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# Luther on the Lord's Supper

*(A lecture given in the Department of Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, February 22, 1963, by Dr. Norman Nagel, Preceptor of Westfield House in Cambridge, England.)*

**I**N FORMER TIMES when men wanted to discover the amount and quality of gold in a piece of metal, they had a special stone called a touchstone which they would rub on the metal to be tested. By the color of the mark it made they could tell how much gold there was there and how pure it was. Our Lutheran Confessions say that for testing a piece of theology an excellent touchstone is the distinction between Law and Gospel. This morning we are to consider another such touchstone, for a man's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper will show what is the strength of gold in his whole theology.

The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper discloses most clearly the basic situation between God and man: what is man before God, and what sort of a God deals with us there. From a man's confession of the Lord's Supper you can see most clearly what is his confession of Christ. This explains why the Lord's Supper has been such a point of division in the history of the church. Theologies that appear similar in many respects have their final test of agreement in the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper. One might almost say that if there is agreement in the Lord's Supper you can be sure there is agreement in the rest of theology.

Throughout the history of the church it has been recognized that where Christians go together to the same altar there is nothing in their doctrine or life that stands in the way of the unity thereby confessed and confirmed. The Reformation is charged by some with destroying the unity of Christendom. While it is true that the visible unity of Christendom has always been rent, there remains the sad fact that in the West after the Reformation there were numerous church bodies, and, as we might expect, their sharpest discord was in the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, for that is a final test or touchstone of unity or the lack of it.

We might ask, incidentally, whether visible unity may rightly be a goal that dominates all else. Is it not perhaps like happiness which comes as an attendant realization where love is flowing back and forth? It may be that unity also is never won by being sought after for its own sake, but rather comes as an attendant realization where the Word of God "has free recourse to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people."

Today we would see what help there is from Luther for our confession of the Lord's Supper. Of this confession Luther was convinced that he could not do otherwise. For the sake of what some understand by Christian unity we are sometimes asked to do otherwise, or at least to acknowledge another doctrine as having a rightful place. This puts a fearful responsibility upon us to try

our doctrine by the Word of God. Is it the only right one that then requires the rejection of every departure from it? Luther may help us here although we cannot merely repeat him as though we were speaking to the same people that he was.

Dr. Martin Luther we esteem as a great teacher of the church. His greatness rests in the fact that he did not strive to teach something new, but, as St. Paul says, "that which he also had received." The doctrine is not Luther's nor ours, but Christ's.

The dominant characteristic of man's thinking in religious matters is the notion that it is up to him to do or be something that will get him right with God. This notion was shared by a promising young law student at the University of Erfurt in the year 1505. He was troubled by God. How did he stand before Him? Luther did not just think about this question. He put his life into the question for it depended on the answer. He became a monk. He did what the church told him to do. He rested his whole weight upon the answers offered him. Some broke quickly, some more slowly, but he kept on until he found the answer that did not break. That was the answer outside of himself—only Christ, the Christ Who alone achieved and Who freely bestows forgiveness, life and salvation.

Augustine helped Luther to see that we are completely at God's mercy. He can do with us what He likes and no one can answer Him back. But what will God do? If He deals justly with us according to the sinners that we are, He must condemn and punish us for our sin. "All right then," sighed Luther, "we must accept that condemnation and punishment." He developed a theology of the cross which acknowledged God to be just in condemning and punishing our sin in us. He saw God as doing this according to the pattern of Christ's suffering and cross. By our willingly taking this condemnation and punishment from God answer is made to God for our sin, and sin once condemned and punished can be condemned and punished no more. By this way we are then justified before God. Here there is recognition of the fact that God must first reduce us to nothing, empty us in order to give His gifts, but in this understanding of salvation in young Luther, man's attention is directed too much to himself and to a process of suffering and crosses that goes on in him rather than to that unique cross of Calvary which alone and completely answered for our sins in taking all sins' condemnation and punishment for us.

