

AGAINST THE CHURCH

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Douglas Wilson

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This book is for my friends at The Calvinist International.
Steven and Peter, may you continue to stand for the church
by standing against so much within the church.

CONTENTS



Introduction	1
Part One: Against the Church	
The Bride of Christ is a Hot Mess	7
Against Liturgy	11
Against the Sacraments	23
Against Infant Anything	29
Against Tradition	39
Against Systematics	51
Against Doctrine	61
For the New Birth	67
Part Two: Background Assumptions	
Grace Has a Backbone	83
That Old Devil Dualism	93
Part Three: The Father Principle	
Life in the Regeneration	103
One Vast Boneyard	109
Generation and Regeneration	115
Father Transplants	119

God's Phonics Program	125
The Holy Spirit's Commonplace Book	131
Every Atom Superglued in Place	137
Ugly Dies	143
Speaking Biblically	147
In Summary	151

Part Four: Doctrinal Leftovers

An Evangelical Oddity	157
Regeneration Defined Once More	159
A Brief History of Evangelicalism	167
What Is An Evangelical?	175
Catholic Evangelicalism	179
Apostasy and the New Birth	185
A Brief Defense of Warfield	191
A Testimony	197

Epilogue: Break, Blow, Burn	201
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Appendix: Biting the Left Hind Leg	205
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INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK HAS FOUR SECTIONS. The first lays out the case against the church, both generally and in some particulars. After having made all sorts of people angry, the second section seeks to address certain background assumptions that go into these discussions—philosophical assumptions about human nature, dualism, and lots of other cool stuff. The third section is “The Father Principle,” in which I discuss the source of life in the heart, the family, the church, and the world. The conclusion of the matter is where I seek to bring everything full circle, and lay out the case for the church. But if you look carefully, you will see that it is only possible to be for the church in this effectual way if you begin by mastering the case against the church.

When Peter Leithart wrote his book *Against Christianity*, he was addressing the very real problem of abstract theological idolatries. The modern man, ever since Descartes, has liked making idols out of intellectual abstractions. Leithart’s fine book was a pointed stick jabbed into one eye of that great idol Religiosity, while this particular stick of mine, suitably sharpened by the editors, is intended for the other eye. While abstractions make fine idols, it would be a grave mistake to think that modern men are somehow immune from the age-old pitfalls

presented by various *concrete* idolatries. We like candles and graven images almost as much as anybody.

Another wonderful blast against the abstract idolatries is Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction*. There the idols of humanity, and power, and history are carefully dissected. I commend these works to everyone who will listen to me. But we have to be careful not to overestimate ourselves. The fact that we have mastered the art of identifying idols that we have forged in our minds and hearts does not mean at all that we have repented of forging them out of metals we dug from the ground.

So this is not an esoteric head trip. The issues addressed in this book are addressed over and over again throughout Scripture. One advantage I had in writing about such concrete idolatries is that, since Scripture antedates Descartes, I had a wealth of passages to resort to, passages that do not require a learned cultural translation before we make our applications.

When the Lord gave a vision of destruction to his prophet Ezekiel, a man with an ink horn marked all those who lamented over Judah's grievous idolatries. But to the other destroying angels, the Lord gave this disconcerting word:

"Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house. And he said unto them, Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain: go ye forth. And they went forth, and slew in the city" (Ezek. 9:6-7).

God often does not show sufficient respect to our holy things. And, we want to insist, they are only our holy things because we got them from *Him*. But these things—baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the principles of liturgy, and doctrine—were not given to us without accompanying instructions and cautions. God did not give us His Word as an invitation to start playing "pick and choose."

So it is no sacrilege to be “against the church.” God is the ultimate iconoclast, and God told His angels to begin at His sanctuary, and He told them to get in there and defile it. That He had a higher purpose in mind can be seen elsewhere in the book of the prophet. And that I have a higher purpose can be seen in the latter half of this book.

PART ONE



AGAINST THE CHURCH

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST IS A HOT MESS

I AM SOMETIMES ASKED why I focus on the new birth so much. The question can be asked and answered on many different levels, but the foundational answer is that our condition is desperate. Like the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:18), we need to buy refined gold from Jesus, white garments to cover our shame, and eye salve so that we might come to see that we can't see anything.

