

The Lord's Supper: Doctrine and Practice  
Conference of the Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Lincoln, Nebraska  
8 February 2012

## Introduction

We have learned from Franz Pieper that all doctrine may finally be reduced to practice. It makes little sense, then, to speak of being united in doctrine while divided in practice. Divisions in practice are finally to be traced back to a divergence in confession of the doctrine. When the Apostle addresses aberrant uses of the Lord's Supper at Corinth, he calls the congregation back to that which he had received from the Lord as he cites the words whereby Jesus institutes His Supper. If we attempt to correct matters of practice without attention to doctrine, changes will either be cosmetic and short-lived or else seen as legalistic impositions. In diagnosing problematic practices, we best begin examining how the doctrine of the Lord's Supper has been confessed in our midst. That is a question that surely is more comprehensive than can be dealt with in a short presentation here today. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest at least a few historical aspects for your consideration.

## Exegetical Trends

It is instructive to note how so much of contemporary scholarship refuses to begin with the *verba testamenti*. Joachim Jeremais whose *Eucharistic Words of Jesus* would have profound effect on twentieth century New Testament scholarship exemplifies this trend: "The wrong way to develop an understanding of the last supper is to be begin from the words of interpretation, because in this way the so-called 'founding meal' is isolated. Indeed, it ought really to be said that this isolation of the last supper through the centuries has made it very difficult to recognize its...significance. In reality, the 'founding meal' is only one link in a long chain of meals which Jesus shared with his followers and which they continued after Easter. These gatherings at table, which provoked such scandal because Jesus excluded no one from them, even open sinners, and thus expressed the heart of his message, were types of the feast to come in the time of salvation....The last supper has its historical roots in this chain of gatherings."<sup>1</sup>

Jeremias makes the move from Jesus' meals with those deemed outcasts and unrighteous to the Lord's Supper. He sees a continuum between these meals and the sacrament. The contrast between the meals where Jesus sits at table with sinners and the last supper is overlooked by Jeremias. In the last supper, Jesus gathers only the twelve. It is not an open meal, but a supper with those called to the life of discipleship; they had followed Jesus throughout His public ministry. It is no ordinary meal that Jesus partakes of with His followers, but the last supper where He institutes the sacrament of the new testament -the meal of His body and blood.

The particularity of this supper sets it apart from all previous meals. On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus says of the bread "this is my body" and of the cup "this is my blood." No mere cipher for the gift of Himself or His acceptance of the unrighteous, these words speak of His impending sacrifice. They declare the fruits of His sacrifice-body and blood given and shed for you.

The words of Christ's new testament like the cross itself are an offense. They may not be reduced to vague assertions of presence, encounter, or mystery as does Eduard Schweitzer who writes: "...the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is exactly the same as his presence in the world -nothing more, nothing less. It is an event, not an object; an encounter, not a phenomenon of nature; it is Christ's encounter with his church, not

---

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremais, *New Testament Theology* -Volume I: The Proclamation of Jesus, trans. John Bowen (London: SCM Press, 1971), 289-290. For a refutation of Jeremias, see J. Michel Reu, "Can We Still Hold to the Lutheran Doctrine of the Lord's Supper" in *Two Treatises on the Means of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1952), 1-38.

the distribution of a substance".<sup>2</sup> Rather the words of Christ says Werner Elert are "extraordinary...without analogy of any kind."<sup>3</sup>

Historical-critical approaches to Holy Scripture created skepticism as to the reliability of the synoptic and Pauline accounts of sacrament's institution.<sup>4</sup> If uncertainty exists as to the accuracy of the institution narratives, the practice of the Lord's Supper is linked either to the meals of the historical Jesus or the meals of the early church thought of as experiences with the Risen Christ.<sup>5</sup> Both of these approaches shift away from body and blood to events and acts. This shift is demonstrated in the *Manual on the Liturgy-Lutheran Book of Worship*, as the authors seek to make the case for the omission of the post-communion blessing, arguing "This blessing which is provided is optional for a number of reasons. It is a reflection of the medieval mentality which saw the communion in terms of things-bread and wine; body and blood-rather than in terms of a personal encounter with the risen Christ."<sup>6</sup>

