

**The Sacramental Style – Expressing the Incarnation of God
1 Corinthians 2:7-13, Col 1:15-23**

Brothers and sisters – as we transition out of the Blue and into the Green spiritual styles, as we lead up to the Talk show – I have a question for you to consider...

If our Lord had **not** instructed us to also Baptize the disciples that we are supposed go and make of all nations... (Matt 28:19)

and if our Lord had **not** said *“unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”* (John 6:35) and then revealed to his disciples that the bread at the last supper was indeed his body so we must *“take and eat!”* (Mark 14:22)

If Jesus had not said these things brothers and sisters – would we still administer baptism and celebrate the Lord’s supper? Think about that for a moment...

Now – instinctively I think most of us would probably say “No – if Jesus didn’t command it then there’s no need to do it” because it is ingrained in our protestant tradition that we only do what Jesus has commanded us to do and we don’t clutter up the Christian faith with additional “human” traditions or rules. And I get that.

But that leads me to pose another question for us to consider – how would you go about making the invisible... visible?

How would you give expression to the unseen spiritual realities that exist in the Christian faith?

The reality about who God is, what our status before God is and the kind of relationship we have with God, how our debt for our sins has been settled with God?

You see there are all sorts of spiritual realities which exist – and they are unseen – we can’t identify them through physical or material means or even experiential means.

We can't see our prayers rising to heaven and being heard by God. We can't see the regeneration of our spirit take place. We can't see the Holy Spirit sealing us for redemption. These are spiritual, unseen realities.

And the fact that we can't see them can be a problem for us.

For example if you read the bible and come across 1 John 1:9 where it says *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* and so we confess our sins to God – what happens?

Well - apparently there is a spiritual reality of forgiveness and purification which has taken place – but we can't see it... how do we know it occurred?

We might feel some relief or joy – but those are our feelings, they originate and reside in us – they are not the actual spiritual reality of our sins being forgiven by God, that originates and resides in God.

And if we start to equate our feelings and experiences with spiritual realities, even if we just consider them to be evidence of that spiritual reality, brothers and sisters that is a dangerous step because we start to base our belief of what is spiritually real upon our subjective feelings.

What happens when you confess your sin and you don't feel joy or relief?? Does that mean it didn't work? Did the spiritual reality not occur? Its hard to know right – we can't see it and check up on it to make sure it really did.

Now we might be tempted to respond to this uncertainty by saying that we need just believe and have faith and trust that these spiritual realities have happened - and if you are able to simply do that brothers and sisters the Jesus' words are very true for you *"blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* (John 20:29)

But, I suspect that most of us are more like doubting Thomas – we need to see in to believe.

Because our sinful nature fights against our ability to simply trust and believe, and the enemy is always quick to plant a thought in our mind that causes us to wonder if God really did forgive us this time.

Sure, He was willing to forgive us the first time - but we keep on messing up with the same old sin again and again, where is the proof that He really will keep on forgiving us?

So, our faith and our trust and our belief needs some help – it needs assistance and assurance. Thus, our Lord has given us the “visible” sacraments of Baptism and His Supper to help our faith believe that the invisible spiritual realities – like our forgiveness and purification - actually exist and occur.

So, brothers and sisters – if you have ever struggled to “just have faith and believe” in the unseen spiritual realities of the Christian faith then learning more about the sacramental style and how it makes the invisible visible for us might be just what you need for your spiritual growth.

So, let’s turn to 1 Corinthians 2 because if we are going to grow in our ability to see invisible spiritual realities, we need to start with being able to identify them and what Paul says in this scripture passage is a helpful start.

In vs. 7 Paul states that he speaks about *“God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages.”* So this gives us three characteristics that help to define an invisible spiritual reality.

So first, they are part of God’s wisdom. Which means these realities are connected to God’s plans and purposes for His creation and thus they are important. We can’t dismiss invisible spiritual realities or write them off as impractical or irrelevant to our daily lives just because we can’t see them. They play an important role in our reality – even if we don’t realize it.

Second, they are secret and hidden. Now maybe this is stating the obvious because we’ve said these realities are invisible, but part of what invisible means in describing spiritual realities

is that they are something we can't discover or find on our own.

We can discover unseen creational realities, such as our soul, our mind, or relationships, or unseen natural forces like gravity or air pressure and so on...

