

An Introduction to M. F. Sadler's *The Second Adam and the New Birth*:
Looking at Salvation through the Lens of the Covenant

By Rich Lusk

Classic Reformed theology has always maintained that the divine-human relationship may be looked at from two perspectives.¹ On the one hand, we can look at things from the perspective of God's sovereignty. God has planned and controls whatsoever comes to pass. Every event in history is simply the outworking of his eternal decree, according to his irresistible purpose. God has graciously predestinated a great multitude for eternal life in Christ, while others have been justly foreordained for eternal destruction because of their sin. Of course, the identity of the elect and reprobate are known only unto God in an ultimate sense.

On the other hand, we have the covenantal perspective (for lack of a better term). We come to know (in a creaturely way) God's decree of election and reprobation through his administration of the covenant. God makes promises and gives commands to a visible, publicly identifiable community. These people must reciprocate his love. Humans, after all, are responsible agents. They make choices. While salvation is entirely a work of God's grace, it is also true that we must work (Phil. 2:12-13). We must believe. We must repent. We must obey. We must persevere. We must participate in the life of the covenant community, with its signs and seals. Of course, our faithful participation in the covenant is itself a gift of grace (including our faith – Eph. 2:8-10), but it also something we are responsible for. Reformed theology has always upheld both the sovereignty of God as well as the creaturely freedom of humanity (cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapters 3 and 9), though at times, there has been a severe imbalance in favor of emphasizing God's control at the expense of human agency.

The book you hold in your hands is perhaps the finest treatment ever written of the "covenantal" side of salvation. It is a look at our salvation from the bottom up. This book does not say everything that could be said about God's covenantal administration, of course. Nor does it say everything that needs to be said about divine sovereignty or human responsibility. It is not a comprehensive theology of salvation by any stretch.

But what M. F. Sadler does say, he says very well. Sadler's book concisely unpacks the covenantal side of salvation primarily in terms of baptism and the church. In baptism, we enter formally and publicly into a covenant relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ. We enter into the church, which is Christ's kingdom, body, and bride. This covenant relationship is gracious. And yet it is also conditional. The baptismal covenant bestows new life and forgiveness, but it also requires persevering faith and repentance. In baptism, we are united to Christ and his people, and offered all the promises of the gospel, but we must respond accordingly.

¹ For a contemporary exposition of these two perspectives, see John Frame's excellent book, *No Other God*, especially pages 95ff.

As Sadler convincingly demonstrates, this baptismal grace belongs to the entire covenant community. The baptismal indicative precedes and grounds the covenant's moral imperatives. This objective covenant standing is used repeatedly in Scripture as an incentive to holiness (e.g., Col. 3:12ff) and a challenge to perseverance (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:24-10:13). In light of this covenant objectivity, those who apostatize are said to have fallen from grace (e.g., Gal. 5:4) and cut themselves off from Christ (Jn. 15:1-8). Sadler's book unfolds this covenant theology in simple, straightforward terms.²

This is not to say Sadler views the church as reservoir of grace. Rather, his point is that the church is the sign and seed form of the new order of things Christ came to establish. Thus, the church is both the instrument and agent of applying Christ's salvation, as well as the form that salvation takes in the world.

Sadler writes from within the Anglican tradition, but he is perhaps best regarded as an Augustinian Christian, or a Reformed Catholic.³ The hallmark of Augustinianism is a theological combination of sovereign grace with a high doctrine of sacramental efficacy (see chapter 16, 19-20, and Appendices B and C). Since the Reformation, these two aspects of biblical teaching have appeared to be in tension, with Romanists choosing the sacraments and Calvinists choosing predestination. But in reality, predestination and sacramental efficacy are fully compatible, as Sadler argues.⁴ There is no need to choose, even if we cannot fully explain their

² Acknowledging the two-sidedness of God's covenant administration is virtually inescapable in any orthodox system of theology because it is the only alternative to either legalism or antinomianism. On the one hand, the covenant counters the presumptuous professor by demanding faith and repentance from the heart. The covenant chides the lethargic and disobedient within the church by reminding them that they are sinning in the face of grace. On the other hand, the covenant answers the anxious believer's uncertainties by giving him direct, personalized promises of God's love and favor. The poor, doubting Christian is pointed to the covenant ordinances as tangible proof that he is in a state of grace. Both the covenant demands and promises point us to Jesus as the one in whom and through whom the covenant is kept.