## Liturgical Studies

Closely linked to the language of encounter is the piety of human activity. Behind the Second Vatican Council's notion of "liturgy as the work of the people" is an understanding of liturgy that is rooted in ritual performance, re-enactment or cultic activity. The key figure here is Gregory Dom Dix whose book *The Shape of the Liturgy* would exert wide influence in the liturgical reforms that swept across Christendom in the wake of Vatican II. Dix asserts that early eucharistic liturgies exhibit a four-fold pattern: (1) taking of bread and wine; (2) giving of thanks over bread and wine; (3) breaking of bread; (4) eating and drinking<sup>7</sup>

For Dix and his disciples, the celebration of the sacrament is seen as adhering to the pattern of Jesus in the upper room. It is a sort of liturgical application of WWJD -what would Jesus do? Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples to eat and drink. Thus the sacrament is primarily a cultic *mimesis* of Jesus' last supper. Here the accent is not on the promise and gift of Christ's body and blood but on ritual action. The liturgy becomes dramatic reenactment. The similarities with Zwingli are apparent. Performance of the sacrament memorializes Jesus and spurs faith to the knowledge of His atonement. But where are the fruits of the atonement located? Not in body and blood given under bread and wine but in communal, eucharistic memory.

Faithful teaching of the Catechism and liturgical practice coherent with it, will maintain that this Supper, is the Lord's Supper not the Christian's supper to echo Luther. Potent trends within the last century have challenged Luther's assertion as one-sided or narrow. I have already noted the influence of Gregory Dom Dix. Significant

---

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Schweitzer, *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament*, trans. James M. Davis (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 303.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Willi Marxsen writes "It is extremely difficult to refer the contents of the Pauline formula back to Jesus; and in the face of all that we can ascertain about the preaching and activity of Jesus, it is still less likely to assume the institution of a cult by Jesus. Thus the supposition that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper on the eve of his death poses so many difficulties that the careful historian must put more than just a question mark here" -Willi Marxsen, "The Lord's Supper as a Christological Problem" in *The Beginning of Christology*, trans. Lorenz Nieting (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 112.

<sup>5</sup> See Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. A. Steward Todd and James B. Torrance (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978) and *Essays on the Lord's Supper*, trans. J.G.Davies (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy-Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 246-247.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 48. Dix's influence in the LCMS can be seen in the 1969 *Worship Supplement* in "The Holy Eucharist II" with its four actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing. See Commission on Worship-LCMS, *Worship Supplement* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), 60-62). See Oliver Olson's examination of the *fractio panis* uncritically adopted by Lutheran liturgies of this period. Oliver Olson, "The Liturgy and the Concomitant Aspects of the Lord's Supper" in *Lord Jesus Christ, Will You Not Stay: Essays in Honor of Ronald Feuerhahn on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by J. Bart Day et al (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 121-129.

also was the work of the Swedish Archbishop Yngve Brilioth In 1925-26, Brilioth wrote *Eucharistic Faith and Practice*, dedicating it to the ecumenical pioneer, Nathan Söderblom. In this book, Brilioth attempts to forge a path through the doctrinal divisions hardened into closed altars throughout modern Christendom. Through a selective examination of liturgical texts, Brilioth sought to isolate distinctive themes or dimensions of the Sacrament accented by various traditions. While arguing that the central motif of the Sacrament is the Mystery or holy presence, Brilioth sees other dimensions to the holy meal as thanksgiving (eucharist), communion, commemoration, and sacrifice. He concludes his treatment by asserting that no one tradition in Christendom has captured the Sacrament in its wholeness. Instead he says that the Sacrament is like a precious jewel which “shows endless changes of light and colour as it is regarded from different angles. But the light which it refracts is one and the same: the holy Presence, the Mystery. It is true to say that the other aspects of the eucharist are only different sides of the Mystery, or, from the human point of view, different ways of approaching it; and the various forms of liturgy and systems of doctrine which we have surveyed have helped to show the richness of its variety in constantly changing forms. But it is also true that since the early centuries no part of Christendom has succeeded in expressing all aspects together, in their harmony and completeness.”<sup>8</sup>

For Brilioth, the Catechism’s confession of Christ’s body and blood given under bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins could be no more than one aspect of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>9</sup> So in Brilioth’s estimation, Luther corrected some aspects of a distorted medieval piety but was finally unable recapture the fullness of the Sacrament itself and whatever territory Luther reclaimed was finally lost in Lutheran Orthodoxy, Rationalism, and Pietism.

