. Do these pronouncements constitute references to the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist? If so, how are we to understand these references? What are we to make of their strong, even unyielding language? How should they affect (or be affected by) other doctrinal commitments such as justification by grace alone through faith alone?

In this article, I will first establish a basis for adopting a qualified sacramental reading of these passages, one that recognizes the presence of sacramental language and concepts while also recognizing that they may not be the main point. Having done this, I will demonstrate that a Reformed sacramental theology is particularly suited to these passages. It withstands the most common criticisms of sacramental interpretations of the passages. Further, it integrates the insights of non-sacramental interpretations within a sacramental framework. The resulting interpretation will, I hope, provide a more integrated view of each discourse as a whole.

II. *Establishing a Sacramental Reading of the Passages*

Biblical scholars have had a difficult time ascertaining the Evangelist’s precise view of the sacraments. Is he anti-sacramental (as evidenced by the lack of institution narrative), or are there hidden sacraments waiting to be discovered in every word or act of Christ? Several options have emerged, ranging from anti-sacramentalism (e.g., Bultmann), to sacramental maximalism (Cullmann), with

Eugene R. Schlesinger is a Ph.D. student in systematic theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis. The title of this article is a reference to an episode of the television program Arrested Development, which alluded to the album Use Your Illusion by the band Guns N’ Roses.

stops all along the spectrum in between.¹ Prudence dictates that before erecting the edifice of a sacramental interpretation of these passages, we first clear away the debris of objections to such a reading. The arguments against finding in John 3:5 and 6:25-59 references to baptism and the Eucharist respectively basically hinge on two points: the historical setting and the strength of language.² First, in the context of Jesus' public ministry, it makes little sense for him to refer to sacraments that have not yet been established; his audiences could not have understood his meaning.³ So, in the case of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, attempts are made to explain the passage in terms that Nicodemus would have been able to understand. Any contemporary Jew well versed in Scripture (such as Nicodemus) and familiar with passages in the OT such as Ezek 36:25-27, which closely associates water and the Holy Spirit, would have understood Christ's words as pointing to the need for cleansing, purification, and renewal from God.⁴ And in the case of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse, they would have understood eating and drinking his flesh and blood as vivid metaphors for faith.⁵

The second principal objection to a sacramental understanding of these passages is that the language employed by Christ is deemed too strong, at odds not only with the overall biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, but also with Jesus' own distinct emphasis in the discourse: to point his hearers to their need for a salvation stemming from divine agency and rooted in his crucifixion and resurrection (John 3:6-8, 15; 6:32-33, 40, 51, 54,

¹ Frederick W. Guyette, "Sacramentality in the Fourth Gospel: Conflicting Interpretations," *Ecclesiology* 3 (2007): 235-50. I am indebted to Guyette's article for providing an excellent starting point for surveying the literature.

² Linda L. Belleville, "'Born of Water and Spirit': John 3:5," *TJ* 1 (1980): 125-41; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 702, 973, 990; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2d ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 963-64. The last two theologians depend upon biblical scholars for their arguments. Therefore, in what follows, I shall not cite them unless dealing specifically with a point they raise.

³ Belleville, "Water and Spirit," 129; Carson, *John*, 192; Köstenberger, *John*, 123, 217; Morris, *John*, 217, 352-53.

⁴ Belleville, "Water and Spirit," 134-41; Carson, *John*, 192-95; Morris, *John*, 218-19; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, 1-12* (AB 29; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 137-41. However, Brown also advocates a secondary, sacramental line of interpretation, for the reasons I will argue below (*ibid.*, 141-44). It matters little to my argument whether there is one birth in view (born of water and Spirit), or two (born of water, born of Spirit). All I intend is to establish that the complex of imagery employed by Jesus would be associated with baptism.

⁵ Carson, *John*, 278-97; Köstenberger, *John*, 215-17; Morris, *John*, 378. Others, who recognize sacramental referents in the passages, agree with this basic point: Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 2:64, 68; Brown, *John*, 272 (Brown sees the first half of the discourse in this light [with secondary eucharistic overtones], but the second half as exclusively eucharistic [272-94]); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 297; C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 43-44; R. Wade Paschal, Jr., "Sacramental Symbolism and Physical Imagery in the Gospel of John," *TynBul* 32 (1981): 164-66.