³ Sadler's theology is basically that of Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. Cranmer, of course, was regarded as one the leading Reformers of the sixteenth century, along with Martin Luther and John Calvin. The theology of his prayer book was heavily shaped by Martin Bucer, who spent time in England working alongside Cranmer. While the prayer book eventually became very controversial, it is part of a common liturgical and theological heritage, shared by Presbyterians and other British-American Reformed churches. We should note that the *BCP* predates the widescale break up of British Protestants into various denominations and factions. See Jules Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America: Changing Patterns Since 1787*, for insight into Anglican-Presbyterian interaction over liturgical and sacramental issues. For a thorough examination of the prayer book's theology, see another excellent work by Sadler, *Church Doctrine – Bible Truth*.

⁴ Rejecting this Augustinian synthesis was B. B. Warfield's mistake in his essay, "Augustine," found in volume 4 of his *Works*. See pages 127-131. Unfortunately, the paradigm Warfield suggested has become commonplace. Warfield writes, "Two children were struggling in the womb of his mind . . . The problem which Augustine bequeathed to the Church for solution, the Church required a thousand years to solve." But the problem is really no problem at all, unless we have already assumed that predestination and sacramental grace are incompatible. The early Reformers identified no such problem, as a close reading of Calvin's *Institutes* bears out. Thus, we must strongly disagree with Warfield's conclusion: "For the Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church." In reality, it was the Anabaptists, not Calvin or Luther, who felt pressure to pit Augustine's ecclesiology against his soteriology. Unlike Warfield, Calvin, Luther, Bucer, Cranmer, and the other leading Reformers did not

relationship. Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Bucer, and so on, held to both the sovereignty of God in salvation and to the sacraments as effectual means of salvation.

Sadler represents classical Calvinism and neo-Augustinianism in their purest form, uncorrupted by American revivalism or individualism. Calvin's view of the structure of the covenant is identical to that set forth by Sadler. Calvin knew there was a sense in which the visible church had to be identified as the elect people. In his sermons on Deuteronomy, he says,

Now then it is of God's free election that we have his Word preached unto us and that we have his Gospel and Sacraments. And therein, we have reason to confess that he has shown himself generous to us . . . But for all that [love shown to us by God in the covenant administration of Word and Sacrament], in the meantime he holds to himself those he so wishes in order that people should not trust the outward signs except by faith and obedience, knowing that although we have been chosen to be of the Body of Christ, yet if we do not make that election to our profit, God can well enough cut us off again, and reserve a final number to himself.

Calvin saw the sacraments as "badges of his fatherly election." Thus, Calvin and Sadler are agreed on the objectivity and graciousness of God's covenant. (Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy should be compared to chapter 5 and Appendix A of Sadler's work, which articulate a doctrine of election from the Hebrew Scriptures.)

In addition, Calvin and Sadler both held to a form of baptismal regeneration, though they used this language quite differently than evangelicals do today when they reject it. In his answer to the Council of Trent, Calvin wrote:

That this may be more clear, let my readers call to mind that there is a two-fold grace in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun, and goes on making progress during the whole of life.

Calvin and Sadler, in line with the historic Catholic church, taught that God worked through baptism as his instrument in granting new life. But baptism is only a beginning, as Calvin notes; it is not a complete salvation in itself, apart from ongoing faith and repentance. Thus, there is no place for presumption or a barren formalism. In fact, Sadler, like Calvin, strongly emphasizes that baptism must be followed up by Christian education, including covenant nurture and discipleship (pages 226ff).

Sadler did not use baptismal regeneration to cancel out the need for conversion; indeed baptismal regeneration is considered the corollary of and basis for conversion (pages 19ff). Baptism puts us in Christ's kingdom, to be sure, but by itself does not guarantee final glorification. In baptism, we are united to Christ and his people. But this grace offered and given in baptism must be received and maintained by faith. We must live up to and live out of our baptismal status (or, to put in the language of the Westminster Larger Catechism, we must "improve" our baptisms).

Because baptism comes with a promise, genuine faith may draw assurance from the sacrament. Sadler, like Calvin, is deeply concerned with pastoral practice, not just theoretical theological questions. Calvin wrote, "Thus, you see that our

think a high doctrine of the church and sacraments presented "great obstacles" to a doctrine of salvation by sovereign grace. We need the "whole Augustine," so to speak - his teaching on both predestination and sacramental efficacy.

baptism becomes precious to us when we use it as a shield to deflect all assailing doubt." Baptism is a shield against doubt precisely because it brings with it God's sure word of forgiveness:

We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.

Sadler echoes this teaching of Calvin throughout his work.

The same cluster of covenantal truths is found in the teaching of the Westminster Standards as well, though it has not always been faithfully maintained in the Westminsterian tradition. In Westminster Shorter Catechism 85, three things are required of us for salvation: faith, repentance, and diligent use of the outward means of grace. In other words, we are ordinarily bound to the external means of Word and sacrament because these are the instruments through which God has promised to give us Christ and his benefits. Question 91 refers to the sacraments as "effectual means of salvation."