Along with Dix’s liturgical proposal and emerging historical-critical renderings of the place of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament, Brilioth’s work would be influential for Lutherans in revising both the doctrine and the practice of the Lord’s Supper. In the 1960’s and 70’s when air was heavy with ecumenical optimism prompted by the achievements of the Second Vatican Council and the prospect of uniting segmented Lutheran churches the map charted by Brilioth would be eagerly followed by both ecumenically and liturgically. On a popular level this can be seen in a small book written by an LCMS pastor, Herbert Lindemann in 1971, entitled *New Mood in Lutheran Worship*. Lindemann praises the achievements of the Liturgical Movement and gives practical advice as to how they might be implemented in Lutheran congregations to create a new atmosphere for worship marked by celebration and joy. As the title indicates, a different mood is sought. Worship ought to be celebratory, welcoming, and participatory.

### **Systematic and Ecumenical Theology**

Six years later, in a lecture series at Yale Divinity School, the German ecumenical theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg delivered two lectures which would be published in a book entitled *Christian Spirituality*. Like Brilioth before him, Pannenberg thought that Luther preserved the medieval preoccupation with guilt. This prevented the Reformer from moving beyond the categories of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. In fact, Pannenberg suggests that the Reformation may have made matters worse for it accented an individualistic notion of faith in a forensic declaration of justification which did not lead to transformation.

Steven Paulson provides a summary of Pannenberg’s proposal: “To get rid of Protestant guilt and isolation he proposed a search for a better piety, and he believed he had just the one that would help. He called it ‘eucharistic’ piety, which required a new liturgy. Instead of centering everything on preaching law and gospel, and so the forgiveness of sins, he proposed a new liturgy that would produce joy instead of guilt, and sponsor communal, rather than individual, faith. This new piety would center on feelings of joy and the work of giving thanks, and it would be composed of signs indicating that worshipers are visibly united while making Eucharist

---

<sup>8</sup> Yngve Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Evangelical and Catholic*, trans. A.G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1965), 288.

<sup>9</sup> Brilioth writes “This one-sided emphasis was only intensified by the fact that Luther himself used the term ‘forgiveness of sins’ in a broad sense to cover the whole fact of God’s gracious coming to man; and the common use of the term in the narrower sense resulted in serious impoverishment of the idea in the Lutheran churches” (142).

together. In short, he laid out the rationale for what has become known in Lutheran churches as the new 'eucharistic celebration.' Communion is joy, not guilt; communal, not individual, and so is not the act of forgiveness of sinners but the public symbol of the united, joyful kingdom of the resurrected Christ as it makes its pilgrim journey to the promised land. Instead of death, celebrate life; instead of the cross, resurrection; instead of guilt, joy. It was quite glorious to contemplate, as glory always is."<sup>10</sup>

The action in Holy Communion is anthropological, that is, it is the human action of ritual celebration. Micheal Welker writes "The recognition that in holy communion a gathered community celebrates a symbolic community meal is indispensable - and, as we will see, has major consequences."<sup>11</sup> This meal has symbolic function. Here Welker is consistent with the *Arnoldshain Theses* as this document defines the sacrament: "The Supper is an act of worship of the community gathered in Jesus' name."<sup>12</sup> In this act is constituted as "With prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, bread and wine are taken, the Lord's words of institution are spoken, and bread and wine are given to the congregation to eat and to drink."<sup>13</sup>