63).⁶ Jesus' point is to drive home that salvation is found in him alone, and not through human action of any sort (including ecclesial rites). Introducing sacraments at this juncture would seem to undermine this crucial point.

I shall begin my response to these objections with the first, reserving my treatment of the second for a subsequent section. There are indeed good reasons for understanding Jesus' words in these passages as sacramental, or at least as sacramentally influenced. First, *prima facie* in both cases, the imagery strongly suggests that some reference to the sacraments is in view. For this reason Rudolf Bultmann concluded that the reference in John 3:5 to rebirth by water and Spirit is a reference to baptism, and therefore an interpolation by an "ecclesiastical redactor." Similarly, when Jesus begins telling the Jews at Capernaum that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, in 6:51, Bultmann saw a eucharistic referent as unavoidable and once more resorted to his ecclesiastical redactor.⁷ That a scholar feels forced to explain away the sacramental wording of these passages as "ecclesiastical interpolations" is telling.

Further, consider the effect these passages would have had on their first auditors, the Johannine community (which I assume to be an apostolically founded church, practicing both sacraments). Christians hear Jesus associating rebirth, cleansing, the Holy Spirit, and water. Given the fact that the earliest Christians associated all of these images and realities with baptism (Matt 3:11-17 and par.; John 1:29-34; Acts 1:4-5; 2:38; 10:44-48; 19:1-7; 22:16; Rom 6:3-5; Col 2:12),⁸ how could they not think of their own baptisms?⁹ D. A. Carson dismisses this argument, saying, "The entire view seems to rest on an unarticulated prejudice that every mention of water evoked instant recognition in the minds of first century readers that the real reference was baptism."¹⁰ But is this really the case? Carson seems to ignore the fact that this is not just a reference to water, but water associated with rebirth and the Holy Spirit. First-century auditors would most certainly have thought of their baptism, a fact of which John¹¹ must have been aware,¹²

⁶ Carson, *John*, 192, 297-98; Köstenberger, *John*, 123-25, 215; Morris, *John*, 218-19, 374; Brown, *John*, 145, 291; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:370-71, 2:55; Barrett, *Essays on John*, 44; Paschal, "Sacramental Symbolism," 159-61, 166.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 138, 218-19.

⁸ In this list I have only included explicit references to baptism, leaving aside passages like Titus 3:5; Eph 5:26; and 1 Pet 1:3, where others have also detected baptismal references.

⁹ So also Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (trans. A. Stewart Todd and James B. Torrance; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 75.

¹⁰ Carson, *John*, 192.

¹¹ In the wake of nineteenth-century higher criticism it has become nearly impossible in scholarly writing to simply and without cumbersome arguments refer to the authors of books by the names traditionally (or canonically) attributed to them. By referring to the author as "John," I am not attempting to answer questions in the provenance of higher criticism. This is not an uncritical attribution, but rather a postcritical one. My concern is with the canonical text, not its prehistory or origins. I leave that to biblical scholars and commentators. While I have no objections to the traditional attribution of the Fourth Gospel to the Apostle John, questions of authorship neither help nor hinder my argument in this article.

¹² Brown, *John*, 141-44.

betraying his sympathy with the association. This need not mean that baptism is the main or primary point, only that there is a deliberate association therewith.

Additionally, this objection only works if one presupposes a radical discontinuity between John the Baptist's baptism and Christian baptism, which I do not believe the NT will sustain. While there are obvious discontinuities between the two rites, they remain basically connected. If anything, we ought to expect that Christian baptism will be richer, fuller than John's. In that case, many of these associations (purification, water, Holy Spirit) were already being forged relative to baptism. John the Baptist proclaims the One coming who is mightier than he, and announces the Holy Spirit's descent upon Jesus at his baptism (1:29-34). There is no reason Nicodemus could not have been connecting the conceptual dots. Therefore, the objection fails.