Of course, this close linkage of covenant, church, and salvation has unquestionable biblical support, which Sadler is at pains to demonstrate with bountiful biblical quotations. Note, for example, the nexus found in Acts 2:14-47: The people *believed* what Peter *preached* to them, *repented* of their sin, and were *baptized*. This package of blessings is coordinated with entrance into the *church* and is called *salvation* (2:47). Thus, Acts 2 affirms the means of grace and church membership are ordinarily necessary to receive eternal life -- not because these means are efficacious in themselves to produce salvation, but because Christ communicates, or bestows, his redemptive mercy through them. In other words, life in the church is the *way* to final redemption. Salvation is found in the context of the covenant because God's design is ultimately a restored, recreated humanity.

Indeed, it is in the ordained practices of the church (Word, sacraments, prayer) that Christ's promise to be with his people is most directly manifest (cf. Mt. 18:20). Faith seeks Christ where he has promised to be found. Faith receives Christ in his appointed means. Faith unites us to Christ by the work of the Spirit in these ordinances. The means of grace are objective instruments through which salvation is offered; faith is the subjective instrument by which that salvation becomes ours.

Sadler shows with copious biblical quotations that this doctrine of covenantal salvation is pervasive in Scripture. The people of God are addressed as recipients of grace -- and this is so, even in the case of very corrupt and nearly apostate churches like Corinth and Galatia. Those who break the covenant are never excused on the ground that grace was withheld or that their baptisms were defective. Sadler's extensive quotations from great saints through history show that he is not peddling a novel, idiosyncratic doctrine either, but a view that has had widespread acceptance in the history of the church.

Some Reformed readers may be troubled by Sadler's occasional harsh words about Calvin. Sadler says Calvin was clear headed but cold hearted (page 278). This is a common but unfortunate misconception. Nevertheless, Sadler still shows an appreciation for Calvin's sacramental theology. If anything, Sadler's problem with Calvin is that he didn't go as far as the English Reformers in integrating

predestination and sacramental efficacy into a total package. But a good case could be made that Calvin was more like Sadler than Sadler was aware. After all, they both trace their theological heritage back to Augustine. And Sadler's *real* beef is with later Calvinists who degenerated from Calvin's more holistic position.⁵ At several points, he makes clear his quarrel is with *modern* Calvinists (e.g., page 79,127), particularly their bifurcation of the church and salvation, and their denial of sacramental grace.

Sadler is an astute biblical theologian. He grasps the two Adam architecture of the biblical narrative. Union with Adam is the root of original sin; regeneration into Christ, the Second Adam, is the answer. Regeneration is understood by Sadler primarily as an objective, redemptive-historical reality, synonymous with the kingdom of God. Like Calvin, Sadler focuses soteriology on union with Christ, rather than discrete particles of an *ordo salutis*. And like Calvin, he views Israel's covenant as a typological forerunner of the church's new covenant. The structure of the covenant, in terms of promise/demand and blessing/curse, remains the same, even though these things have been intensified in the new age. The movement from old covenant to new does not entail a movement away from communal concerns to purely individualistic concerns. Both Calvin and Sadler pay careful attention to the language with which inspired authors address the visible covenant community. Both Calvin and Sadler emphasize that salvation takes covenantal shape – which is to say, it takes shape in the church.

Sadler situates his understanding of election within a larger doctrine of union with Christ, since Christ himself is preeminently the Elect One. Sadler clearly has a doctrine of individual election (e.g., pages 141, 208f, 269f) – he is no Arminian -- but like Calvin and Augustine, he also emphasizes Scripture's teaching on corporate election (e.g., 94f, 209). Individual election in Christ is realized and fulfilled in the context of the corporately elect community. Of course, this is also the point made by the final statement of the 17th Article of Sadler's Anglican confession of faith:

"Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God." In other words, we evaluate the status of ourselves and others in terms of God's revealed Word (the covenant), not in terms of guesses about the eternal decree (cf. Dt. 29:29). Election is a comfort because in looking to Christ we come to know our own election in him.

