

PART II: THE LORD'S SUPPER

A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SACRAMENTS

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*[One who despises the sacrament] is like a sick person who on a whim eats and drinks what is forbidden to him by the doctor. They should regard the use of the Sacrament just like a precious antidote against the poison that they have in them.*¹

The Lutheran Church acknowledges only two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In *A Lutheran Understanding of the Sacraments: Part I*, an examination of the identification of a sacrament was made. In addition, Baptism was considered and researched from an entirely Lutheran perspective. This paper will explore the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Synoptic Gospels) record in detail what occurred during the last supper the Lord shared with His disciples. This supper was not an ordinary meal – it was a Passover meal.

The Passover was one of the three annual festivals in which all of the Jewish people were to pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. During the Passover, the Jewish people commemorate the Exodus from Egypt when God freed His people from the bondage of slavery. Not only is this meal shared with the entire family, but all Jewish families will corporately eat and remember God's grace and mercy shed upon them. During the first Passover, God gave specific instructions to Moses concerning the Passover. Moses, in turn, relayed God's instructions to the people. God instructed each family to select a perfect lamb, one without blemish, from the flock. This lamb was slain and eaten during the Passover by the family. In addition, the blood of the lamb was painted on the

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Second Edition, Translated by William Hermann Theodore Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 439.

doorposts of the houses where God's people lived. During the night, God sent an Angel of Death to Egypt. If the Angel of Death saw the blood, the Angel would pass over the house.² If the blood of the lamb was not present on the doorposts, the firstborn son of the household was killed. This meal was celebrated year after year by God's people, up to and including the time of Jesus Christ.

The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. The fulfillment ended many of the Old Testament laws God put into place that pointed forward to the coming Savior. For example, the ceremonial laws were never meant to be perpetual. God never desired sacrifices, although He did command that they be offered by His people.³ The sacrifices were preparing His people for the coming Messiah. The Incarnation of Christ is a period of transition between the closing of the Old Covenant and opening of the New Covenant. Although the covenants have the same God and Savior, the people of the Old Covenant saw Christ only in a dim light. However, the people of the New Covenant see Christ as a flaming torch.⁴ While Passover was a sacrament of the Old Covenant, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the New Covenant. While Passover displayed redemption from a shadowy view, the Lord's Supper displays redemption in its full light.

We are people of the New Covenant. To answer the question, "What is the Lord's Supper?" we must answer this question as New Covenant Christians who look back at

² The translation into English of the Hebrew words used to describe the pass over event has been questioned. Some indicate that God "passed over" the houses painted with the blood of the lamb. However, there is good reason to believe that God "covered" the houses painted with the blood while the Angel of Death passed over.

³ Psalm 40:6; 51:16, Matthew 9:13; 12:7

⁴ Zecariah 12:6

the Old Covenant. When viewed as New Covenant Christians looking back at the Old Covenant, certain answers become clearer. First, the Lord's Supper is an ordinance instituted by Christ Himself, in other words, a sacrament. Passover was commanded by God to be received by His people until the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Likewise, the Lord's Supper was commanded by Christ to be received by His people until the consummation.⁵ In addition, the Lord's Supper is not merely bread and wine. Just as Baptism is not simply water, the Lord's Supper is joined with God's Word.⁶ Next, the Lord's Supper is celebrated corporately and not individually. Passover was celebrated not only by extended families at one sitting, but all extended families celebrated the meal at the same time. Certainly, exceptions occurred, but the general idea of the Passover celebration was a meal commemorating the deliverance from slavery by all of God's people. The Lord's Supper is to be distributed and received in the same manner – by the entire assembly. Thirdly, Passover was restricted to only God's people. Outsiders were not welcome to participate in the meal. Likewise, the Lord's Supper is celebrated and eaten only among believers in Christ. Lastly, Passover focused on the body and blood of the sacrificial lamb that freed the people from the yoke of Egyptian slavery. The body and blood of the lamb set the people free. The family ate the entire lamb during the festival. During the Lord's Supper, believers eat the body and blood of the sacrificial lamb that freed the people from the yoke of slavery to sin. The body and blood of Jesus Christ forgives the sins of the people.