Luther's early understanding of the Lord's Supper is in harmony with this theology of the crosses. From Augustine he learnt to regard the Mass as first of all a sharing with Christ and His saints in their sufferings and their goods. In our sufferings which show that God is destroying sin in us we are to take heart from the fact that we are then in the company and fellowship of Christ and His saints. Here the dominant factor is the mystical body of Christ and not His true body. The mystical body of Christ is the body or company of those that are His, the church. Luther wrote,

Just as the bread is changed into His true natural body and the wine into His true natural blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints. . . .<sup>1</sup> This holy sacrament is naught else than a divine sign in which Christ and all saints are pledged, granted and imparted, with all their works, sufferings, merits and possessions, for the comfort and strengthening of all who are in anxiety and sorrow, and are persecuted by the devil, sin, the world, the flesh and every evil.<sup>2</sup>

In this *Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament* of 1519 the forgiveness of sins is not mentioned and the cross of Calvary does not have its unique weight. However, here we see Luther, who could never forget that he was a pastor, striving to make the Mass meaningful for people. Of great significance here is what Luther does not say. Early Luther says astonishingly little about the Mass. We may see in this his reluctance to be at variance with the teaching of the church. What was being popularly taught about the Mass made it into a work that men do, a sacrifice of Christ offered by the priest as a propitiation for sin. With this Luther's growing theology that centered everything in God must sooner or later come into conflict. The surprising thing is how long in fact it did take. Before the papal legate Luther sought to show that his theology was in harmony with the tradition of the church, and he protested against the "new doctrine" which Cajetan put in demanding submission to the naked authority of the pope. Cajetan saw more clearly than Luther where Luther's theology would lead in questioning merits that man might acquire before God and in insisting on faith that receives the gifts of the Sacrament. Eck at Leipzig helped Luther see this more clearly, and the pope left him painfully without further doubt when he condemned what Luther had come to recognize as the heart of the Gospel. When Luther recognized that he could not render obedience to any such pope but that he was bound by the Word of God, the Reformation began to boom. "If the pope condemns the truth, then with the truth the pope must be condemned."<sup>3</sup>

The universal notion that man has some part to play in achieving or securing his salvation had so taken hold of the Sacrament that it had been turned backwards. Luther protested,

The Mass is nothing else than the divine promise or testament of Christ, sealed with the sacrament of His body and blood. If that is true, you will understand that it cannot possibly be a work, and that there is nothing to do in it, nor can it be dealt with in any other way than by faith alone. . . . What godless audacity is it, therefore, when we who are to receive the testament of God come as those who would perform a good work for Him. . . . When we ought to be grateful for bene-

fits received, we come in our pride to give that which we ought to take, mocking with unheard of perversity the mercy of the Giver by giving as a work the thing we receive as a gift.<sup>4</sup>

Luther held up the word of Christ "given and shed for you for the remission of sins." In the Sacrament God gives and man receives, that is, believes. The direction of the Sacrament is downward from gracious giving God to sinful us who can do nothing to earn His favour but which is given us freely for Jesus' sake.

The assertion that man has some effective role to play takes various forms. There are basically three: works, mysticism and reason. Luther met these in Rome, Karlstadt and the Swiss. To Luther they presented three forms of man's religion by which man would make terms with God.

While Rome had turned the Mass upside down she yet acknowledged the body and blood of Christ. Luther had next to face an attack on the Sacrament which denied the very body and blood of Christ and also made it into a work which men do. This attack came from those who claimed to be his followers. Many Protestants are right with Luther while he is bombarding the pope, but then desert him when he turns to fight on the Reformation's second front.