Similarly, an audience which regularly partook of a meal wherein Jesus identified bread with his body and wine with his blood, and heard Jesus identifying himself as the Bread of Life—expounding his flesh as true food and his blood as true drink, and insisting that his flesh and blood be eaten and drunk—would most certainly have understood the one in light of the other.¹³ As evidence, consider John Calvin's treatment of the passage. Though in his commentary he denies that the sacrament is in view, his treatment of the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is replete with references and allusions to this discourse.¹⁴ Despite exegetical commitments against it, for him the association was simply unavoidable. So it must have been for the earliest audience of the Gospel, who would have had far less reason than Calvin to deny such a reading. Likewise, allusions to Israel's travails in the desert (grumbling) and comparisons between Jesus and the provision of manna would have invited further eucharistic associations, because such manna-Eucharist typology was commonplace in early Christianity (see 1 Cor 10:4).¹⁵ The Passover setting of the discourse (see 6:4) provides further confirmation.¹⁶ I suspect that all this is intentional on John's part, but even if it were not, this would not be the first time early Christian interpreters found in the Sacred Scriptures a rich constellation of meanings beyond the original author's horizons.

That the parallels were intentional is borne out by Joachim Jeremias's comparison of the structure and content of Jesus' statement in John 6:51, ὁ ἄρτος δὲ ὃν ἐγὼ δώσω ἢ σὰρξ μου ἐστὶν ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ζωῆς, with the words of

¹³ Brown, *John*, 272-74; Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:60-61; Barrett, *Essays on John*, 42-44; Barrett, *John*, 297, 299; Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 94. Carson (*John*, 297-98) and Köstenberger (*John*, 217) also acknowledge this fact.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (trans. William Pringle), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.ix.html>, see comment on 6:53 (accessed January 24, 2012); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.17.1-34. On this see Eleanor B. Hanna, "Biblical Interpretation and Sacramental Practice: John Calvin's Interpretation of John 6:51-58," *Worship* 73 (1999): 211-30.

¹⁵ Brown, *John*, 274; Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:60.

¹⁶ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 297.

institution recorded in 1 Cor 11:24, Τοῦτό μου ἔστιν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν.¹⁷ Although some suggest that the use of σάρξ instead of σῶμα—the word typically used in connection with the Supper—contraindicates this view,¹⁸ the Aramaic בשר could be translated by either.¹⁹ So the objection is not fatal to the position, particularly given the strong conceptual overlap between sacrament and discourse. After all, Jesus does not merely talk about eating his body as the Bread from Heaven, but also about drinking his blood. What started as a rumination upon the miracle of the loaves and Jesus as the unique giver of revelation and life has expanded beyond bread to encompass the other sacramental element and action.²⁰ I do not suggest that this moves beyond Jesus' unique role. Instead, I suggest that the conceptual expansion shows that John wants us to think of this very role in association with the Eucharist.

Thus far we have considered John's intentions and their calculated effect on his community. In considering Jesus' intent, the argument is further strengthened. Jesus must have given forethought to the sacrament before instituting it.²¹ So it is not at all unreasonable to suppose that here, a year before its inception, the Supper is in his mind as he uses the *exact* same metaphor in this discourse. At the very least, Jesus would have remembered this as he instituted the Lord's Supper, as would have John (who certainly had both in memory as he composed his Gospel). If Jesus had this discourse in mind when instituting the Supper, then surely it is valid to interpret the one in light of the other. Even if, as R. Wade Paschal argues, "The thrust of this passage is really to subordinate the eucharistic symbols to Jesus," this point still holds.²² Obviously, people have been making the association for centuries, and there is no reason to think that John's intended audience would not have as well. Instead, the suggestion is that the imagery used is employed to produce a calculated effect.

In many ways, this argument is the mirror image of the one offered in the first objection: that we must take into account what Jesus' interlocutors could have understood. Without denying that consideration, I posit that we must also take into account what John's first auditors would have understood. Indeed, given Jesus' propensity for making statements that could only be understood after his resurrection (2:18-22; 7:32-36, 37-39; 8:21-22),²³ one *could* argue that we should privilege the first Christians' understanding *over* Nicodemus and the Jews at

¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 107-8.