We have all sorts of distractions to help persuade us that our condition is not in fact desperate, but those distractions always amount to some sort of Hezekiah-like “peace and safety in my time.” We tend to measure how the culture is doing by how *we* are doing at the moment, which simply means that we are sentinels who can be bribed and bought off. A rising star who is finally breaking into the conference circuit, for example, and who thinks everything swell for that reason, is like a punter being put in as quarterback late in the fourth quarter, with the score something like 78 to 3. He thinks of it as a personal promotion, for *he* is now on the field, instead of seeing himself as being the crowning folly of a general disintegration in the coach's career.

So we need to come to grips with the fact that in North America, the bride of Christ is a hot mess.

We live in a time when the charismatics need the Spirit, the Reformed need a reformation, and the evangelicals need to be

born again. We do not need particular doctrines about the Spirit in the abstract. If we are given the Spirit of reformation, we will get all the doctrines we need. We will of course need doctrine that arises from the Scriptures in order to help us understand what the Spirit just did for us. But if the Spirit didn't actually do anything, then our systematic theologies are nothing but printed kits for organizing smoke. If the Spirit didn't do anything, then any religious frenzies, conducted under an unauthorized use of His auspices, have all the religious authority of a priest of Baal cutting himself with a knife at a Stones concert.

But if the Spirit is poured out in power, then we will have what future generations will call a great reformation and revival. If He is not poured out, then we are in a desperate way, regardless of what we might think about it. Our situation is critical. But, some ask, if He is not poured out, what should we do in the meantime? That is a reasonable question, and we do have to do *something*. But everything we do should be in the spirit of Elijah arranging wood on the altar, waiting for the fire to fall, and recognizing the absolute need for the fire to fall. And when you get to the point of that showdown on Mount Carmel, there is no plan B.

In the meantime, we do not need for the bishop to process up the central aisle like the shiniest and baddest black crow in the gutter. We do not need another message from Doctrine Man with ten rivets in each subpoint. We do not need the worship leader to take us through yet one more orgasmic chord progression. We don't need a doctrine of responsible stewardship and sustainability that worries more about how many times we flush than how many babies we kill. We do not need any more cardboard cutout celebrity pastors, grinning at us, as smug as all dammit. In short, we don't need any more of what we currently have. A.W. Tozer once cuttingly observed that if revival means more of what we have now, we most emphatically do not need a revival.

In short, we need the Spirit to be poured out upon us. And when God is pleased to make this happen, the Spirit will do the work He always does, *which is that of making men new*. He will make them new in the middle of some metrosexual posedown in front of the mirror. He will make them new in the middle of some stupid sermon they are busy preaching, with puffs of dust arising every time a page is turned. He will make them new in the middle of an academic conference on feminist counternarratives. He will make them new in the middle of renting one more skeezefest on Netflix. He will make them new in the middle of their very last angry outburst against their wives. He will make them new while they are in the middle of yet another eggy Facebook post directed at what little faithfulness we have left. The Spirit will interrupt us, and He will make us new. That's what He does.

When the fire falls, everything worthwhile will be purified further, and will stand. Gold, silver, and gems will remain. But all the things we have made out of pine needles will go up in a sheet of flame—our celebrity conferences, our hair product youth pastors, our liturgical mummeries, our doctrinal gnat-strangling, and our arguments on the road—with Jesus just a couple yards in front of us—about who will be the greatest.

“I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. This also shall please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs . . . For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah: that they may dwell there, and have it in possession. The seed also of his servants shall inherit it: and they that love his name shall dwell therein” (Ps. 69:30–31, 35–36).

So why do I write about this so much? Because we live in a valley of dry bones. This explains why a pastor would write a book against the church. This is why a preacher of sermons would write against sermons, why a practitioner of infant

baptism would attack it, and given how many things are done in church, there is more where that came from. The explanation is that all who love the church *must* be against it. If you simply love and promote the church, one of the first things you will lose is the church. This is the very first lesson we need to learn in following Jesus, right? You have to lose things in order to save them. “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35). But you can’t just lose things because of absentmindedness or carelessness. Jesus says that it has to be for *His* sake, and for the gospel’s. If you lose the church for the sake of *Jesus* and for the sake of the *gospel*, you find at the end of the day that you have saved the church. In fact, it is the only way to save it.