Welker observes that the term "eucharist" has found wide acceptance among both Roman Catholics and Protestants as it takes the focus away from the elements to the communal action of the assembly.<sup>14</sup> It is an ecumenically-friendly term that is attractive both to Rome and the Reformed. Alasdair I. C. Heron comments "Very early in the ancient church, 'Eucharist' became the established name for the sacrament, as recorded around the middle of the second century by Justin Martyr and perhaps even earlier. It has remained in use ever since in both the Eastern, Greek Church and the Latin, Western Church; and appropriately so, for this is the great **act of thanksgiving** at the very heart of Christian worship. Calvin himself spoke of 'the kind of sacrifice which we have called eucharistic' (i.e. the sacrifice of thanksgiving), and insisted 'this kind of sacrifice is indispensable in the Lord's Supper.' It is no very great jump from Calvin to restore the word itself as an alternative to Supper'; and by doing so we make available to ourselves the most universally used and understood name for the sacrament, one which is free from narrower denominational or confessional associations, and which has for that reason been increasingly employed in modern ecumenical dialogue."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Steven D. Paulson, "What is Essential in Lutheran Worship?" *Word & World* (Spring 2006), 55. Here also Oliver K. Olson, *Reclaiming the Lutheran Liturgical Heritage* (Minneapolis: Reclaim Resources, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Alasdair I. C. Heron, *Table an Tradition: Toward an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), xiii. Lowell Green observes that the term "eucharist" is used only twice in the Lutheran Confessions. See L. Green "The Holy Supper" in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, edited by Robert Preus and Wilbert Rosin (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 207. On the other hand, the Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530 uses Eucharist to identify the chapter on the Lord's Supper. See *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 75. Zwingli's preference for "eucharist" is noted by Geoffrey Bromiley. See G. Bromiley, "Lord's Supper" in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 142. My colleague, Professor Naomi-chi Masaki pointed me to this line by Theodor Kliefoth: "The Lord's Supper is held to in terms of what the congregation does in it, namely, remembering and showing forth the death of Jesus, thanksgiving etc. Therefore they (the Reformed) prefer to call the Lord's Supper by the name Eucharist" T. Kliefoth, *Die urspruengliche Gottesdienstordnung in den deutschen Kirchen lutherischen Bekenntnisses, ihre Destruktion und Reformation* (Rostock and Schwerin: Stiller'sche Hofbuchhandlung, 1847), 27. For a Lutheran analysis of the use of the term "eucharist" for the sacrament see Gerhard Forde, "What's in a Name? Eucharist or the Lord's Supper?" *Logia* (Easteride 1993), 48. Forde comments "An age which has already reduced God pretty much to a meaningless cipher, a sentimentality characterized as 'love in general,' cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that this sacrament is the Lord's Supper not ours. He gives it. He is the gift. We are indeed to give thanks for this unspeakable gift. But the thanksgiving must be quite distinct; it must not displace the gift itself. When the Lord's Supper becomes the Eucharist everything is run together and confused and the sheer gift of the gospel is obscured, if not lost" (48). For Sasse's critique of the terminology of "eucharist" see Hermann Sasse, "Consecration and Real Presence" in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse* edited by Ronald Feuerhahn and Jeffry Kloha (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1995), 300-303. The liturgy contains a "eucharistic prayer." It is Luther's post-communion collect of 1526

Alongside of the activity of thanksgiving, the Supper functions as a sign of mutual acceptance. Welker writes "Yet along with thanksgiving, there is a second center: the communal taking, breaking, and distributing of the bread, and the corresponding symbolic action with the cup and the wine. The action in connection with the bread and wine expresses human beings' welcome and acceptance of each other."<sup>16</sup> This theme then translates into a completely open altar. The Apostles words in I Corinthians 11 are taken by to mean: "The community, the church of Christ, must attend to the right celebration of the Supper. Each person must judge him- or herself. But no one has the power and the authorization to exclude a particular person or a particular group of persons from participation in the Supper! On the contrary, Paul's reproach to the Corinthians applies precisely to a celebration of the Supper which is misused to exercise moral control and for some persons to dominate others."<sup>17</sup>