¹⁸ Carson, *John*, 278; Köstenberger, *John*, 215.

¹⁹ So Brown, *John*, 285; Morris, *John*, 375.

²⁰ So Schnackenberg, *John*, 61.

²¹ So Morris, *John*, 354-55. Grudem does not quite say this, but suggests that if Jesus wants his auditors to feed on him, he must have in mind a means of their doing so (*Systematic Theology*, 990).

²² Paschal, "Sacramental Symbolism," 166.

²³ James W. Voelz, "The Discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6: Is It Eucharistic?," *Concordia Journal* 15 (1989): 29-37. Carson argues that these opaque sayings of the Lord are usually such that "his utterance is plain enough in its ostensible historical context once what he has been referring to is made clear after the resurrection" (*John*, 278). However, this seems to be a stretch. In fact, Köstenberger notes that language such as κύριος and εὐχαριστέω in 6:23 indicate a post-Easter perspective anyway (*John*, 206).

Capernaum. In many ways, this is the Gospel's point: to record the life of Jesus, a life which only makes sense in the full light of Easter. It should not surprise us if Jesus' original hearers could not understand the full import of his words. Indeed, it should not surprise us if they were not meant to. We should assume that post-resurrection developments shed light on and provide the necessary framework for interpreting the life and ministry of Jesus. I do not want to leave the historical setting behind, but in dealing with the canonical Gospel, written to guide and encourage the early church, we must also consider its effect on its intended audience.²⁴ Therefore, identifying Ezek 36:25-27 as part of the conceptual background for the statement in 3:5 does not and cannot do away with a sacramental interpretation. The complex of imagery would have simply led early Christians to either understand Ezekiel in light of their baptism, their baptism in light of Ezekiel, or, better, both at once. To borrow from semiotics, we are dealing with connotations, rather than denotations.²⁵ This is how allusions work. It is not so much a rigid, one-dimensional identification, but rather an evocative, polyvalent association. Christian baptism takes up all the Bible's many images of water and purification and weaves a conceptual tapestry, all of which is at work—in varying degrees—within the reflection of the baptized.²⁶

Thus far, then, I have offered counterarguments to one of the two primary contentions against a sacramental reading of John 3:5 and the Bread of Life Discourse: that such a meaning would be lost on Jesus' interlocutors. I have posited that looking to the horizon of expectations of the canonical Gospel's first audience provides us with strong reasons to understand at least some sacramental reference in the language. Indeed, D. A. Carson, who is generally quite critical of interpreting the passages sacramentally, is willing to recognize secondary allusions to baptism in ch. 3 and the Eucharist in ch. 6, writing:

None of this means there is no allusion in these verses to the Lord's table. But such allusions as exist prompt the thoughtful reader to look behind the eucharist, to that to which the eucharist itself points. In other words, eucharistic allusions are set in the broader framework of Jesus' saving work, in particular his cross-work. Moreover, by the repeated stress in this discourse on Jesus' initiative, no room is left for a magical understanding of the Lord's table that would place God under constraint: submit to the rite, and win eternal life! . . . In short, John 6 does not directly speak of the eucharist; it does expose the true meaning of the Lord's supper as clearly as any passage of Scripture.²⁷

²⁴ Carson objects to this, arguing that the Gospel's stated purpose in 20:30-31 is evangelistic (*John*, 280). However, very similar sentiments are expressed in 1 John 5:13, which is undoubtedly addressed to Christians. It is not that John has no evangelistic intent, but narrowing the Gospel's scope to "evangelistic" is misleading, as the need for faith in Jesus Christ is an ongoing reality in the life of Christians.

²⁵ See, e.g., Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2007), 137-43.

²⁶ An excellent example of this associative tapestry at work is the "Great Flood Prayer" from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and Luther's Baptismal Liturgy. Biblical references like 1 Pet 3:18-22 and 1 Cor 10:1-5 show that such sacramental imagination was at work even in the NT writers.

²⁷ Carson, *John*, 196, 295, 296-97.