Many debates have stirred concerning the changes that may or may not take place to the bread and the wine during the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholics teach that

⁵ The return of Christ.

⁶ McCain, *Concordia*, 432.

“transubstantiation” occurs, which means that the bread is no longer bread and the wine is no longer wine, but instead become the physical flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The writers of the Lutheran Confessions believed this teaching to be “sophistic cunning” and refused to accept the teaching.⁷ Some Lutherans have taught that the substance⁸ of the bread and wine remain alongside the substance of Christ’s body and blood, i.e. a local physical presence. In this teaching, the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but Christ’s Presence is also present (in substance). This teaching, known as “consubstantiation”, was taught by Duns Scotus and has been erroneously associated with Martin Luther. Luther also debated Huldrych Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, who taught that the bread and wine simply remained bread and wine and the Lord’s Supper was nothing more than celebration of what Christ did for His people. Orthodox Lutherans hold to a Real Presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Christ clearly taught His disciples in the upper room, “This is my body”⁹ and “This is my blood”¹⁰. As such, the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper.¹¹ Luther refused to debate on exactly *how* this occurred and simply referred to this as a Sacramental Union between Christ and the elements.

WHO IS TO ADMINISTER THE LORD’S SUPPER?

As mentioned in the paper *A Lutheran Understanding of the Sacraments: Part I*, great care must be taken to keep order in the church. Certain circumstances permit the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁸ Words such as “substance” and “accidents” are philosophical terms that have certain associated meanings – especially pertaining to this discussion. “Substance” refers to the actual object, while “Accidents” refers superficial elements of the object such as taste and appearance.

⁹ Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19

¹⁰ Matthew 26: 28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20

¹¹ McCain, *Concordia*, 35.

administration of Baptism by lay people. However, these cases are certainly few in number. Concerning the Lord's Supper, only those rightly called should administer the sacrament.

Luther covers a rather unusual question in his Large Catechism. The question was "Can even a wicked priest serve and administer the sacrament?"¹² Unfortunately, the battles of sin we war against today were present even during Luther's day. As such, we must continue to keep in mind that although a called minister of Word and Sacrament may extend his hand to distribute the bread and wine, it is God who communes the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, a person who distributes the sacrament in an unworthy manner still distributes the body and blood of Christ.

HOW IS ONE TO ADMINISTER THE LORD'S SUPPER?

According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Christ 1) took the bread and blessed it; 2) gave the bread to His disciples; and 3) the disciples received and ate the bread. Accordingly, these three acts of Christ are the model and form of the sacrament. Therefore, proper sacramental administration must include: 1) consecration of the bread and wine; 2) distribution of the bread and wine; and 3) consumption of the bread and wine.¹³ If any of these three parts are omitted, there is no presence of a sacrament and no forgiveness of sins.

¹² *Ibid.*, 434.

¹³ Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Third Edition, revised, Translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 572.

Consecration of the Bread and Wine: In order to consecrate the elements, we turn to the Holy Scriptures, the infallible and inerrant Word of God, to seek a properly inspired blessing. Paul recapitulates the blessing from Christ during the supper with His disciples. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes:

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 11:23** For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This blessing, or some similar translation¹⁴, is a proper blessing of consecration and must be proclaimed to the assembly. This is important since many Lutheran denominations have begun to utilize a Eucharistic Prayer in which these words of institution are included. God knows what He has done for His people – He sent His Son, His only Son, whom He loved to die on a cross. He does not need to be reminded of His actions. However, the sinful people of this world need to hear the words and see the bread and wine before them so that they remember and understand.