### A Lutheran Critique

Hailed by many as an ecumenical break through, the new liturgical theology did not deal with the question of what is received in the sacrament as consensus was seen instead in a common ritual pattern. Hermann Sasse saw this consensus as a compromise that spelled death to the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper. His writings on the sacrament beginning in the 1930s and continuing until near the end of his life in 1976 sought to defend the Lutheran doctrine and deepen in congregations an appreciation for a practice consistent with this confession. His writings on the Sacrament of the Altar are in so many ways prophetic of our current circumstances. Sasse saw a genuine Lutheran confession of the sacrament jeopardized by both a non-sacramental, unionizing Protestantism and a Romanizing liturgical movement. Both are unacceptable alternatives as each surrenders the evangelical character of the Lord's Supper. This happens as Lutherans set aside the confession that the Word of Christ Himself gives us His very body and blood to eat and drink in order to accommodate the Reformed. Reformed tendencies are not to be countered by becoming more Roman. Sasse was critical of the liturgical movement for adopting Roman liturgical practices without giving consideration to how these practices embody and alien doctrine that would transform the testament of Christ into a sacrifice. For Sasse the answer to those Lutherans who sought their identity with the Reformed as well as those who saw themselves as drawing their theological identity from Rome was to be found in Article VII of the Formula of Concord.

It was from the Formula that Sasse would argue that the difference between the Lutherans and the Reformed on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is as lively today as it was in the sixteenth century. It is not merely a debate over the *how* of Christ's presence but rather *what* is present. No Christian believes in a *real absence*. That was not the issue at the time of the Reformation nor is it the issue now. Thus communion announcements

---

that gives thanks for the salutary gift of Jesus' body and blood and implores God that this gift would strengthen the communicants in faith toward Him and fervent love toward one another. Eucharist happens in the world as those who have received Christ's body and blood now give themselves to the neighbor in love. For more on this point see Paul Rorem, "Augustine and Luther For and Against Contemporary Spirituality" *Currents in Theology and Mission* (April 2003), 102-103. Also see John T. Pless, "Taking the Divine Service into the Week" *Christ's Gifts in Liturgy: The Theology and Music of the Divine Service*. Edited by Daniel Zager (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 2002), 71-82. Welker notes that the term "eucharist" is more friendly to feminist theologians who find the language of the "Lord's" Supper offensive (Welker, 3). See the critique provided by Oswald Bayer, "The Ethics of Gift" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 2010), 447-468 where he states "Whoever calls the Lord's Supper as a whole 'the Eucharist,' and understands it as such – as an act of thanksgiving – subsumes the 'downward' gift and promise within the 'upward' offering of praise in such a manner that the thanksgiving nullifies the gift. The pure gift is thereby practically overshadowed and, indeed, distorted by the response and the gift in return – even when these are understood pneumatologically in a Trinitarian context and thus relieved of the suspicion of works righteousness" (454).

<sup>16</sup> Welker, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 71. Compare *A Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice* from the Florida-Georgia District of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Contrast with Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966). Elert sees this understanding as "man-centered" and representing the trajectory of Schleiermacher. Elert writes "The concept of fellowship which is here said to characterize the church does not derive from the nature of the church, but the nature of the church is derived from the concept of fellowship" (2).

that ask that those who come to the altar "believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament" are meaningless. As Dr. Albert Collver has demonstrated the language of the real presence is not yet a confession of Christ's body and blood.<sup>18</sup>

The themes that we have isolated in contemporary ecumenical theologies of the Lord's Supper provide a frame of reference for understanding the incessant drive for open communion. After all, if the Supper is a communal recognition of the presence of Jesus as the One who welcomes sinners and an activity of thanksgiving, why ought not all people be urged to participate? Hence the preference of the terminology of "eucharistic hospitality" over against the older language of altar and pulpit fellowship. Closed communion is seen as exclusive (which it is) and thus a stumbling block to mission in a culture that prides itself on being open and inclusive.