The text just quoted also brings up the other primary objection to such a reading: that the language is too strong for the referent to be sacramental, placing a sacramental reading not only at odds with Protestant theological commitments to salvation *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, but also with the basic thrust of the passages in which the references themselves are found. In order to address this objection, I shall have to turn to some of the distinctives of a Reformed sacramentology.

III. *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: Reformed Sacramental Theology*

By a Reformed sacramentology I mean one that is basically faithful to the sacramental theology articulated in the Reformed confessions (The Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Standards, and I would include the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion). These documents reflect the Calvinist rather than Zwinglian stream of the Reformed tradition. Michael Horton provides an excellent contemporary restatement of this position, emphasizing that, in a Reformed understanding of the sacraments, covenantal relations rather than metaphysics are of primary importance.²⁸ Hence, while the Reformed can express their views in scholastic terms, this is not their primary ambit.²⁹ And within their native environment, the sacraments serve as promissory and confirmatory signs.³⁰ They are signs, and as signs they signify.³¹ And a particular semiotic is in view here. The Reformed view neither replaces the sign with the thing signified (as in Roman Catholic transubstantiation), nor confuses the two (as in Lutheran consubstantiation), nor separates the two (as in Zwinglian memorialism), but rather relates the two closely, yet analogically.

The signs communicate what they signify.³² The choice of the word “communicate” is not accidental. Nicholas Wolterstorff draws from speech act theory to explicate the way this works. In speech act theory, a locution refers to an utterance; an illocution denotes what one intends by said utterance (e.g., promising, commanding, threatening); and a perlocution is the resultant effect in those to whom the utterance is directed. In the sacrament, God’s locutionary act is the ritual action (offering bread and wine, or washing a body with water). The illocutionary act is to reassure participants of his promise enacted in the Son, particularly his death and resurrection. Meanwhile, the perlocutionary act is that we are actually so assured, our faith strengthened and nourished by Christ and him crucified.³³

²⁸ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 778.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 781.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 778-79. So also Calvin, *Inst.* 4.14.1-5; Belgic Confession 33; Heidelberg Catechism 66; Westminster Confession 27.1; Westminster Larger Catechism 162; Thirty-Nine Articles 25.

³¹ This recognition of the “significance” of the sacraments has also enjoyed a renaissance through the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet in works such as *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2001); and *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1995); as well as Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ: Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 65-69.

³² Horton, *Christian Faith*, 812.

³³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Sacrament as Action, not Presence,” in *Christ: The Sacramental Word*:

"Therefore," writes Horton, "the focus is not on substances and accidents or the way in which Christ is (or is not) present either as or with the elements. The issue is what God is doing with and through these signs."³⁴ Through them God enables us to grasp more deeply, by faith, the Person and work of Christ. This avoids the criticism of a "magical" view of the sacraments. Though there is a close union between the sign and the thing signified, this is not based upon magic, but upon use and performance.³⁵ In fact, insinuations of "magical" views of the sacraments are unfair and inaccurate in just about any case. The usual culprit for such a characterization is Roman Catholicism's *ex opere operato* conception of sacramental efficacy. Yet, properly understood, *ex opere operato* should not be conceived of as magical. It is a logical deduction from certain ecclesiological and christological considerations.³⁶ And it is balanced out by the doctrine of *ex opere operantis*, and the recognition that faith is required for a "fruitful" sacrament.³⁷ Reformed Protestants disagree with these conceptions of the relationship between Christ and his church and for this reason disagree with this conception of sacramental efficacy. But dismissing this view as "magic" is unfair and unhelpful. Indeed, recent Roman Catholic theology has noted the danger of *ex opere operato* degenerating into magic, and has sought to avoid this pitfall.³⁸

With regard to the concern about salvation's ground in divine rather than human (even ecclesial) action, Horton reminds us, "The contrast [in Paul] between baptism and works righteousness points up that the sacraments cannot be treated as human works, much less attempts to attain righteousness before God."³⁹ This is because "the reality that baptism communicates must be embraced by faith."⁴⁰ This helps to clarify my point above about allusions forming an evocative and polyvalent semiotic tapestry. In fact, it is good for Christians to think of their baptism when they hear of purification and of new birth, and vice-versa. Such associations reinforce the sacrament's efficacy, which is empowered by the Holy Spirit and received by faith.