AGAINST LITURGY

A CERTAIN MAN WAS TRAVELING TO MEMPHIS, and as he drove along the highway, he saw one of those big green road signs that said, "Memphis, 250 miles." This was not unusual, but what *was* unusual was the cluster of cars, tents, and Winnebagos around the base of the sign. Curious, he decided to stop.

As he walked up, a man stepped out of the closest Winnebago, and greeted him. "Greetings!"

"Hello," the traveler said. "What are you all doing here?"

"What does it look like?" the man said. "We're going to Memphis."

"How long have you been here?"

"Ten years or so. Or thereabouts."

"But that is not going to Memphis. You're just living right next to the sign to Memphis."

"Ah, but we know how many rivets are in the sign. And what kind of green paint it is. And how much paint they used. And the kind of concrete the posts are in. Do you know any of that stuff?"

"No," said the traveler, heading back to his car. "And I don't have time to learn. I have to be in Memphis by five."



The fact that liturgy is inescapable does not keep us from misusing it. In fact, it makes the misuse all the more likely. That old cynic Ambrose Bierce once defined ritualism as “A Dutch garden of God where He may walk in rectilinear freedom, keeping off the grass.”¹ One of the early church fathers taught the principle *lex orandi, lex credenda*—the law of prayer is the law of faith. What this means is that our liturgies shape our faith; our liturgies are a confession of faith, and they are frequently a most *unexamined* statement of faith. We should be against anything that is shaping us unless we are being taught by Scripture at the same time. A telltale sign that we might be making this mistake is when we find ourselves parked in a Winnebago next to our liturgy, instead of using it to get somewhere else.

In all the sacred things we are against, we find the same error coming up again and again. Are we using the liturgy as mural or a window? Are we staring at it, or are we looking through it?

In the first chapter of Isaiah, we find all the necessary foundation stones for a true and robust evangelicalism. The Lord has called a people to Himself, having brought up children to Himself (Isa. 1:2). So they have a *formal* connection to Him, like good Episcopalians and Presbyterians, but those children have rebelled against Him. Their formal worship of God, their liturgy, had become corrupt (Isa. 1:11–15). This is not just some random thing they did, but rather it came about because they were a “seed of evildoers,” they were “children that are corrupters” (Isa. 1:4). They did evil because they were evil. Their generation was all wrong, which meant there must be regeneration in order for it to be put right. The solution was

1 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2000), 203.

to be converted. The answer is to have their sins, like scarlet, become as white as snow (Isa. 1:18). Their sins, which were as scarlet, included their scarlet liturgy.

When C.S. Lewis had been exasperated by a particular fallacy for quite long enough, he finally decided to name it. That is how we got *Bulverism*, the fallacy of dodging an opponent's argument by explaining first how he got to be so silly. In a similar vein, but not from so lofty a height, I have decided to name something that has been provoking me for some years now: the tendency that attempts to resist Gnosticism while simultaneously falling into something else very much like it.

Let's call it *knosticism*, shall we? The ancient error of gnosticism came from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. The Gnostics claimed to have an extra spiritual "something," a spark of heavenly knowledge, which trumped everything down here. It has come to mean a disparagement of the earthly and material, and a privileging of the rational, spiritual, or abstract. I have taken the English word knowledge and, using the latest advances in gene splicing, have translated this ancient tendency into its modern-English-speaking form—knosticism.

Many modern knostics have wanted to learn how to appreciate the arts of narrative. As far as that goes, nothing is wrong with it, but whether writing about novels, or movies, or stageplays, they have found "redemptive" or "death and resurrection" themes in all kinds of grimy stories. It turns out that *Dawn of the Dead* has resurrection themes. In other words, an abstract thing, the structure of the story, is mysteriously able to sanctify the actual content of the story. By means of this amazing magic trick, any amount of Tarantino sludge can be made edifying.