When the Lord's Supper is thought essentially an action on the part of the assembly- a "eucharist" or thanksgiving meal - it seems rude and inhospitable to refuse to let others participate. A closed altar is seen as a stumbling block to the growth of the church. Visitors will not understand this practice. So Timothy Wright asserts "Some congregations have a 'closed' policy when it comes to participating in the Eucharist: Only baptized members of the congregation or denomination may receive the bread and wine. This policy will not work in a visitor-oriented service. 'Excluding' guests will turn them off. It destroys the environment that the church tried to create."<sup>19</sup> Churches that insist on closed communion are deemed unfriendly and lacking in missional focus. When variegated understandings of mission define the church rather than the means of grace, closed communion is judged as antiquated practice that contradicts the Gospel.

The words of Christ still stand. He gives us His body to eat. He gives us the blood of His new testament to drink for the forgiveness of our sins. "Around the Lord's Table is gathered the church. At the Table of the Lord, the church knows what it most profoundly is: the body of Christ. There has been no doubt of this since the days of the apostles. Where the Lord's Supper is no longer known or celebrated, there the church dies, irretrievably lost"<sup>20</sup> wrote Hermann Sasse in 1941.

One of Sasse's "letters to Lutheran pastors" is entitled "Word and Sacrament: Preaching and the Lord's Supper."<sup>21</sup> This letter points to the crucial connection between sermon and sacrament, preaching and the Lord's Supper. Preaching is essential to the sacrament. In a sermon on I Corinthians 15 from 1532-33, Luther asserted "For the pulpit can and must alone preserve Baptism, Sacrament, doctrine, articles of faith, and all estates in their purity."<sup>22</sup> Sermon and sacrament stand or fall together. One is not to be played off against the other.

Gracia Grindal advances a caricature that those who are committed to weekly celebrations of the sacrament and liturgical integrity give little attention to quality preaching as a source for poor preaching.<sup>23</sup> Such criticism

---

<sup>18</sup> See Albert B. Collver III, "Real Presence" *A Confession of the Lord's Supper* (Unpublished Phd Thesis, Concordia Seminary-St. Louis, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 122.

<sup>20</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Preface to *Vom Sakrament Des Altars*" in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters- Volume II (1941-1976)* trans. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 12. Sasse was a man who called the church to repentance. It is a salutary thing that Matthew Harrison, Ronald Feuerhahn and others are making Sasse available to us today. We have much to learn from him when it comes to the place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the congregation. He lived and suffered through the decay of Lutheranism in Germany. He has much to say to our situation as well. For an overview of his contributions, see John T. Pless, "Hermann Sasse (1895-1976)" in *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 2011), 298-325 and John Stephenson and Thomas Winger (editors), *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Word and Sacrament: Preaching and the Lord's Supper" in *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 11-35..

<sup>22</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing House, 1955-1986), 28:62. Hereafter abbreviated as LW.

<sup>23</sup> See Gracia Grindal, "On the Decline of Preaching" *Worship Innovations* (June 1996), 1-4

is over-stated and misplaced. One could point out the heavy-handed moralism that has invaded Lutheran pulpits under the influence of American Evangelicalism or the rise of sermons that give exposition of the preacher's life story rather than the proclamation of the biblical text. Nevertheless the criticism might contain a grain of truth. There is an old joke that Methodist preaching is three points and a poem and Lutheran preaching is three points and a few words about the sacrament. Sacramental platitudes abound with predictability. Preaching then ends up as something of a commentary on the liturgy or the significance of the particular day in the church. This is the death of liturgical preaching.

Some of the blame can be placed on Peter Brunner who asserted "Our task is not primarily to expound a text but to interpret an action that takes place in our midst".<sup>24</sup> Here preaching is not seen as the delivery of the words of Jesus, words that are spirit and life, but preaching stands only to interpret the liturgy or point to that which is to come, the sacrament. Preaching is liturgical not only because it occurs in the context of the Divine Service but because it is of one piece with the liturgy where the Lord Christ Himself is giving out His gifts. The sermon itself is a speaking of absolution. Through the words of preaching, God is forgiving sins. Preaching that conforms to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures is God's Word. The sacrament evokes liturgical preaching, that is preaching that lays open the new testament of Christ's blood for troubled consciences. It is not talk about the Gospel or the sacraments but a proclamation of the Gospel that also encompasses the externality of the body and blood we are given in the Supper. In this way the reminder of Gerhard Forde is helpful that the sacrament will not allow the Word "from disappearing into the inner life."<sup>25</sup>