Karlstadt was the man who was officially scheduled to debate with Eck at Leipzig and from whom Luther then took over. He was also the man who took the Reformation in Wittenberg into his own hands while Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg. Luther, he felt, had not gone fast or far enough and he was going to have a thoroughgoing reformation. Away with everything external was his battle cry. Statues, stained glass windows, vestments, the crucifix—away with the lot for true religion is in the heart. Karlstadt had learned from Augustine and the Greek thinking that had seeped into Christian theology that there are two opposed spheres: the earthly, external one, and the inward, spiritual one. Man's plight is then that he is ensnared in earthly, material things, and his salvation is therefore in his rising above them into the inward spiritual realm. Man escapes from the prison of earthly things by spiritual exercises which lift him up to the heavenly level where God is at home. These exercises are heavily emotional. Karlstadt spoke of "outstretched desire," "burning remembrance of Christ," "ardent knowledge" and "passionately tasting the sufferings of Christ."<sup>5</sup> The experience of these shows a man upward bound.

Luther saw all this, too, as upside down and looking in the wrong direction. We are not to look inward to watch for emotions which prove us spiritual. This self-regard is in the direction of works, something we feel and do to secure our salvation. Luther saw that in trying to get away from one lot of external things Karlstadt ended up with another, or as he put it, Karlstadt fell into the water in trying to get out of the rain.

If a man does not rest his salvation outside himself he looks for things inside himself and in things that he feels and does. For Karlstadt these were the mystic spiritual exercises, and then also getting rid of statues, the crucifix, altars, vestments, not using the word "Mass," or any titles but "brother" and "dear neighbour," a particular manner of breaking the bread, making a law of the Sabbath, and wearing a peasant's hat and grey coat. To Luther this was a new monkery and helping the pope back up again.<sup>6</sup> "The pope," he said, "drives Christ out of the front door, while Karlstadt drives Him out the back."<sup>7</sup>

Karlstadt accordingly made the Lord's Supper a thing of the Law and of works. Christ is then again a judge who watches our performance and rewards us accordingly. The Lord's Supper is not for Karlstadt the point at which Christ deals with us in bestowing His body and blood with the bread and wine, but rather a springboard from which a man is to fly upward with his soul and have a heavenly communion with Christ up there. Karlstadt felt he could get himself up there; Luther knew he could not. He had tried this way too and had learnt that we cannot cover the distance. This Christ has done. Not only the achievement of salvation is all Christ's doing but also its bestowal. We do not bridge the gap of place and time. Luther said,

If I want to have my sins forgiven, I am not to run to the cross for I will find forgiveness not yet imparted there. I must also not cling to the remembrance and acknowledgment of Christ's suffering, as Karlstadt burbles. There I will not find it. I will find the word which imparts, bestows, offers and gives to me that forgiveness achieved on the cross.<sup>8</sup>

As Luther glories in the lowliness of the baby in the stable, so he glories in the lowly bread and wine, for these show Christ came all the way to us and mercifully dealing with us on our earthly level through our earthly things. He has left no distance for us to cover. He gives and we receive, and what we receive is what His words say we received: His body and blood.

Luther's opponents made much of remembering in the Sacrament. The Words of Institution were for them a narrative which tells what happened once long ago and that we must try to get near to by remembering. For Luther the Words of Institution were the very words of Christ which speak true and have in them His creative power that effects what they say. The same God who said, "Let there be light: and there was light" says of the bread in each Holy Communion, "This is my body," and of the wine, "This is my blood," and it is so.<sup>9</sup> It is so because He says so and therefore it is in no way dependent on anything in us. Make it depend on something in us and you make it unsure. The certainty is outside ourselves in the words, body and blood of Christ.

Luther says similar things against the Swiss theologians. Them he regarded as pushing something of man because of the dictates of reason. They too made Christ remote, up there. Zwingli also worked with the division of an earthly realm opposed to a spiritual heavenly realm. A favorite text of his was, "The flesh profiteth nothing." By flesh he understood this earthly realm as represented in the earthly part of us, our bodies, and even the body of Christ. Luther pointed out that 'flesh' here means not some earthly part of us but our whole sinful nature, and that Christ cares not merely for some supposed spiritual part of us but for the whole of us and so he deals with us in the Sacrament of His body and blood.

Zwingli would rather leave our bodies out of it. With his soul a man so remembers Christ that He rises to a heavenly communion with Him, feeds on Christ with his heart, but not with his mouth. The true body of Christ, you see, is not down here but up there.

