

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

For You

Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the Preached Word

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CHAPTER TWO

Extra Nos

The Latin is *extra nos*. It means "outside us," and it is the hinge on which this entire book turns.

I am going to ask you to sit with it for a chapter, because everything after this — the water, the voice, the bread, the cup — is unintelligible without it, and because the phrase almost always lands wrong the first time a person hears it.

IT SOUNDS COLD. IT ISN'T.

Here is what most people hear when they are told that their salvation is located outside them.

They hear *impersonal*. They hear a religion of paperwork, where a man could be technically forgiven and inwardly dead, where the whole thing is a filing system and nobody's heart is in it. They hear the thing they left the mainline church to get away from, or the thing they were warned about growing up: dead ritual, going through the motions, people who have been baptized and confirmed and buried without ever once meaning it.

I understand the objection. I have made it. And I want to answer it not with an argument but with a room.

It is a quarter past two in the morning, and you are in a vinyl chair the color of oatmeal, in a hallway on the fourth floor, because the room itself has too many people in it. Somewhere down the corridor a machine is making the sound machines make. You have been awake since five o'clock yesterday morning. The coffee in your hand went cold an hour ago and you are still holding it because setting it down would require deciding where.

The news, when it came, came in the flat voice they train them to use.

And in that chair, for the first time in a long time, the question of where you stand with God has stopped being theoretical. It is not a topic anymore. It has walked up and sat down beside you, and it is asking, and you have to answer it with whatever you actually have.

So what do you have?

If everything you have is inside you, then here is what you are about to do. You are going to try to reconstruct a feeling you had at sixteen. You are going to attempt, at two in the morning, on no sleep, in a body flooded with adrenaline and grief, to determine whether a decision you made half your life ago was sincere enough to have counted. You will be running an audit, with faulty records, in the worst conditions of your life, on the one question that matters most — and the auditor will be a man who has not slept and cannot stop shaking.

Now suppose instead that what you have is this. A date. A church. A font in the corner of a building three hundred miles from here. A morning when water was put on your head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and God attached to that water a promise to forgive your sins.

Notice what has and has not changed in the last four hours. Your feelings have changed. Your capacity to feel anything has changed. Your ability to construct a coherent thought about God has changed — you could not defend the faith to a freshman right now, and you know it.

The date has not changed. The promise attached to it has not changed. Not one word of it is different at 2:15 in the morning than it was at noon on a good Tuesday in June.

Extra nos is not coldness. It is the difference between a promise you have to remember and a promise that was recorded.

Everything that lives inside you moves. Your memory revises itself constantly and without telling you; ask any two siblings about the same Christmas and watch two honest people describe different afternoons. Your feelings are downstream of your blood sugar and your sleep and the last conversation you had, and they will report a different verdict on your soul at eleven at night than at nine in the morning, on no new evidence. Your sense of your own sincerity is the least reliable instrument you own, because it is the only one you cannot check against anything outside itself.

God knows this. He made you, and he has been dealing with people like us for a long time. And so, in what I have come to regard as one of the great mercies of the Christian faith, **he refused to hide the gift in the one place you cannot search reliably.** He put it outside, where you can go and get it. Not because he is distant, but because he is kind, and because he had no interest in a gift you could only be sure of on your good days.

The coldness objection has it exactly backwards. A religion located in your interior is the cold one. It leaves you alone in there with your own testimony, at two in the morning, with no witness.

GOD HAS NEVER BEEN EMBARRASSED BY MATTER

The second objection comes fast behind the first, and it is more serious. Fine, someone says — outside me. But why *water*? Why bread? Why should the God who made the galaxies attach anything at all to a basin of tap water and a loaf from the grocery store in a church in North Dakota?

The answer is that he has been doing this from the beginning, and you already believe it about the biggest instance. Let me put three of them next to each other, because two would be a coincidence and three is a habit.

First, how he made the world. He did not think it into being privately. He *spoke*. There was a word, and where the word went, the thing existed. From the first page of Scripture, God is a God who works by putting his power into something and sending it out — and the something, in that case, was language, which is about as ordinary as a thing can be. You use it to order a sandwich.

Second, how he saved it. He did not save the world by broadcasting a general amnesty from heaven. He got into a body. He was, at one point in actual history, an infant of a specific weight, in a feed trough, in a particular town, on a particular night, and he needed to be fed and held like every other infant who has ever lived.

And notice what the shepherds were given. Not a vision. Not an inward assurance. A set of directions and a physical description: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. *Go there. That is where he is.* The sign was the address.