Preaching the Lord's Supper is not done by way of analogy but by proclaiming the Lord's words, their "for you" character. These words Luther understood as the words of Jesus' testament. Incarnation and atonement are comprehended in the word testament<sup>26</sup> for the God who makes this testament takes on flesh and blood in order to die. "What is the whole gospel" Luther asks "but and an explanation of this testament?"<sup>27</sup>

Along with preaching there is catechesis. Luther's treatment of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Catechisms has the pastoral aim of preparing people for a salutary reception of the Lord's body and blood. His pastoral goal was that the Christian would know what the sacrament is, the blessings given in this gift, and how it is to be used in faith. The conclusion of the Apostles' Creed confesses "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." These gifts are delivered to the communicant in the Lord's Supper as Luther notes that the words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins" show "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."

---

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans Martin Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968). Brunner was a leading liturgical scholar who would have far reaching influence in American Lutheran liturgical circles. Sasse criticizes Brunner for surrendering the Lutheran doctrine of the sacrament via the *Arnoldshain Theses*. Sasse writes "This modern Lutheranism no longer refuses altar fellowship to the Reformed Christians. Its representatives, including Professors Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner, have produced the Arnoldshain Theses, which try to overcome the old contrast in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper by a compromise. Even Peter Brunner has no objection against altar fellowship between adherents of Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism" H. Sasse, "Inclusive Lutheranism" in *The Lonely Way*- Vol. II, 342-343. Oliver Olson has pointed out Brunner's indebtedness to Odo Casel. See Oliver Olson, "Liturgy as Action" *dialog* (Spring 1975), 108-113 and "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology" and John T. Pless, "Hermann Sasse and the Liturgical Movement" *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (Eastertide 1998), 47-51.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 160. Forde observes "Sundered from the sacraments, that is, the spoken word can go awry and fail to reach its goal. 'Help' must come from the outside, from a more irreducibly external word....They will not let the Word be swallowed up in our internality. They remain always external, from without. They guarantee the character of the Word as what Luther could call an 'alien' Word, a Word from without, from out there in the world of things and bodies" (169).

<sup>26</sup> See LW 36:38 and 35:84.

<sup>27</sup> LW 35:106. Also see Gerhard Forde, "The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus" *Word & World* (Winter 1997), 5-9. Forde writes "The conceptuality of testament sets forth and insists upon the gospel character of what occurred" (6). Also see Reinhard Schwarz, "The Last Supper: The Testament of Jesus" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 1995), 391-403.

The Small Catechism, without engaging in explicit polemics against either Rome or the Sacramentarians, addresses both of these errors.<sup>28</sup> Question 1, "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" and question 3 "How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?" confess the gift of Christ's body and blood under the bread and wine and connects the physical eating and drinking with faith in Christ's words. These questions seem to be addressed particularly to those followers of Zwingli who would deny the presence of Christ's body and blood and see in the sacrament nothing more than a spiritual eating and drinking. Question 2, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" and question 4 "Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?" address Roman abuses of the sacrament as Luther confesses the forgiveness of sins at the heart of the sacrament and faith in Christ's words as necessary for worthy reception.

The Large Catechism addresses these same themes but in a more explicit fashion. Luther notes that the Lord's Supper is established by the Word of Christ and is to be used according to His Word: "All this is established from the words Christ used to institute it. So everyone who wishes to be Christian and go to the sacrament should know them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come."<sup>29</sup>

In the Large Catechism, as in the Small Catechism, Luther catechizes for an evangelical use of the sacrament. That is he wants the sacrament to be recognized for the gift that it is and received accordingly. The Lord's Supper refreshes and strengthens the Christian in the ongoing fight for survival against the wily devil, the treacherous world, and the deceptive flesh: "Therefore, it is appropriately called food for the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature....Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger."<sup>30</sup>