For Zwingli as also for Karlstadt, Calvin and the Roman theologians the Right Hand of God was a place that you could draw a ring around or measure with a ruler. If Christ is at such a Right Hand then obviously He cannot be down here, or more precisely, His divine nature may be down here but not His human nature, His body. Luther recognized the danger here to the Personal Union of God and man in Christ.

A body, they reasonably declared, cannot be in more than one place at the same time. But, replied Luther, Christ says His body is present and imparted with the bread in the Holy Communion. Besides, the Right Hand is not some sort of celestial swallow's nest up there to which the body of Christ is confined. Scripture does not speak of the Right Hand as a circumscribed place but as God's power which is everywhere. You may not divide Christ. Wherever Christ is, there is the whole Christ. A Christ who is only God is not the Christ who is our Savior.

Here we see something very characteristic about Luther's approach. He does not begin with our body that can only be in so many inches of a place and then impose that upon Christ's body. He begins with Christ's words and we can be sure that He does with His body what He says He does. His body can be anywhere. We may not impose our measurement and prescriptions on him.

However, we are not helped by His being anywhere or everywhere. As Luther said,

It is one thing for God to be there and quite another for Him to be there for you. He is there for you when He sets His word there and binds Himself to that place saying, "Here you are to find me."<sup>10</sup>

Though He is in your bread, you will not grasp Him there unless He binds Himself there for you and appoints you a particular table with His word, and Himself points out the bread with His word where you are to

eat Him. This He has done in the Sacrament, saying "This is my body," as if to say, "You may also eat bread at home where I am indeed present enough, but this is the true appointment: This is my body. When you eat this, you may eat my body and nowhere else. Why? Because here I would fasten myself with my word so that you are not to flutter about and desire to seek me all over the place, where I am, to be sure. That would be too much for you. You are too small for grasping me there without my word."<sup>11</sup>

Hence Luther could joyfully cry, "God is not far but near."<sup>12</sup>

Another notion that reason would impose is what is fitting for God. Zwingli held that it was not fitting for the almighty majesty of God so to lower Himself to bread and wine and there suffer Himself to be mishandled and abused. Man's soul must rise to the higher, more spiritual level if he is to have communion with God. Man must then qualify by, as it were, bringing himself into the range of God. What we qualify for is then no longer gift. Luther not only pointed this out but also recoiled from the suggestion that we have the almighty majesty of God to deal with. Before that majesty we are done for. Only in the incarnate God are we sure that God is for us and our Savior. As Luther said:

God without flesh is useless. Upon the flesh of Christ, upon that Infant clinging to the bosom of the Virgin, you are to set your eyes and simply, with steadfast heart, say, "I have neither in heaven nor earth a God, nor do I know one outside this flesh which is gently enfolded in the bosom of the Virgin Mary." When you say this there is no danger that you will fall away from God or your mind be distressed with terror or desperate fear. By every other way God is incomprehensible; only in the flesh of Christ is He comprehensible.<sup>13</sup>

Luther is at his best about this at Christmastime. Here is some more from a sermon on the angel's message to the shepherds:

He has power to cast us into hell and yet He took soul and body like ours. . . . If He were against us He would not have clothed Himself in our flesh. . . . Here God is not to be feared but loved, and that love brings the joy of which the angel speaks. . . . Satan, on the other hand, brings home to me the magnitude of my sin, and terrifies me so that I despair. . . . But the angel does not declare that He is in heaven. . . . "You shall find. . . ." He points out that He has come to us and put on our flesh and blood. . . . Our joy is not that we ascend and put on His nature as is the case when the Mass is made a boastful decking of ourselves in divinity. Do not be driven to distraction by the Majesty but remain



down here and listen, "Unto you a Savior. . . ." He does not come with horses but in a stable. . . . Reason and will would ascend and seek above, but if you would have joy, bend yourself down to this place. There you will find that boy given for you who is your Creator lying in a manger. I will stay with that boy as He sucks, is washed, and dies. . . . There is no joy but in this boy. Take Him away and you face the Majesty which terrifies. . . . I know of no God but this one in the manger. . . . Do not let yourself be turned away from this humanity. . . . He is not only a man and a servant, but that person lying in the manger is both man and God essentially, not separated one from the other, but as born of a virgin. If you separate them joy is gone. O Thou boy lying in the manger, Thou art truly God who hast created me, and Thou wilt not be wrathful with me because Thou comest to me in this lowly way—more lovingly cannot be imagined. If you would truly love, let Him be this way in your heart.<sup>14</sup>

