

The Sacrament of the Altar

1 Corinthians 11:23-32

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In the church at Corinth, the Holy Communion was celebrated in the context of an evening meal. The congregation would gather in the morning for worship. Then they would re-assemble in the evening for the love feast, a supper at the end of which the Holy Communion was administered. Unfortunately, divisions, heresies, and selfishness had caused the whole thing to degenerate to such a point that Paul had to tell them that they came together “not for the better, but for the worse” (1Co 11:17). He had to instruct and correct them so that they wouldn’t come together “unto condemnation” (v. 34). With their divisions and selfishness, their lack of self-examination, and their failure to discern the Lord’s body, many were communing unworthily and eating and drinking damnation to themselves (vss. 28, 29). God’s judgment was falling upon many in the congregation. Therefore, Paul wrote to recall them to a proper use of the Lord’s Supper.

We modern Lutherans are frequently tempted to misuse the Sacrament. False doctrines which deny the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper are rampant in Christian literature and media. The breakdown of discipline in our churches in these sad days often results in a cavalier attitude toward the reception of the sacrament. Many give no thought to self-examination and preparation, and simply go with the herd, without regard for what is given in the sacrament. Some Lutherans even consider the sacrament a deterrent to growth because it makes the service longer and because proper administration of the sacrament requires that new-comers be instructed and give an account of their faith before they are admitted to the altar. We are always in danger of minimizing the divinely instituted Lord’s Supper and treating what is given in it lightly to our harm. Therefore, it behooves us to consider the teaching of the Word of God concerning the Holy Communion so that, by the grace of God, we might have a right faith concerning what is given in the Sacrament, and how it is to be used.

1 Corinthians 11:23a - For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you,

Paul here says that what he taught concerning Holy Communion was what he had received from the Lord. He delivered what he first received. The Sacrament of the Altar is not a mere human ceremony developed because someone thought it would be a good way to remember Jesus. The Lord's Supper is a divine institution. Paul uses the same language about receiving and delivering here as he does in 1 Cor. 15:3 about the apostolic gospel which he taught. He received it from Jesus and passed it on as a called apostle. The gospel and the sacrament go together hand in glove. Indeed, the Lord's supper is gospel; an *acted* sermon or proclamation of the death of Christ. Therefore, as the church is constituted and sustained by the gospel, so it is sustained and strengthened by the divinely instituted Sacrament of the Altar.

1 Corinthians 11:23b - That the Lord Jesus the *same* night in which he was betrayed took bread: 24 And when he had given thanks, he brake *it*, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. 25 After the same manner also *he took* the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it*, in remembrance of me.

The elements that Christ used (and uses) were bread and wine. If we to have the Lord's Supper, we must use bread and wine. The bread is simple bread, and the wine is ordinary wine, the fermented juice of the grape. If we use anything else, even if we think we have good reasons for doing so, it is not the Lord's Supper, but a supper of our own making. The bread may be leavened or unleavened (Christ used unleavened in the context of a Passover Seder), and the wine may be red or white, undiluted or diluted with water, just so long as it is real wine.

Of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper Christ says, "This is my body, which is broken for you", "This cup is the New Testament in my blood". St. Matthew's account of the words of institution says a bit more: "...which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (26:28). (The words of institution used in our Divine Service are a harmonizing of the various accounts of the Lord's Supper in Matthew,

Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians, meant to convey everything that Jesus said in the institution of the Supper.) These words clearly indicate that Christ teaches that the bread of Holy Communion *is* the body of Christ, and the wine of Holy Communion *is* the blood of Christ. We call this the Real Presence.

Lutherans do not believe that the bread and wine merely symbolize or represent the body and blood of Christ. This is crass false doctrine which plays fast and loose with the words of Scripture.

Lutherans do not believe in transubstantiation. This is a speculative Aristotelian idea that says that the bread and wine are no longer bread and wine. They are transformed into the body and blood so that they only appear to be bread and wine. This violates what Paul says in ch. 10:

1 Corinthians 10:16 - The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

The Word teaches that the blessed bread and cup are the communion of the body and blood of Christ. The bread and wine do not disappear.

Lutherans do not believe in consubstantiation. This is another aristotelian speculation that maintains that the bread and body are two distinct substances; a kind of “cracker and cream cheese” affair.

Lutherans believe in accordance with Scripture, that, because of the sacramental union effected by the Word and Institution of Christ, “although the body and bread are two distinct natures... nevertheless when they are united and become an entirely new thing, they lose their distinction as far as that new unity is concerned and in so far as they become and are one thing. Therefore they are also called and spoken of as one thing, without one of the two having to perish and cease to be, but both bread and body may remain... It is no more common bread... but... body bread... It is no longer mere wine... but blood wine...” (Luther). This is what Lutherans mean when we speak of the body and blood of Christ “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. Body/bread; Blood/wine. There is no philosophical speculation here, just a simple faith in the Word of God.

The body and blood of Christ are given in the sacrament to be eaten and drunk. We receive them orally, in a supernatural manner. We call this oral supernatural reception sacramental eating and drinking. "But what is the benefit of such eating and drinking? That is shown us by these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation" (Small Catechism). The forgiveness, life and salvation which Christ purchased and won for us with His holy precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death, are proclaimed, offered and given in the gospel, and also here in the Holy Communion, that our faith may be grounded in what God does and gives, and not what we do.