Distribution of the Bread and Wine: If the bread and wine are consecrated and then withheld, what good have they served? In order to be a valid sacrament, both the bread and wine must be distributed to God's people. During Luther's life, the priests withheld the wine for themselves and offered the laity only the bread. Luther argued that Christ commanded both must be distributed. In Luther's argument, he stated that, if a person

¹⁴ The exact wording is not as important as the meaning and intention. We must realize that the Holy Scriptures that we read today is a translation from Kione Greek. Therefore, not all translations will be identical and, in fact, will differ from language to language, yet still all are equally valid.

only received the bread, they would still receive the body and blood of Christ. However, since Christ divinely instituted His Supper and commanded that both be distributed, we must obey our sovereign Lord. Upon distributing the bread and wine, it would be most proper to remind the person receiving, "...given/shed for you". In other words, when the bread is distributed remind the person, "The body of Christ given for you." Likewise, when distributing the wine, remind the person, "The blood of Christ shed for you".

Consumption of the Bread and Wine: If the bread and wine are properly consecrated and distributed to God's people, but the people do not consume them, what good have the elements served? In order to be a valid sacrament, the bread and wine must also be consumed.

There are many other questions concerning quantity and quality of the bread and wine. For instance, what type of bread should be used in the sacrament, leavened or unleavened? How much bread should be used, a small wafer or a large hunk? What makeup of bread should be used, white or wheat? These types of questions also apply to the wine as well. What type of wine should be used, red or white? May the "fruit of the vine" be served (i.e., May grape juice be served)? In addition to the questions concerning quantity and quality of the bread and wine, certain questions concerning mode are often discussed. For instance, should we use common cup, individual cups, or intinction? The elders and pastor of the assembly must discuss and decide the answers to all of these questions.

WHO IS TO RECEIVE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

A person who truly believes in these words, "Given...and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" is truly worthy to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Interestingly, the text above from 1 Corinthians 11 used to consecrate the bread and wine may include one additional verse:

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 11:23** For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

In Luther's Small Catechism, he discusses who receives the sacrament in an unworthy manner? Luther writes, "...anyone who does not believe these words [given...and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins], or doubts, is unworthy and unfit."¹⁵ Later, in the Formula of Concord, Article VII, additional information is written, "We believe, teach, and confess also that there is only one kind of unworthy guest: those who do not believe".¹⁶ Those who receive the bread and wine in an unworthy manner receive judgment and condemnation. This is the only kind of unworthy recipient of the Lord's Supper.

This principle of worthy versus unworthy is important to understand because many future decisions will be addressed upon the called leader's discernment of the Holy Scriptures. Many difficult decisions will be made on the understanding of worthy versus

¹⁵ McCain, *Concordia*, 343.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 489.

unworthy recipients. For instance, should strangers be allowed to approach the altar and receive the sacrament? Should aunts and uncles (cousins, friends, etc.), of members be permitted to approach the altar and receive the sacrament? Should these people be examined first? Should they at least be warned? The elders and pastor of the assembly must address all of these questions and proper policies put into place so that the members know what to expect and why.

With so much focus on *who* should be permitted to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, sometimes the understanding of *why* receive the Lord's Supper is overlooked. Of course, Christ commanded us to do this.¹⁷ However, the sacrament brings forgiveness of sins. The comfort of the sacrament is that when the heart feels that the burden of sin is becoming too heavy, new power and refreshment might be gained.¹⁸ This is the effect of receiving the sacrament.

CONCLUSION

Luther described the union of bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ as a "sacramental union". This is distinctly Lutheran. This is also a very distinct type of union.¹⁹ Luther spent a great deal of his time denying accusations of exactly *what* he taught. For Luther, he believed that people spend too much time attempting to logically and to philosophically understand *what* occurs to the bread and wine in the sacrament. Luther's idea of a "sacramental union" may be simplified in the following manner: "it is

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹⁹ In other words, this is not like the union of God and man in Christ (hypostatic union). Nor is this like the three-in-one union of the Trinity. Nor is this like the union Christ and the believer (mystical union).

bread and it is Christ's body...how it occurs, I do not know...but Christ says that it does and I believe Him".