Then similarly of the Sacrament:

The body I say is in the bread, but not according to the bread. Who has spoken the word? It is neither according to human reason nor according to the bread, but according to God's Word. . . . In hearing the Gospel I hear a human voice, but faith calls it God's Word. If you regard the boy according to the flesh, He means nothing to you; but much if this little Jesus is God and Savior, acknowledged not according to the flesh but in the flesh. . . . Therefore, so that you do not scorn the boy, give heed to the words of the boy that He is Lord and Savior.<sup>15</sup>

A part of the objection that such lowliness is not fitting for God is that such lowliness is not worthy of His honor. If Christ had thought of honor as men do, He would, said Luther, mocking the Swiss, have stayed at God's little Right Hand, seated upon a velvet cushioned throne, having the angels entertain Him, and giving no thought to coming down and getting involved in our mess. But God's honor is the opposite of what men call honor.

Our God has His honor in this, that for our sakes He gives Himself down to the utmost depth, into flesh and bread, in our mouth, heart and bosom, and for this reason for our sakes He suffers and is contemptuously handled both on cross and altar.<sup>16</sup>

Another objection of reason is that the Lord's Supper is not really necessary since nothing may be said to be given by it that

is not given by the words of the Gospel. Luther answers characteristically,

It is His will to make His gift to you and through the humanity, through the word, and through the bread, in the Communion. What an arrogant and ungrateful devil you are that dares to ask why He did not do it otherwise and not in this way! Would you decree and choose manner and measure for Him? You ought to leap for joy that He does it by whatever way He wishes. What matters is that you receive it.<sup>17</sup>

Luther said that if he had to choose between Rome and the Euthusiasts, as he called them, he would choose Rome, for there there was certainty of the body and blood of Christ, while with the Enthusiasts there was certainty only of bread and wine, with the body and blood spiritualized away from the bread and wine. Luther's teaching of the Lord's Supper, however, is not a choice between alternatives but an insistence upon the whole.

Body and blood may not be separated from the bread and wine to fit the demands of reason. Christ simply does and gives what He says, and in Him and His Supper there is no gap between earthly and heavenly. Through His words He is speaking to us and through the bread and wine He is bestowing His body and blood as He says, whether we believe it or not.

Nor may the Sacrament be made merely a thing of words. We receive both with ears and with mouth that our heart may be made glad with the gift. Luther holds all together: ears, mouth and heart; bread and wine and words of Christ; bread and wine and body and blood of Christ. The forgiveness of sins here does not come either from the words or from the body and blood, but from both together. There is no gap between Calvary and the Sacrament, no gap between the Upper Room and the altar.

When Karlstadt said we must not think that Christ gives us His body and blood but rather that He gives Himself, Luther replied that the words say body and blood of Christ and of these we can therefore be sure. They do not speak of some personal presence of Christ. These, however, are not alternatives for Luther. He holds both, but first what the words say. Similarly he would not allow Christ's true body to be pushed from the centre of the Sacrament by the body of believers, Christ's mystical body. This, however, does not mean rejection of the latter. The mystical body that had dominated his early understanding of the Mass he still confessed, but first what the words of Christ say. First Christ's true body, and from that His mystical body grows and is nourished.

Luther strove to hold up the Sacrament in its wholeness. He battled against every attempt to introduce gaps, to break something off, or regard only a part at the expense of the rest, or to squash it to fit some notion of men. "Let the Sacrament remain whole!"<sup>18</sup> was his fervent cry.