Now . . . three cheers for structure, but content matters. Content is determinative.

Given the title, I didn't expect to enjoy Mark Galli's book *Beyond Smells and Bells* quite as much as I did.² I found myself agreeing with virtually everything Galli wrote. He writes engagingly and with a great deal of practical wisdom. He is clearly one of the good guys. And yet we should object—*violently*—to an unstated assumption behind the book, an assumption that is quite common in our day. If the reader shares that knostic assumption, then this book will perpetuate confusion and do quite a bit of damage. If the reader hates that assumption as much as I do, throwing rocks at it every chance he gets, then he should profit from this book as much as I did. Shall I explain?

Galli is describing and defending a generic Western liturgy, and it is with that word *generic* that we get ourselves in trouble. In Appendix B, he has a helpful comparison of basic liturgies across denominational traditions—Roman, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian. The point of the table is to show the astounding *structural* similarities between them. And, point taken—if the liturgy of Christ Church, where I minister, were to be included as a sixth column in that table, the similarities would continue to be just as obvious. In other words, I don't want to dispute this point at all, but I also want to maintain that this point is entirely beside the point.

I cannot tell, by examining these parallel liturgies, which tradition includes prayers to graven images. I cannot tell, by examining these liturgies, which ones allow the service to be led by a lesbian minister. In short, by looking at these liturgies, I cannot tell whether or not God receives them as “acceptable worship” or not. But whether or not God receives us in our offered worship is the central thing. In a line up of skeletons, I

² Mark Galli, *Beyond Smells and Bells: The Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).

cannot tell which one was the tattooed biker moll and which one was the Junior Miss princess.

The Bible teaches that the basic division in liturgical worship is not between high and low or between traditional and contemporary, but rather between *acceptable* and *unacceptable*. And the only thing that can make it acceptable is pure, unfeigned, evangelical faith in Jesus. Anything else is on its way to the Bad Place.

Right near the beginning of Scripture, we find the story of Cain's religious offering being rejected (Gen. 4:5). The people of Jeremiah's day are told that burnt offerings were not acceptable (Jer. 6:20)—they were just feigning heart religion (Jer. 3:10). Their hearts needed to be circumcised (Jer. 4:4). God refused to accept offerings from the hands of the Jews in Malachi's day (Mal. 1:10). We are called to worship God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear (Heb. 12:28). We ask God to remember all the offerings and to accept the burnt sacrifices (Ps. 20:3).

One of the reasons I emphasize regeneration so much is that this is the heart change that enables us to understand this critical point. Without the new birth, we are all of us sunk. When the worshipers are converted and regenerate, they fill out the worship service with acceptable content. And yes, I know this argument works just as well with those impudent organizers who think that the worship of God can be a junior high pep rally. Unconverted Protestants have figured out their own ways of offending God. Someone who is born again knows that God cannot be "worked." He knows that it not our task to assemble before the Almighty in order to blow smoke at Him—whether or not thuribles are involved.

My friend Toby Sumpter, no enemy of robust liturgy, once wrote: “When people come to our church ‘for the liturgy’ I think I will begin asking how frequently they use porn, yell at their wife, or tell lies.”³ On a related note, Mark Galli, in his defense of liturgy, noted that “it should not surprise us that the liturgy is also one of the best places to hide from God.”⁴ It sure is.

When liturgists debate, they have a lot to talk about and many fields of study to cover—theology, history, aesthetics, and so on. I have certain decided convictions in all such debates and am happy to participate in them. But there is one thing needful as a prerequisite to everything else, and this one thing is necessary to keep all the subsequent debate from being entirely beside the point. You have to have Jesus.



If a man must be born again before he can see the kingdom of God, he must certainly be born again before he can see the realities of that kingdom in the liturgy. If you can’t see the point, then you are not going to be able to see the point *anywhere*.



If the assembled people know and love God, then He receives their worship. If they do not, then He does not. If the assembled worshipers are spiritually dead, then all their liturgical accoutrements are just ornate carvings on the gravestones.