Third, and this is the one nobody expects. In the wilderness, when the people were dying of snakebite, God's remedy was not a prayer, or a rite of repentance, or an inward turning. He told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, and told the people to look at it. And they looked at that plain, unimpressive, frankly strange object, and they lived.

There is nothing in bronze that heals a snakebite. Everyone involved knew that. The bronze was not medicine; it was an *address* — the place God said he would do the thing, so that a dying man would know where to look instead of casting about for a feeling of sufficient faith.

Our Lord picked that story up and applied it to himself: as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. He is telling us how to read his own crucifixion — as the appointed object, put up in public, that a dying person is told to look at.

If you can believe that the eternal Son of God was located in a manger, and that a bronze ornament on a stick was where he told dying men to look, you are not going to have a philosophical problem with water. **God has never been embarrassed by matter**, and every objection to the sacraments on the grounds that they are too physical is an objection that arrives about two thousand years too late.

THE MAN WHO NEARLY WENT HOME UNHEALED

There is an old story that makes this point better than I can.

Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army — a great man, the text says, and highly regarded, and a leper. Word reached him through a captive Israelite girl that there was a prophet in Samaria who could deal with such things. So he went, the way a man of his rank goes: with horses and chariots, with a letter from his king, and with a king's ransom in silver and gold loaded in the baggage, prepared to pay whatever such a cure would cost.

He pulled up at Elisha's door. And Elisha did not come out.

He sent a servant with a message. Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and you will be clean.

Naaman was furious, and I want you to hear his complaint in his own words, because they are marvelously human. He had expected the prophet to come out to him — to stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the spot and cure the leper. There would have been a ceremony. There would have been a *moment*.

And then he names the rivers. *Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?*

Sit with that sentence, because it is the whole objection this chapter exists to answer, and Naaman states it more honestly than most of us would. He is not refusing to wash. He would wash all day. What he cannot accept is *this* water — a muddy, mediocre, foreign little river, distinctly inferior to the rivers back home, which he could name and which any Damascene would agree were the better water.

He turned and went away in a rage. He very nearly went home with his leprosy, seven hundred pounds of silver still in the baggage, because the address was too plain.

His servants saved his life with the most sensible sentence in the chapter. If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? How much more, when he has only said to you, wash and be clean?

That is the whole objection and the whole answer, side by side. We are not offended by God. **We are offended by the plainness of where he told us to go.** And the mercy of the plain address is precisely that it is findable — you can walk to a river. You cannot walk to a sufficiently sincere inner state.

Naaman went down and dipped himself seven times, and his flesh came back like a child's. Not because the Jordan had properties. Because God had said *there*.

WHAT A MEANS ACTUALLY IS

Now I need to be precise, because this is where the Reformation actually happened and where most modern confusion lives.

There is a difference between **a sign that points** and **an instrument that delivers**.

A road sign that says BISMARCK 90 is a sign that points. It contains no Bismarck. It tells you a true thing about a city that is somewhere else. It is genuinely useful and you would be worse off without it — and if you stand at the sign and wait, you will not arrive, because pointing is all it was ever built to do.

And notice something about the road sign that makes the comparison exact. It can be perfectly accurate. It can be well made, freshly painted, correctly placed, and pointing precisely where it says. None of that changes what it is. A better sign does not become a deed, and a beautifully executed symbol does not begin to convey anything. The difference is not one of quality. It is a difference of kind, and no amount of improvement moves a thing across it.

A deed, on the other hand, delivers. When land changes hands, the transfer happens *through* the document. The paper is not a picture of an ownership that occurred invisibly somewhere else; the paper is how the ownership comes to you. It is ordinary paper, with ordinary ink, and a notary's stamp that cost eight dollars. It is also the thing that makes the farm yours.

If you have never bought land, try this one instead. A poster in a shop window advertising a concert is a sign that points: it tells you truly that there is music happening on Friday, and you cannot get in with it. The ticket in your pocket is an instrument. It is a scrap of cardstock worth nothing as cardstock, and it is the thing that gets you through the door, and the difference between the poster and the ticket is not that one is more beautiful or more sincerely believed. The difference is what each one was made to do.

Most American Christians have been taught to treat baptism and the Lord's Supper as posters. Beautiful posters, meaningful posters, posters worth keeping and framing —

but advertisements, pointing at a grace that is happening somewhere else, on the inside, in the invisible part. On that account, the water is a picture of a washing that already happened in your heart, and the bread is a reminder of a death that happened long ago, and the real action is in your act of remembering.

