**The Furniture for the Ordinances: Water Baptism**

The Reformers have given us three working principles regarding the ordinances:

* *There are only two in number*. This is determined by the fact that Christ, himself, communicated to us only these two (rf. Mt. 28:19; Lk. 22:19-20 & parallels). In this, we can readily see the connection with the ordinances given the people of God prior to Christ, circumcision and Passover, as well as the ordinances spoken of in their future and eternal state, the mark of God (Rev. 7:3; 19:7-9).
* *Their observance is a part of the worship of God*. The ordinances are not to be conducted in private or selectively (such as by the priests on behalf of the whole congregation, etc.), but that they are to be a part of the service of worship to God and in the presence of the whole congregation.
* *Their meaning is as signs and seals*. What do the ordinances actually accomplish? As mere objects and performances, nothing. Just as water baptism does not save by itself, the bread and wine do not unite us to Christ. Instead, they are means by which God’s grace comes to us. For that reason, the ordinances are called signs and seals: they physically point to the spiritual reality to which they refer and they testify to the veracity and guarantee of our Lord’s promises.

Because of these three principles, it is necessary that the ordinances be continually visible before the congregation in worship, whether they are presently used or not.

But how is that to be done? Protestants have considered the matter in two ways. When Baptists try to be faithful to these principles, they find they must invest heavily in a sizable and attractive immersion tank. But when pragmatic concerns for space arise, these tanks are often located to suit. That might be behind the choir loft and shrouded with plants or curtains and raised well above the pulpit itself. Or, the tank might be recessed in the floor of the raised platform and covered, when not in use, by a carpeted trap door. Neither of these commonly used positions really succeed in visually teaching these Reformation principles.

For other Protestants, the problem tends to be reversed. Because the amount of water is not crucial in their theology, the tendency is to make the container itself significant, rather than diminished. Baptismal fonts are often constructed out of sizable amounts of wood or granite to emphasize their importance. And their pragmatic concerns are twofold: is the size of the font made in proportion to the rest of the room and should it be fixed or portable?

One element that does not seem addressed in these considerations is that of the water itself. “Living water” was understood by the Jews as flowing water and not standing water. Bathing or washing in a tub or drawing from standing water would not have been considered cleansing. The water needed to flow in order to clean. Baptists pick up on this theme when they advocate baptism in rivers rather than tanks. The symbol of one’s sins being washed away is visibly portrayed. For other Protestants, this is seen in the action of pouring – the water flows from above and on to the individual and then off.

To my mind, this movement seems important. More readily teaching the aspect of Christ being our “living water” (Jn. 4:10) would be the symbol of a baptismal font that is made to flow, as with a small fountain, or, much more simply, a pitcher and bowl combination. If a pitcher and bowl were to be utilized, there would be no need for a separate font stand. Instead, they could be placed on the table reserved for communion, alongside the plate and cup which symbolize Christ’s other ordinance.

No matter how the ordinance is displayed, it should always be in its place in the worship room and never be allowed to be relegated to a corner or to a storage room when not in actual use. Our baptism is the sign and seal of our relationship in Christ. It should be gazed upon by believers as a reminder to them of their reception into the family of God and of the benefit of their assurance of salvation. And it also stands as a witness before Christian parents to the claim of God upon covenant children, of the parents’ vows to unto God for obedience in the raising up of these children, and of God’s continual blessing and comfort to them as they do so.