We should know that God is the great maker of icons. As the Creator of a world full of His image-bearers, He has made billions of them. If we know God, then we discern His body, we locate His image, and we will do so where *He* put it. If

³ Toby Sumpter, Twitter post, March 7, 2012, 1:47 p.m., <http://twitter.com/TJSumpter>.

⁴ Galli, *Beyond Smells and Bells*, 11.

we do not know God, then we will eventually find ourselves bowing down to pictures or statues that one of *us* made. Wisdom is as wisdom does, and people who pray to pictures don't have a liturgical clue.

And this is why it is necessary for us to confess that God is also the greatest iconoclast. As the Judge who governs a sinful world, He is the preeminent caster down of idols and images, especially those images or places or sacrifices or liturgies which He Himself commanded to be made in the first place. No one desecrates a holy place like YHWH. No one desecrates *His* holy places like YHWH. No one flings holy relics away in disgust like He does.



YHWH makes our ears to tingle (1 Sam. 3:11; 2 Kings 2:12; Jer. 19:3). He did it at Shiloh. He did it to Solomon's temple. He did it to Nehushtan. He did it to Herod's temple. And the holy prophets of old used the kind of language in declaring the righteousness of such judgments that makes Cromwell's men look like dithering liberals.

The principle of new life must therefore be active and present before we can be entrusted with any element of public worship, whether high, low, or middle. The Spirit creates the church, *not the other way around*, and when that Spirit-created living water is there, we must find a cistern for it. But finding a cistern is not the same thing as finding the water. The history of the church is littered with people who have made this damning mistake. Woe to those who have committed two evils.

“For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13).

So we must see Christ, and we must see Him with evangelical eyes. We must do this before forming any dogmatic convictions about liturgy whatever. Before taking on the role of a

liturgist, whether amateur or professional, we must pass our prelims. Our board consists of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Simeon, and a couple of hot-gospelers from the Kentucky frontier. Their appointed task is not to fence the font, or the Table, but rather our right to make contributions to the liturgical discussions.

Men love rituals. Man is a liturgy-making creature. Nothing whatever can be done about it—the only thing that distinguishes one tribe from another is the respective shape of their rituals. But every tribe has them. Some are ornate, and others are simpler, but they are all there. This sign or that one, this tablecloth or that one, three candlesticks or none, and so on. Liturgy is inescapable.

But the thing that distinguishes the regenerate from the unregenerate is something quite different, and this distinguishing mark is what I call true evangelical faith. This is the understanding—an understanding down in the bones—that the Spirit moves where and how He wills. We cannot whistle Him up, and we cannot make Him do tricks.

Men want to distinguish between true and false, right and wrong, on the basis of what is going on *out there*—instead of remembering that a true Jew is one inwardly. Circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit. It is the same with baptism. True *baptism* is of the internal man, by the Holy Spirit, and if that is missing you do not have a Christian inwardly. You do not have a true Christian, but rather a wet member of the visible covenant. The only thing *we* control (with the variations we have in our rituals) is *how* wet that member of the visible covenant is. And there an unregenerate Baptist has a clear advantage over an unregenerate Presbyterian.

Because of how men love rituals, they can co-opt, with relative

ease, a God-given ritual. God gave the law of Moses, and the people constantly had to be told that God wanted mercy, not sacrifice. “So why’d you give us *sacrifices* then?” the unregenerate mutter. God gave them the bronze serpent, a type of the Lord Jesus, which had to be destroyed by another type of the Lord Jesus. And God gave us the Lord’s Supper, and we quickly (within the first century) figured out a way for that Supper to do us more harm than good (1 Cor. 11:17). So there is no automatic blessing that can come to us from the outside created world.

We can only be blessed in our religious activities if the Holy Spirit has given us a new hearts. A new heart can come through the ordinances of God (hearing the Word, prayers, the sacraments, etc.) in true evangelical faith. But without that true evangelical faith, all religious activity is just so many drowning swimmers clutching at their anvils.



This is why any liturgical emphasis on the externals of worship, coupled with a drifting away from historic evangelical verities (i.e., the absolute necessity of the new birth), is particularly dangerous. This point is in no way minimized by pointing out that cultural or nominal evangelicals have done exactly the same thing with the inanity of their low rituals. This does not minimize the point, but rather heightens it.