But not so with the invisible spiritual realities from God. Paul says in vs. 9 about the spiritual reality which is prepared for those who love God that *"no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor [has] the human heart conceived..."* So unless God decides to reveal it to us, these things are beyond the scope of our human abilities to investigate and discover.

And third, God has decreed these realities from the very start. So, this means there is a consistency and reliability to these realities. Just because they are invisible and unseen doesn't mean they are transient and ethereal. Just as God decreed the material creation into existence, God also decreed these spiritual realities to exist, thus they are as real and solid as the

material creation, even though they are not material and we can't see them.

So, invisible spiritual realities are i) God's wisdom ii) hidden and secret iii) decreed by God.

Now Paul knows this, but why does he know this? Because as he says in vs. 10 *"these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit."*

Now the "us" Paul refers to here are those who accompanied him on his mission trip to Corinth and helped him teach and instruct the new believers about the invisible spiritual realities of the Christian faith.

And Paul makes a statement about that ministry in vs. 13. He says *"we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual."*

Now Paul is making this statement here to defend his ministry against those who were spreading rumors that he was not a legitimate apostle, so that's context which gives us this interesting phrase "*interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.*"

And while Paul's context is not what we are looking at this morning, I find this phrase to be a very good biblical description of what is at the core of the sacramental style and what it means to make the invisible visible – "*interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.*"

So much of what Paul writes about to the Corinthian believers in this first letter has to do with invisible spiritual realities and how the Corinthian believers ought to live and worship once they have been made aware of them.

He's interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual, and we see this in how Paul immediately starts to address the issues that were problematic in this church.

Usually Paul will start one of his letters of with an explanation of the gospel and then in light of the gospel will move into instructions on how to live a Christian life. But with his letter to the Corinthians there is no opening explanation of the gospel.

Instead Paul immediately moves into instructions – addressing the divisions in the church and the accusations leveled against himself and his credentials as an apostle. Then he moves into dealing with sexual immorality, status in one life, being married or unmarried, eating food that has been sacrificed to idols, back to his apostolic ministry again, then on to propriety in worship and appropriate conduct for participating in the Lord's supper, clarifying misunderstandings about gifts of the Holy Spirit and Body of Christ, that famous passage on love, and then he finished with more teaching on the resurrection of the body.

Now my goal is not to do a study of this letter to the Corinthians this morning but to show you that its was of utmost importance to Paul in his letter to the Corinthians to

make them aware of the invisible spiritual realities that exist in the Christian faith which they were ignorant of or did not take seriously – interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Paul had to make the invisible visible to the Corinthians, he needs to interpret these realities for them so that they begin to realize and believe that these invisible spiritual realities exist and require an appropriate response in their life and worship.

In each of the areas that he covers in his letter, there exists an invisible spiritual reality that Christians must acknowledge in a visible material way – so that we make the invisible visible.

For example, in 1 Cor 6:15 Paul says *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?”* This is an invisible spiritual reality that exists for Christian believers.

You can't see it – but it is a reality, spiritually we are members of Christ.

And because this reality exists Paul reminds the Corinthians that certain sexual behaviors are off limits. He reasons it out this way *“Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!”*

The implication of what one should do with one's body is spelled out as Paul expounds another spiritual reality that exists in vs. 19-20. He says *“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit... You are not your own; you were bought at a price.”*

And because of this reality which we can't see – but exists nonetheless – Paul reminds the Corinthians they must make this invisible reality visible by *“honoring God with your bodies”*

You see how Paul has to make the invisible visible to them – how he needs to teach them spiritual things? How he has to “interpret” these spiritual realities to them by way of explaining them through an appropriate visible means of acknowledging them?

Now brothers and sisters if your natural style is the sacramental style this kind of visual or tangible or physical explanation of an invisible spiritual reality will really resonate with you – it makes sense.

And if you have nurtured your natural sacramental style, when you encounter Christian signals and symbols - you don't just understand them mentally – you enter into the invisible spiritual reality which they embody – or perhaps its better to say that the spiritual reality which they represent enters into your physical reality.

Now our protestant tradition is pretty sparse when it comes to signals and symbols of our faith – we have the cross and... well we have the cross – but in the Anglican and Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches there are all sort of signals and symbols.