The confessional claim is that they are tickets. Deeds. **The grace does not run parallel to the water; it runs through it.** Paul does not call baptism a picture of the washing of regeneration. He calls it the washing of regeneration. Our Lord does not say *this represents my body*. He says *this is my body, which is for you*.

It is worth asking why the poster reading is so attractive, because it is not stupidity that produces it.

It is reverence, mostly — a real and honorable instinct that God is too great to be bound to a cup of water, and that saying otherwise drags him down into the plumbing. And it is fear of the alternative: if the water actually does something, then the church has power, and men have used the claim of power badly for a very long time, and you have read the history.

I take both concerns seriously. But look at what the poster reading costs. It moves the action from the font to your interior — from a thing done in front of witnesses on a date you can name, to a transaction inside you that nobody saw and that you cannot inspect afterward. It does not protect God's freedom. It simply relocates the whole question to the one place where you cannot get a reliable answer.

That is what a means of grace is: not a symbol you look at, but an instrument God uses to hand something over. The word *means* here is the same as in "by means of." It is a delivery mechanism, and the thing it delivers is the forgiveness of sins.

Which brings the question all the way down to earth and makes it answerable. If forgiveness is delivered, then it is delivered *somewhere*, at some time, by some appointed method. And you can go there.

"ISN'T THIS JUST MAGIC, THEN?"

I can hear it, and I am going to hold you off for now.

If God attaches his promise to water, is the water magic? Does the pastor have a spell? Can a man be dunked against his will and dragged into heaven by hydraulics?

No. And the reason why no is not a hedge or a footnote — it involves the way a promise works, and what faith is for, and it deserves a full chapter rather than a paragraph

here. You will get it in Chapter Twelve, and I am not going to pretend the question is smaller than it is.

For now, the short form: a means of grace always carries a word attached to it. Not water alone but water with the word; not bread alone but bread with *for you*. Augustine said it in a sentence the church has been repeating for sixteen hundred years — the word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament. Strip the promise and you have a bath and a snack. Keep the promise and you have God's own delivery of what he promised.

The instrument is never bare, and it is never magic, because it is never anything other than **Christ's word arriving in a form you can be sure you received.**

THE FIVE PLACES

So then: where?

Luther makes a list, and it is worth knowing that he makes it, because the list is broader than most people expect and it comes from a document confessional Lutherans hold as their own. In the Smalcald Articles, laying out how God gives counsel and help against sin, he enumerates five things:

The preached Word. A man sent by God, standing up in a room, saying to you out loud what Christ has done — not information about God, but God's own address arriving in your ears.

Baptism. Water and the word, applied to you on a specific day that does not move, whatever you do afterward. It happened once and you return to it daily, which is not a contradiction and is the subject of two chapters.

The sacrament of the altar. Bread and cup, placed into your hands with the words *given for you*, so that the promise arrives not only at your hearing but in your body.

The power of the keys. The authority Christ gave his church to forgive sins out loud — one man, saying to your face, *I forgive you all your sins*, about the specific thing you just told him. Most people reading this have never once had that sentence said to them, which I regard as the strangest hole in American Christian life.

And the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. The friend on the phone. The believer across the table at the diner. The man in the folding chair in the church basement at seven o'clock on a Tuesday who says, to a person who has just admitted the worst thing about himself, *Christ died for that too.*

Five. Not two.

Read that list again, because it contains a surprise. Most Christians who know anything about Lutherans expect the sacraments. Some know about absolution. But almost nobody expects the last item, and almost nobody has ever heard it preached — and Luther sets it down in the same breath as baptism, with no apology and no downgrading.

I intend to take him seriously about that, and it is the reason this book is not simply a book about the two sacraments.

Here is the shape of what follows. Two chapters on the preached Word, because it is the one you encounter most often and understand least. Two on baptism, because it is the one that will do you the most good on your worst day. One on absolution, because it is the one almost nobody has ever received and almost everybody needs. Two on the Supper. And one on that last, strange, wonderful item on Luther's list.

Through every one of them, the same question, which I want you to keep in your hand like a key:

Where is forgiveness handed to me, and how would I know I got it?

Not *do I feel forgiven*. Not *have I been sincere enough to qualify*. Where is it handed over, and how would I know.

Because the answer to that question does not change on Saturday, and it does not change at a quarter past two in the morning in a vinyl chair on the fourth floor. That is the entire point of its being outside you.

*This is where the sample ends. The rest of For You is the invitation
it opens onto.*

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