Neither is the point blunted by those who (in the name of the truth I am advocating) have turned themselves into evangelical mystic ghosts, in no need of the external world. But even they have their rudimentary rituals, and the plain teaching of Scripture goes on to silence them. Regeneration enables us to use biblical ordinances rightly; it does not eliminate the need for them. It only eliminates the spiritually stupid use of them.

If we can make this mistake with *any* external arrangement (and we most certainly can), then what is needed is a revival of

the Holy Spirit, blowing wherever He wants to. When He does this, the first thing to topple is every form of sanctimonious religiosity. So instead of building so many liturgical mobile home parks, we really ought to be praying for a Category 5 revival.

I once heard a friend make a wonderful point in a sermon. He pointed out the reason Jesus resisted those who believed in Him at the end of John 2 and how this helps explain His treatment of Nicodemus in John 3.

“But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus” (John 2:24–3:1).

He knew what was in man, and there was a man . . .

This is why we have to be born again, and this is why the Spirit has to do it. Whenever we do it, our reformations consist of changing the tablecloth. There. *That* should please Him.

There is a temptation for those Christians who want to emphasize ritual (in the wrong way) to say that in the new covenant, things are all different because of the way Christ is present in His worship now. But this overlooks several things. First, Christ has *always* been present with His people. The Rock that accompanied Israel was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), and the people then drank spiritual drink and ate spiritual food.

The second point unfolds from the first. We are not permitted to draw contrasts where the New Testament draws parallels. The Corinthians were tempted to put on airs over against the Jews. *We* have spiritual food. *We* have spiritual drink. So did the Jews, Paul replies bluntly. You can have religious ceremonial, God-given ritual, whole burnt offerings and sacrifices, baptism

in the cloud and sea, and still be overthrown in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5). You can have a degree in liturgics and still not have the one thing needful (Heb. 4:2). Not only is it possible to do this, it is *easy* to do this. The human soul *likes* making this mistake. And why do I talk this way? Because the Bible does, over and over again. It is never rude to speak biblically.

So if we look at this carefully, we see that the Golden Rule is another way of expressing the duties of love. Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but rather to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). This is how He does that—by giving a heart of love, by giving the kind of heart that understands the Golden Rule.

He gives the new heart. He converts the soul. He opens our eyes. He makes light shine out of darkness. He pours out the spirit of regeneration. He gives us true evangelical faith, the only catalyst that can make any religious activity whatever acceptable in the sight of God (Heb. 4:3).

Apart from the new birth, God hates whatever it is we think we are doing. Away with the noise of your songs! High church, low church, stand-on-the-yellow-line church . . . God spews it out of His mouth.

AGAINST THE SACRAMENTS

THE REVEREND CONFECTIONERS IN THE BACK of the Westminster Candy Shop one day decided to change the recipes because customers were no longer buying the Sawdust Swirl. But rather than continuing with their experiments, they took a vote and decided to return to the original recipes that had been in use when the shop first opened three and a half centuries before. Unfortunately, the managers of the shop viewed these events with deep suspicion and declared the Reformation Fudge Supreme to be both fattening and heretical.



The sacraments are visible signs given to us by God to declare that salvation is from His hand alone. We (naturally) like to use the sacraments in such a way as to invert the meaning and declare our independence from Him. We need to learn how to make the same distinctions that are easy to make when talking about the Scriptures. If we say that we are saved on the basis of the Bible alone, we are not making any claims about the paper, the ink, and the leather or the maps, concordance, and ribbons. In the same way we are not saved by water, or by bread and wine. The surgeon may pick up many different instruments in the course of the operation, but it is the surgeon who is doing it. If we have mastered this distinction, we stand against every form of sacramental superstition and abuse.

A pastor friend once tweeted this: “Sometimes a pastor needs to take a man’s baptism and trash it and bury it in front of him and only then will it become true.”⁵ The reaction he got illustrated the need for such comments to multiply and increase. But why would a *pastor* say something like that? Aren’t we supposed to be ministers of Word and sacrament? Why would we ever want to trash something that we are ministers of?