They make the sign of the cross, they kneel to pray, they burn incense, there is holy water, they have rosaries for prayer, they anoint people with oil, there are all sorts of symbols

usually worked into a stained-glass window - and their buildings and their platforms and the items on the platform are specifically designed with symbolism in mind. Even the order and structure of the worship services is representative and symbolic.

And in the Eastern Orthodox tradition they also have the practice of creating and engaging with Icons – images – especially of Jesus Christ. Maybe you've seen pictures of these icons or you've seen Orthodox Christians paying reverence to or kissing an icon.

Now again – as Protestants this kind of interaction with the signals and symbols of our faith is difficult for us to process – especially if we are not of the sacramental style.

And if you are a protestant who has the sacramental style – you don't tell very many people that you find all of the “smells and bells” of these Christian traditions rather appealing because your going to get some raised eyebrows and funny looks and your fellow protestants might think you are being

lead astray by human traditions and superstitions – especially if they saw you kissing an icon.

So this is where we need to acknowledge that the strength of the sacramental style in making the invisible spiritual realities visible for us can become its weakness and deteriorate into superstition and empty ritualism.

And in the history of the church we have seen how this happened in the medieval Catholic church and how the person and the gospel of Jesus Christ was obscured by this superstition. Instead people were putting their faith in rituals and trusting in symbols instead of the one to whom the sacraments were supposed to make visible.

Of course, the way to prevent that – as you all know by now – is to make sure that we spend times engaging in the more difficult and awkward, even unpleasant work of Level B growth in our opposite style. So, if you are naturally sacramental then you need to engage in the scripture-driven

style in order to keep your strength from becoming a weakness.

Now we protestants would do well to encourage the Sacramentalists among us because their style of experiencing God helps the rest of us to appreciate the invisible spiritual realities of our faith and take their existence seriously.

When we do not – our Christian faith and lives lacks spiritual depth and reality and becomes a rather flat two-dimensional reality consisting of teachings and morals.

Which is why I asked us earlier to think about whether we would make the time and effort to make the invisible visible if our Lord had not specifically instructed us to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. Its to see if we recognize the need for making the invisible visible.

So Brothers and sisters, I hope that the Holy Spirit has worked through this message so far to impress upon us the importance of acknowledging the invisible spiritual realities

that exist and how we need to bring them into our physical reality through signal and symbol.

And just in case we might have any further reservations about how the physical material creation is able to make invisible spiritual realities accessible to us in this sacramental style – without considering it to be superstitious...

Brothers and sisters, let us consider that the invisible Triune God revealed Himself to us... through becoming a part of this physical creation – taking on flesh as John 1:14 says.

That's the starting point for the Sacramental style – the Incarnation of the Word.

So yes, it is possible that signals and symbols can be misused and end up obstructing our view of Christ – But... when we spend time in the scripture learning about the incarnation and meditating on all its implications for the creation.

When we grasp how the Word became fully human, fully embodied in all our physicality – then we start to realize that the physical signals and material symbols of the sacramental style are like mini-incarnations that declare and proclaim the incarnational reality is the central focus of God's plan to not only save us – but the entire creation.

And instead of obstructing our view of Jesus it embodies a 3-dimensional reality into it. In the same way that learning how to focus your vision cause what appears to be a 2-dimensional picture that doesn't seem to make much sense, to turn into a 3-dimensional reality. Signals and Symbols – and especially the sacraments give us a 3-dimensional relationship with Jesus.

Now there is so much more we could say about that...

And there is so much more we could say about the ways in which we can express the incarnation to make visible the invisible spiritual reality of Christ redeeming His creation.

That could be another series in itself... which now that I think about it... that's kind of what we will be doing in the TALK Show isn't it? So – I guess we could say that the TALK Show is kind of protestant sacramentalism – a very unique expression of the Incarnation that makes an invisible spiritual reality become visible for us...

But brothers and sisters we need to wrap up this exploration of the sacramental style – and as we do – I think it is fitting to focus on an invisible spiritual reality by way of something visible.

I invite you to listen once again to our second scripture reading – but this time as you focus your attention on this icon of Jesus Christ.

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things

hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

What will you do brothers and sisters – to make the invisible visible? Amen