Luther exalts the sacrament on account of Christ. The forgiveness of sins won on the cross is delivered and distributed in the Supper. "Therefore it is absurd for them to say that Christ's body and blood are not given and poured out for us in the Lord's Supper and hence that we cannot have forgiveness of sins in the sacrament. Although the work took place on the cross and forgiveness of sins has been acquired, yet it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word."<sup>31</sup> Thus Luther urges that the sacrament be received frequently not as a work or expression of human piety but on account of our deep need. "What I mean is that those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that people are becoming lax and lazy about its observance."<sup>32</sup> Christ's command and promise coupled with our own condition ought to draw us to the sacrament: "We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing

---

<sup>28</sup> See Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 170-172. Also see Timothy Wengert, "Luther's Catechisms and the Lord's Supper" *Word & World* (Winter 1997), 54-60 but especially Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* trans. By Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 270-273. Bayer: "Luther does not concentrate on the threefold repetition of the two phrases 'given for you' and 'shed for the forgiveness of sins' just by chance. God's turning toward the sinner, the promise that creates faith, empowered by the death and resurrection of Christ, cannot be summarized any more succinctly and specifically than by using these words. This must be stated clearly as a critique of the depersonalizing speech about the 'bread of life' or the diminution of the Lord's Supper to become a generic lovefest. The Lord's Supper is not some diffuse celebration of life but defined in a precise way in its essence by means of the connection between the Word of Christ that effective power and the faith" (272).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, translators, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 467. Hereafter abbreviated as Kolb and Wengert.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 469.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 469. Also note Luther's words in his *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525): "If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to suffering of Christ as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or the gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives me the forgiveness which was won on the cross" (LW 40:214).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 471.

from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed the body is helped as well."<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

A faithful and reverent liturgical practice will catechize. Such a practice is not about a ritualistic fussiness but an attentive reverence to the Lord's mandate and gift. The words of Jesus Christ are at the heart of the Supper. They give and proclaim His body and blood. Without the words of Christ there is no sacrament. This is the point made by the Formula of Concord: "Indeed, in the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung publicly in the congregation, and in no case are they to be omitted. This is done, first, so that Christ's command, 'Do this,' may be obeyed. Second, it is done so that Christ's words will arouse, strengthen, and confirm the hearers' faith in the nature and benefits of this sacrament (that is, the presence of Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits that have been won for us by Christ's death and the shedding of his blood, which are here given to us in his testament). Third, it is done so that the elements of bread and wine are sanctified and consecrated in this holy practice, whereby Christ's body and blood are offered us to eat and to drink, as Paul says (I Cor. 10:16), 'The cup of blessing that we bless...' This of course takes place in no other way than through the repetition and recitation of the Words of Institution."<sup>34</sup>

When the Apostle Paul corrected sacramental malpractice in the Corinthian congregation, he did so by calling these Christians back to the words which he had received from the Lord (I Corinthians 11:23-25). Jesus' words tell us what they give and they give what they declare- His body and blood. Church practices that cloud or contradict Jesus' words undermine the gift that the Lord would give us. Some congregations in our Synod – perhaps even many congregations- have lived for years or potentially decades with practices that contradict our confession of the Lord's words. For them the abnormal has become normal. The Lord's Supper is seen as a matter of religious entitlement open to any who choose to participate. Christ's testament for the forgiveness of sins is reduced to an occasion for human expression of thanksgiving, celebration, and affirmation. The Sacrament is sentimentalized as an extension of familial or personal intimacy.

We need once again to learn how to confess the Lord's Supper. As with one mind and one mouth we are given to extol Christ's Supper for what it is, the gift of Jesus' body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, only then the matters of practice can be addressed as something other than matters of style or preference. Lacking in clear consensus in the doctrine of the Supper, issues of practice will remain elusive and undefined. If we cannot confess together what the Lord's Supper is with full simplicity of the Small Catechism then attempts at unity of practice will be seen as legalistic impositions. On the other hand, if we begin with Jesus' words and on the basis of His testament work out to how we are to administer and receive the Supper, we will be able to arrive at practices which reflect the fact that it is the Lord's Supper, not the Christian's supper, which is celebrated in our churches.

Prof. John T. Pless  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, IN  
II. 4. 2012

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 474.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 607.