Christ says, "This do in remembrance of me." He does not mean that the Lord's Supper is simply an aid to our memory as if it were given so that we could, by mental effort remember Jesus and His death for us. The Communion is not a feast commemorating a dead man, but a "meal fellowship with Him who lives, and who, by reason of His resurrection victory, is actually present among His followers through the administration of Holy Communion" (Brunner). And so Paul says:

1 Corinthians 11:26 - For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

The remembrance is in the eating of this bread (body/bread) and the drinking of this cup (blood/wine) according to the Words of Christ. The Holy Communion is a proclamation of the Lord's death, through which all the benefits and blessings which He won for us at Golgotha once for all, are offered and given here and now, to be received by faith.

Having considered what Holy Communion is and gives, we now move on to consider how we should use it rightly. Jesus says, "This do..." twice. He also says "oft...". The Lord's Supper is intended to be done often until Jesus returns. It is His supper that we are to do, not our own. When we change the elements, or when we change the meaning by denying the Real Presence, it is no longer the Lord's Supper that we celebrate, but a counterfeit supper of our own devising. Therefore, we must insure that

the Word be preached purely and the sacraments be administered in accordance with Christ's institution in our midst.

We know that in the early church the sacrament was celebrated every Sunday. We also know from the Book of Concord that the Lutheran churches during and after the Reformation offered the sacrament every Sunday and on other festivals. Many devout Lutherans, however, remember a time when Holy Communion was celebrated only four times a year, and later, once a month. How did this happen? In the 1700's and 1800's two different but not unconnected movements worked in tandem to push the sacrament into the background. The first was Pietism, a hyper-spiritual movement that emphasized personal piety and religious experience over the Word and Sacraments. The important thing for them was what goes on in one's heart. They minimized the efficacy of the Word and Sacraments. They also taught that one should never receive Communion unless you were *really really* prepared by protracted repentance. This made Christians afraid to receive the sacrament too often. Pietism prepared the way for the second movement, Rationalism, which maintained that religion must be reasonable. Rationalists had little patience with the supernatural, or with mystery. Worship services became long lectures with severely abbreviated liturgies. The Real Presence had no place among rationalists. The result of all this was that by the time Lutherans started coming to America, they were long used to infrequent communion. And in America they found themselves surrounded by Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and other sects, none of whom has a high regard for Holy Communion. It is no wonder that for a long time Lutherans continued to commune only infrequently.

But in the past few generations there has been a slow, steady revival of true confessional Lutheranism in the world. As Lutherans have been rediscovering their true heritage, there has been a growing tendency toward returning to the apostolic and reformation practice of weekly communion. This is good, for it is more in keeping with Jesus' command, "This do... oft...", than thinking of the sacrament as an occasional added extra.

1 Corinthians 11:27 - Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man

examine himself, and so let him eat of *that* bread, and drink of *that* cup. 29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this cause many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge our selves, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

Here Paul warns against eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. Those who eat and drink unworthily are guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord, and eat and drink damnation¹ to themselves. As a result of this misuse of the sacrament, Paul says that many in the Corinthian congregation were weak and sickly, and some had died. Unworthy communicants receive the true body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, but they do so to their harm; they bring down God's judgment upon themselves.

Because of this Paul says, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat... and drink..." (V.28) He also says, "...if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged" (v. 31). We want to make sure that we commune worthily. Worthy reception of the sacrament includes:

1. Repentance. We are to come as sinners acknowledging our need for God's mercy and grace. The impenitent, those who are not sorry for their sins, should not commune. They are unworthy. They are not seeking what the Lord is giving; they think they need no forgiveness.
2. Faith in Christ. We come as believers in Jesus Christ as our only redeemer and savior, trusting Him and not our works to justify us before God. Those whose faith is not centered in Jesus Christ, but in their own works and wisdom, are unworthy.
3. Faith in the Real Presence. We come believing the Words of Christ that the bread and wine are the true body and blood of Christ. To doubt or disbelieve this is to fail to discern the Lord's body. Those who do not discern the Lord's body eat and drink

¹ The alternate reading in the KJV margin is 'judgment'. While the primary reference in our text is to the temporal judgments of God in the form of chastening, such sinning against the body and blood of the Lord, if continued impenitently, will ultimately result in damnation (v. 32).

judgment to themselves.

4. Intention to amend. We come as sinners needing and desiring the forgiveness of sins, and earnestly desiring, with the help of God, to amend our sinful lives. Those who are unconcerned about their sins, or who have no intention to amend, are unworthy and should not commune until they come to repentance.

Repentant sinners who trust in Christ and His Words, and who seek forgiveness and strength for a holy life, are worthy and may commune confidently, even if their faith is weak, for the Lord's Supper was given to strengthen faith. They come desiring and believing in what Christ is giving in the Sacrament. But those who are impenitent, intransigent, and unbelieving, should stay away lest they make matters worse for themselves. The practice of closed communion, though it is criticized by the ignorant and by those who ought to know better, is in reality a practice of loving concern for those whose faith is unknown. Before we admit someone to the Lord's altar we want to make as sure as we can that they can commune worthily² so that they don't inadvertently do themselves harm.

Christ instituted this Sacrament to sustain and strengthen the faith of the baptized. Faith which trusts in Christ and what He does and gives, receives the blessings offered in the Lord's Supper. Such faith also earnestly desires to make proper and worthy use of this gift. This is assured when we remain with Christ and His Words rather than our own works and wisdom.

² We also want to be sure that they are of the same confession of faith, because Holy Communion is also a testimony that those who commune are of the same faith.