Summarizing Calvin's doctrine of the Supper, which may be expanded to his doctrine of sacrament in general, B. A. Gerrish writes, "*The gift is Jesus Christ himself.* This Calvin never tires of saying. The gift is not to be identified with the benefits (*bona*) of Christ; first and foremost the gift is Jesus Christ himself, who is their source (*fons*)."⁴¹ Precisely because we deal with the Person of Christ himself rather than simply his work, in the Supper we are fed with his body and blood because, as

Incarnation, Sacrament, and Poetry (ed. David Brown and Ann Loades; London: SPCK, 1996), 110-14. I am indebted to Michael Horton for drawing this essay to my attention (Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008], 108-9).

³⁴ Horton, *Christian Faith*, 783.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 780-82.

³⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Sacrament of Encounter*, 63-79, 82-89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-40; Chauvet, *Sacraments*, 94; Brown, *John*, 292.

³⁸ Chauvet, *Sacraments*, xiii-xxv.

³⁹ Horton, *Christian Faith*, 790.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 791.

⁴¹ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 136, citing Calvin, *Traité de la Cène* (OS 1.507; TT 2.169-70); emphasis original.

the Word who became flesh, he is inseparably united with this body and blood and we cannot have access to Christ apart from them.⁴² Yet it is important to remember that for Calvin, the mechanism of reception is faith. The sacraments function to communicate what they signify precisely because they are communicatory and confirmatory. They deliver “the clearest promises,”⁴³ and it is by faith that these promises are grasped. Hence, the criticism that the benefits that would be attributed to the sacraments, were they in view, are elsewhere attributed to faith⁴⁴ does not stick because the way the sacraments deliver this benefit is by faith.

Therefore, sacramental language and imagery does not obscure the passages’ emphasis and focus upon the Person and work of Christ. Carson speaks of “thoughtful reader[s] [looking] behind the eucharist, to that to which the eucharist itself points.”⁴⁵ And yet that’s *always* the point. In the sacraments we are always referred beyond the signs to the things they signify. Likewise, Carson notes that the new birth spoken of in John 3 is, throughout the passage, tied to the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ And yet, far from being an obstacle to a sacramentally informed interpretation, this interweaving dovetails rather nicely with it. The sacraments deliver the promises of God, enacted by and grounded upon the death and resurrection of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and received by faith. This is the case in *any* sacramental theology, but it is a hallmark of the Reformed doctrine.⁴⁷

This last point, that the sacraments are grounded in the work of Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and received by faith, also helps clear up another misconception. The Reformed tradition eschews any spirit-matter or nature-grace dualism.⁴⁸ This means that when the Reformed talk of a spiritual presence of Christ, we do not mean that such presence is imaginary, ethereal, or even non-physical (though, in point of fact, it is this last). Instead, a spiritual presence means a presence empowered by the Holy Spirit. Hence, Calvin writes of “the secret working of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. To [Calvin’s opponents] Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence!”⁴⁹ This understanding of “spiritual” is in accord with the NT’s usage elsewhere (e.g., 1 Cor 2:9-16; 12:1-11; 15:35-49). Thus, when critics urge that the passages in question cannot be understood sacramentally because they refer to “spiritual” realities,⁵⁰ they betray a faulty

⁴² Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 136; Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.8-10; Wolterstorff, “Action not Presence,” 113.

⁴³ Calvin, *Inst.* 4.14.5.

⁴⁴ Carson, *John*, 297; Köstenberger, *John*, 215-17; Morris, *John*, 352-53.

⁴⁵ Carson, *John*, 297.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, 77-78; Horton, *Christian Faith*, 782; Wolterstorff, “Presence, not Action,” 111-12; Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 206-9; Schillebeeckx, *Sacrament of Encounter*, 13-82; Chauvet, *Sacraments*, viii-xxv.

⁴⁸ Horton, *Christian Faith*, 35-47, 82-89, 140-50; Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 20-46.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.31.