Why has the perspective set forth by Sadler been largely ignored? Reformed Catholics have always been misfits on the American religious scene. They simply don't fit into the predominantly (ana)baptistic theological mix that has come to characterize American Protestantism. Evangelicals hold many truths in common, such as the inspiration and authority of Scripture, salvation by grace, justification by faith, and so on. These are no doubt central, core doctrines. But evangelicals are also amazingly uninterested in the sacraments. Sacraments play almost no role in

⁵ To put this point another way, Sadler's problem is with those extreme Calvinists within neo-Puritanism who reduced the full orb'd system of Calvinism to predestination (or to the "TULIP," the acronym for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints). In reality, classical Calvinism is about the church, sacraments, and covenant every bit as much as it is about predestination.

evangelicalism's self-definition, devotional praxis, counseling on assurance, and so forth. The sacraments are not part of evangelicalism's demarcation of orthodoxy, over against liberalism. In fact, if evangelicals and liberals have any one thing in common it's that neither side sees the sacraments as central to the gospel.

The danger of downgrading the sacraments is that biblical religion will be turned into a quasi-Gnostic system of truth, as Sadler recognized long ago (pages 169-70). Our a-sacramental theology is bound up in our individualism and radically privatized view of religion. Propositions are privileged over rites, turning biblical faith into an ideology, or a philosophy of life, or a worldview. Of course, Christianity *includes* ideas, a philosophy of life, and a worldview. But it cannot be *reduced* to these things. Christianity, after all, is a religion built around the incarnation of the Son of God. We aren't saved by ideas; we are saved by (Christ's) embodied actions. Word and deed always go together in Scripture. The sacraments must be understood as actions *of God* through creaturely means.⁶ Without efficacious sacraments, God's only access to us is through the intellect. But this turns Christian faith into a new rationalism (or Socinianism, as Sadler shows, e.g., page 145).

Thus, the sacraments are integral to the gospel, even though they do not guarantee salvation apart from faith any more preaching does. God is free to work when and how and where he pleases, to be sure, but *ordinarily* he chooses to apply salvation to us through his appointed means of grace (preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper) in the context of the covenant community. Sadler's book will help us understand what we mean when we corporately confess in the Nicene Creed "one baptism for the remission of sins." Sadler's book will help us recover the "churchly" nature of salvation and the sacramental aspects of Christian piety.

Sadler's book is not a perfect remedy to our ills. As might be expected, the work partakes of the philosophical weaknesses of the late nineteenth century. Occasionally, Sadler lapses into a nature/grace schema. At several points his exegesis could be significantly refined. But Sadler's treatise is important because it reminds us that God's salvation comes to us through the church and through his external means. He refocuses our attention on the macrocosm of the biblical narrative, rather than the microcosm of our individual experience. This book is well worth reading, despite the archaic syntax and overly formal style.

Sadly, Sadler has largely been forgotten by history. Even within his native Anglicanism, he is overlooked. Other nineteenth century British and American theologians continue to have their works reprinted and read (e.g., J. C. Ryle, Robert Dabney, and Charles Hodge). Sadler should be a part of that group simply because he has something so distinctive and so classically Christian to say to us. His voice should be heard in contemporary discussion, for it is the voice of the church fathers, such as Augustine, and the great Reformers, including Calvin and Cranmer.

⁶ Sadler points out that no one baptizes himself. Baptism is done by Another and received passively. In other words, a proper understanding of baptismal efficacy is actually a powerful safe guard to *sola gratia*. It reinforces Luther's word of counsel to Melancthon, "The whole gospel is outside of you." We can add the further observation that no one is baptized alone. In other words baptism is done in a communal context. It is inescapably public, and therefore political (since it inducts one into the kingdom of Jesus Christ and obligates one to loyal service under his lordship).

I have been tremendously blessed by reading this work from Sadler as well as several others. I providentially stumbled across Sadler a few years ago when I was reading through old issues of the *Mercersburg Review*. The Mercersburg movement, led by the likes of John Williamson Nevin, Philip Schaff, and Emanuel Gerhart, represented a short-lived attempt to establish Reformed Catholicism on American soil. For all its brilliance, the movement flamed out rather quickly. But as I was working through the old Mercersburg material, I came across a glowing review of the second edition of Sadler's *The Second Adam* in the January, 1868 issue. J. W. Santee's synopsis made it quickly evident to me that Sadler's biblical-theological handbook on baptism could be just the kind of thing the today's evangelical church needs. Perhaps God will choose to revive a Reformed Catholic movement in America thanks in part to a rediscovery of Sadler's work.

Duane and Sara Garner have done Christendom a great service by re-typesetting this forgotten classic and making it available to the modern reader. Sadler's book is far more than an antique or an historical curiosity. To be sure, we still need biblical-theological studies of baptism and the covenant written in our time and more in line with our own language. But Sadler's fine piece can go a long way towards helping us recover the rich, full orbbed Reformed and Catholic faith that has been largely eclipsed in American evangelicalism.