All of the Gospel is in the Lord's Supper. As Christ deals with us there we know Him most nearly and surely as our gracious God and Savior. Any injury of the Sacrament is injury of Christ. Such injury is the insistence of man's religion that man does his bit too, and so he does not give Christ all the honor that is due to Him, or denies what Christ gives or the way He gives it. We have followed the injury presented by works, the mystic approach and by reason.

Injury of the Sacrament not only dishonors Christ but also disrupts the fellowship of the Sacrament. Rome broke fellowship with Luther; it excommunicated him. The Evangelicals, as they called themselves, tried to heal the breach with the Augsburg Confession but without success for they could not surrender to the pope's demands. Luther refused fellowship with Karlstadt, and at Marburg in 1529 when there appeared to be a large area of agreement, Luther refused fellowship with Zwingli and the Swiss for they were not agreed about the Lord's Supper. He would have nothing to do with the suggestion that they should give over arguing about the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper and rather simply attend it together. The Swiss were ready for this but such a suggestion comes more easily from those who deny that the true body and blood of Christ are present and imported with the bread and wine, for to them what they spiritually or figuratively understand by the body and blood is given only to those who have the faith which rises to a heavenly communion with Christ. Here faith is become a qualification in man and a factor in him necessary to constitute the Sacrament for him. Then, of course, every man may be welcomed to the Sacrament for if a man does not happen to have this faith he is not then guilty of the imparted body and blood of Christ.

It is understandable therefore that those in Christendom who hold keenly to the Doctrine of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ practise communion, while those who do not so hold, do not. The Doctrine of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ involves so great a responsibility for there is then the recognition that whoever receives the Sacrament receives the body and blood of Christ, and fearful it is indeed if a man should be encouraged to receive these without discerning them. If we love such a man we will want him to receive the Sacrament as what Christ's words say it is. We do not love him if we help him to be content with something less.

Luther was by no means an enemy of Christian unity. He also grieved over the disunity that he saw, and it is at the Lord's Table where Christian unity is most clearly seen to be broken, and to be healed.

Luther did say "No" to Zwingli at Marburg, but seven years later he embraced the South Germans who had wavered between the Lutheran doctrine and that of the Swiss. They went to Communion together for Luther was convinced that they were agreed in the disputed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Some think Luther

was taken in, but that is another question. Nobody was in doubt what he stood for and he acted in good faith when agreement was declared on the basis of the words of Christ. He did not require more, and he did not say, "I do not trust you." But he did stubbornly insist on agreement in the doctrine for he knew that whenever a man goes wrong in the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, he makes more of himself than he should, and less of Christ.

It is Christ's Supper, not ours, he said, and so must be received in its wholeness as the overwhelming fact, mystery, and gift of "the true body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and drink, instituted by Christ Himself." Then in the Catechism come the Words of Institution. They clearly state the overwhelming fact, mystery, and gift. Then comes the question, "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."

#### NOTES

(All references are to the Weimar Edition of *Luther's Works*)

1. II, 749, 10
2. II, 749, 23
3. II, 18, 2; 21, 5
4. VI, 520, 22
5. XVIII, 203, 18; 196, 3
6. XVIII, 63, 31; 195, 27; 191, 10, 111, 11
7. XVIII, 111, 29
8. XVIII, 203, 39
9. XXIII, 233, 1; 257, 5; XXVI, 283, 4
10. XXIII, 151, 10; 43, 10; XXVI, 339, 25
11. XXIII, 151, 28; 155, 32; XX, 400, 25; XXXI 1, 223, 28
12. XXIII, 147, 24; XXVI, 420, 20; 317, 1
13. XXV, 107, 5
14. XXIII, 731, 34-733, 9; 737, 6-20
15. *Ibid.*
16. XXIII, 157, 30; XIX, 486, 14; XXXVII, 42, 33; XLVI, 634, 33; XXIII, 157, 2
17. XXIII, 269, 3
18. XXX, 1, 55, 19