⁵⁰ E.g., Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 793; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 1109.

understanding of the concept, one that feeds unhealthy dualisms. Surprisingly, when Carson turns to his positive construction regarding rebirth by water and Spirit, he argues that rather than a reference to the Holy Spirit, we should understand this to refer to “the impartation of God’s nature as ‘spirit.’”⁵¹ To Reformed ears *this* will sound problematic and, indeed, “magical.” But a Reformed sacramentology is able to avoid this, and its underlying dualism, by attributing agency to the Holy Spirit, efficacy to faith, and avoiding the introduction of any new substance, nature, or essence.

A Reformed sacramental theology also avoids confining salvation’s blessings to the sacraments. Because Jesus Christ is the content of the sacraments, and faith the means of reception, it follows that their benefit can be enjoyed outside the sacraments. In treating Calvin’s eucharistic theology, Gerrish concludes that his entire theology is eucharistic. Feeding upon Christ simply is the Christian life. It is not confined to the sacrament, but it is nevertheless realized in the sacrament.⁵² Therefore, one cannot advance an argument against the sacramental interpretation that it confines salvation, reception of Christ’s benefits, or the work of the Spirit to the sacraments. This is simply not the case. Even the thoroughgoing sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church does not argue the absolute necessity of the sacraments for the work of the Spirit but allows for extra-sacramental grace.⁵³ The Reformed scheme confines saving grace still less so, making the sacraments confirmatory seals of what is otherwise enjoyed by faith all the time: “Believe and you have eaten.”⁵⁴

As we have seen, a Reformed doctrine of the sacraments can both answer and avoid the criticisms advanced by those who resist a sacramental interpretation of John 3 and 6. Working along promissory lines, it avoids any “magical” conception of the sacraments. With Christ as its content and faith as its means of reception, it avoids obscuring the clear emphases on the Person and work of Christ (as well as any sort of works righteousness). And because it allows that the grace communicated in the sacraments can be received apart from them, it avoids charges of restricting the sovereign freedom of God. The Spirit can still blow where he wills.

IV. *Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Integration and Tying up Loose Ends*

The foregoing demonstrates that reading these texts in a way informed by Reformed sacramental theology easily subsumes the insights of non-sacramental readings of these texts.⁵⁵ Just as non-sacramental critics urge, Jesus Christ’s Person

⁵¹ Carson, *John*, 195; Belleville, “Water and Spirit,” 138.

⁵² Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 21-76. Hence Calvin, after denying that John 6 refers to the Eucharist, writes, “And yet, at the same time, I acknowledge that there is nothing said here that is not figuratively represented, and actually bestowed on believers, in the Lord’s Supper; and Christ even intended that the holy Supper should be, as it were, a seal and confirmation of this sermon” (Calvin, *Gospel According to John*, comment on 6:54 [accessed January 25, 2012]).

⁵³ Schillebeeckx, *Sacrament of Encounter*, 143-47; Chauvet, *Sacraments*, xxi-xxiii; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1257-71.

⁵⁴ Saint Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jn.* 25.12.

⁵⁵ My language in this section borrows slightly from Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 93.

and work are front and center, flanked by the operation of the Holy Spirit and the importance of responsive faith. But while nothing from the other readings is lost, something important is gained: given that there are indeed sacramental allusions in these texts, a Reformed sacramentology enables us to actually talk about them—and talk about them we must because people will inevitably recognize the connection to the sacraments—while also keeping the main thing the main thing. In this sense, my proposal need not be at odds with those who, like Carson and Köstenberger, recognize sacramental allusions at a secondary level.⁵⁶ Instead, one could understand my proposal as a way we might talk about these allusions while also doing justice to the passages' overall thrust (hence my title: you can use your allusion too). As Louis-Marie Chauvet notes regarding John 6, "What we have is a discourse whose *object* is not the Eucharist as such, but the identity of Jesus and faith in him. It remains that if the object is not eucharistic, the *language* is, permeated through and through by the symbolism."⁵⁷ To acknowledge the sacramental connections and simply stop there fails to do full justice to the texts, or to the divine or human author's intention for them.