We trash the sacraments, if and when we do, *because* we are ministers of the Word. We trash the Word, if and when we do, *because* we are ministers of the sacraments. We live this way because this is what Scripture, taken in its entirety, requires of us.

We may only trash such things if unbelief and superstition have already trashed them.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: But the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8).

God delights in the prayer of the upright, but if a man is wicked, he cannot buy God off through showing up with a sacrifice. Not only does God not receive such a sacrifice, He regards it with loathing. The word *abomination* is a strong one here—the sacrifices and liturgical observances of a wicked man cause God to recoil in disgust. And if God recoils in disgust, shouldn’t we also? The sacraments are sacrifices of praise, are they not? And what does God think of such sacrifices from the wicked?

A wicked man, just being what he is, presents abominable sacrifices. But wait, he can even make it worse—if he comes with evil intent brewing in his mind actively, how much more of an abomination it becomes.

5 Toby Sumpter, Twitter post, July 1, 2012, 5:18 p.m., <http://twitter.com/TJSumpter>.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is *abomination*: How much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?” (Prov. 21:27).

To desire the sacrifices (and the sacraments) to be *automatically* a good thing is to forget the covenantal realities. It is to forget that the world is governed by a *personal* God. It is an attempt to keep Christ in a box. The heart of man is fully capable of polluting whatever he might be offering to God. He does this whenever he thinks that believing the promises and keeping God on a short rope are the same thing.

“He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination” (Prov. 28:9).

This would include prayers at the baptismal font, and prayers offered over the eucharistic celebration, would it not?

So this is why a minister might want to trash a man’s baptism, or his diligence in communing, or his Bible study skills, or his theological acumen, or his prayer warrior status, or his tithing prowess, or his clerical garb . . . age. Why? So that it might rot in the ground, and rise again to newness of life.



These truths can be seen in a type. The law of God distinguished between clean and unclean animals—the unclean could not be offered up in sacrifice. From this, some might want to infer that any clean animal could be so offered, but this was not the case at all. An animal could belong to the category of the clean, and yet still not be fit for sacrifice. The weak and infirm animals could not be offered, the animals with a blemish could not be, and so on.

When we come to worship God, we come to offer *ourselves*. In the sacraments, we are partaking. Baptism represents our union with Christ, and the Lord’s Supper our partaking of Christ. We are involved, and *we* are involved as part of the offering. Now if someone is baptized, this means he

is a covenantal sheep, not a dog. But more is required than “not being a dog.” When a priest was examining an animal presented for sacrifice, his work was not done when he ascertained that it was not a dog.

And of course, the final gospel answer is that we are all of us maimed, and the only perfect sacrifice was that offered by the only clean victim. If we are in Him, then His perfections are ours. If not, then our imperfections remain our own—even if we have been removed by baptism from the category of the unclean.

A blemished sheep in sacrifice can no more be accepted by God than a pig can.



The alternative to believing in the real presence of the Lord in the Supper is believing in His real absence. *That* can't be right. So perhaps a better way to frame the debate should therefore be local presence versus a rightly understood *covenantal* presence.

One of the great problems with local presence has to do with space (the Lord's body being *there*, on the table), but it also is problematic with regard to time. God's promises, being covenantal, include all time, history, lives, genealogies, biographies, and the last day. The Lord's Supper has to be understood *in the story*. The promises concern the video, not the snapshot. We must be opposed to every sacrament caught in a freeze frame. In order to be true sacraments, they must be story sacraments. And what is the story?

We partake of the Lord in the participles, we partake of Him in the partaking. We cannot say, “Look, there is the Lord, stationary, on the table.” Rather, we say, “Here is the Lord *in the action* of eating and drinking.” And these actions are part of a *series* of actions, which together constitute the story. We partake of the Lord's body and blood in a glorious series of

verbs—declaring, praying, blessing, setting apart, taking, breaking, taking, and giving.⁶ And each moment in the story says something about the end of the story.

When God speaks to us, He speaks to us about the continuation and conclusion of our story.

“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it” (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

So our prayer should not just be for the Lord to show up in the sacraments *now*. We want Him to come to us in salvation, of course, and—this is crucial—we want Him to *stay*. We plead with Him to *remain*. And this is what He has promised His elect that He will do. First, consider how we ask . . .

“Do not hide Your face from me; Do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; Do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation” (Ps. 27:9).

The Lord does not just promise to be with His worshipers in the moment, but rather to be with them at the Last Day. That is the promise, and that is why only evangelical faith can receive such a promise. Sacramental superstitions are up to the snapshot challenge—superstition can give the sensation of a god presenting himself *now*. But only someone who is born again can understand a promise like this one.

“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5–6).

6 *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1881), 29.3.

If God has promised anyone that He will come to us, and that He will never go away from us, to whom is that promise made? It is a promise that encompasses the whole story—and it is therefore a promise to those for whom the whole story was written in the first place. It is for the little flock, and only for them.

“But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. *Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom*” (Luke 12:31–32).

The one who has promised is faithful, and He will do it. So if you believe, it was always yours. If you do not believe, then where is your complaint? You never wanted it anyway.

This is the beginning of all spiritual wisdom. Among the sons of Sarah, we find sons of both Sarah and Hagar. Among the Jews, we find Jews and Gentiles. Among the sons of Abraham, we find the sons of Abraham and Belial. Among the regenerate, we find the regenerate and the unregenerate. Among the elect, we find the elect and the reprobate. Among the baptized, we find the unbaptized. Among the communicants, we find those who refuse to commune. Until the resurrection, why do these two categories *always* arise?

Against the sacraments? Well, to be honest, we should only be against the makeshift, temporary ones. If it is not a sacramental observance on the part of the elect, enabling them to partake eternally in the everlasting decree, then to Hell with it.

AGAINST INFANT ANYTHING

THE SEMINARY INSTRUCTOR LEANED against his desk and asked if there were any questions. One hand went up.

“So you are saying that infant baptism dates from the earliest years of the church, and that is one of your reasons for accepting it?”

“*One* of the reasons, yes.”

“But then the readings you have had us do demonstrated that the church held wildly erroneous views of baptism for over a thousand years after that?”

“I think that is a fair summary of the reading, yes.”

The student came to the point he wanted to press. “So how is that an argument *for* doing it?”

“By pointing out that the babies were not the only infants.”

“Okay, you lost me.”

“The church was an infant when *it* was baptized, and there was a lot of growing up that had to be done. The doctrine of infant baptism was an infant when *it* was baptized, and it had a troubled childhood, especially in the junior high years.”

Silence fell over the classroom. The questioner scratched his head. Finally he broke the silence. “Are there office hours this week?”

Historic evangelicals, at their best, are unaccredited teachers in the schools of the prophets. At their worst, they are sons of Zedekiah, selling little miniature horns of iron on the teevee for \$9.95 plus shipping and handling (1 Kings 22:11). Institutional Christians, let us call them, at their best, are like Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:17). At their worst, they carry on in such a way as to make even a Bach chorale obnoxious to God (Amos 5:23), processing up the center aisle in such a way as to make every true child of Father want to throw a Scottish psalter at their pointy hats.

After baptism has taken place, everything else is part of Christian discipleship—teaching the baptized to obey all that Christ commanded. Discipleship is irreducibly, a matter of obedience, not theological test-passing. It is an ethical response, not a cognitive one. Now a certain cognitive element is necessarily there, and it obviously grows over time, but the first thing you must be after is a willingness and eagerness in the disciple to be accepted, grown, taught, and disciplined, etc. What is the point of communing a child, if that child is not growing up into righteous, peace and joy (Rom. 14:17)? Why would a minister of Christ want to give children little damnation wafers? The fact that it is the cup of *blessing* did not keep profane Corinthians from dying as they drank it. Those who practice child communion, therefore, are running the risk of incurring one of the Lord's most fearful curses (Matt. 18:6).

Those who object to infant baptism because of the invitation it presents to nominalism and presumption have a strong argument. If circumcision was the precursor to baptism, as paedobaptists like to argue, then the temptations that came with circumcision will also come with infant baptism. The