A Reformed doctrine of the sacraments allows us to account for the robust and realistic language used in these accounts without compromising other doctrinal commitments or surrendering the integrity of the passages' message. The sacraments are conveying and communicating a promised reality, and they function by *strengthening faith in the promises*. This means we can and should expect a high degree of realism in sacramental language. How else could we expect them to nurture faith? This seems to be the logic of the Belgic Confession, which, after a series of qualifications asserts, "We do not err" in affirming that "the proper and natural body, and proper blood of Christ" are eaten and drunk in the Eucharist.⁵⁸

This viewpoint also allows us to better integrate our understandings of these passages. As already noted, Reformed sacramentology is heavily christological, and its efficient agent is faith. Therefore, rather than pitting faith against the sacramental, the two are recognized as coordinated. The object of faith is Christ. The content of the sacraments is Christ. And faith in Christ can be given material expression. Therefore the "faith-Christ" components of the discourses fit together seamlessly with the "sacramental" components—the same theme predominates in both. Therefore they need not and ought not be pried apart. So a Reformed sacramental reading of the passages provides us with one further element to cement the sometimes contested unity of the pericopes.

V. Conclusion

It is an inescapable fact that Christian readers (or those familiar with Christian practice) have been, are, and will be reminded of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist as they read about rebirth by water and Spirit in John 3:5 and eating

⁵⁶ Carson, *John*, 196, 295; Köstenberger, *John*, 217.

⁵⁷ Chauvet, *Sacraments*, 50.

⁵⁸ Belgic Confession 35.

the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus, the Bread of Life, in John 6:25-60. The Evangelist's choice to embed these words in a context where they are associated with the same complex of imagery with which the sacraments are associated elsewhere in the NT and in Christian theological reflection suggests that this "remembrance" is deliberate, or at least expected, and therefore approved (though perhaps critically). This need not mean that the primary referent in the passages be sacramental practice. Indeed, even within sacramental practice the primary referent is never the practice, but rather he to whom the sacraments point: the risen Lord Jesus who bestows all his benefits.

I have proposed that a Reformed doctrine of the sacraments—premised upon signifying and sealing the promises of God enacted by the Person and work of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and received by faith—allows us to discuss satisfactorily the sacramental connections in these passages while also (1) keeping the Lord Jesus and his work on the cross the primary referent; (2) safeguarding other doctrinal, particularly soteriological, commitments; (3) avoiding "magical" views of the sacraments, or "confining" God's grace and action to church practice; and (4) better integrating our understanding of these passages.

The main shortcoming is that this theology of sacrament is not widely held, curtailing its usefulness in this connection. In some rare occasions, Evangelicals might hold to a higher sacramentology, but more often than not, considerably lower views abound, even among the Reformed. I would not go so far as to suggest that the only way to understand rightly the Johannine passages is to adopt a Reformed sacramentology. Instead, I proffer it as a suggestion for how we might discuss the sacramental allusions present in the passages. And I further suggest that it does the job admirably, tying together the passages in a most satisfying manner and avoiding the criticisms of those who eschew sacramental readings of the texts. This explanatory power ought to earn a fresh hearing for Reformed sacramental theology. This is especially appropriate as the last several years have seen quite a resurgence of Reformed soteriology among those who have been dubbed the Young, Restless, and Reformed, who tend to appropriate Calvin's doctrine of salvation while leaving behind his conceptions of church and sacrament.⁵⁹ Yet Calvin's thought, and the Reformed tradition in general, extends far beyond the so-called "five points," providing a churchly, sacramental form of Christianity.⁶⁰ So I finally suggest that, given the demonstrated utility (or dare I say, efficacy) of Reformed sacramentology in connection with these biblical passages, the time is ripe for a complementary resurgence in Calvin's doctrine of sacrament as well.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Documented in Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

⁶⁰ See Richard A. Muller, "How Many Points?," *CTJ* 28 (1993): 425-33; Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*; James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

⁶¹ I am indebted to Andrew T. Alwine for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Copyright of Westminster Theological Journal is the property of Westminster Theological Seminary and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.