

## CAN WE PARTICIPATE LITURGICALLY IN THE ATONEMENT?

Theology of Christian Worship Conference

Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN

22-23 June 2008

The assigned topic is a big one. Where do we start with atonement or liturgy? Atonement is something of an embarrassment to many in the theological guild these days. The scandal of the cross remains a stumbling block so God must be defended against charges of divine child abuse. Others claim that the cross-centered “Lutheran” Paul is a distorted reading of the New Testament; the ecumenical moment would be better served by alternate readings that would lessen the radical law/gospel distinction in Paul and replace the justification of the ungodly with alternate themes such as new creation and participation in Christ<sup>1</sup>. The claim made by Luther and the Confessions that the death of Christ is God’s definitive act in history done for the forgiveness of sins – a claim that is both inclusive and exclusive- has not gone unchallenged even by Lutherans<sup>2</sup>. Where the atonement is reduced to a metaphor, the Lord’s Supper cannot but shift into the Christian’s Supper. Without the cross, the Sacrament becomes dislocated; interpreted as a remembrance or representation of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary now accessed by ritual activity in the liturgical assembly.

In a paper entitled “The Gift We Cannot Give Ourselves: The Eucharist in the Theology of Pope Benedict XVI,” James Massa, the Executive Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, argues that the current pope provides both an appreciative and critical assessment of Luther’s sacramental theology that opens to move beyond the impasse created by Trent and the early Lutheran theologians. Massa writes “From Ratzinger’s standpoint, not everything Luther was opposing in the Roman Catholic theological arguments of the period can be defended. Yet the core Roman Catholic position on the unity of the Eucharist and the cross was something that the great German Reformer was unable to affirm on account of his view of history.”<sup>3</sup> Massa then goes on to make the case that Benedict’s “assimilative” understanding of Eucharistic sacrifice, aided by historical critical research have given us “a deeper understanding of what commemoration means in the biblical context.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed Wolfhart Pannenberg in a recent article in *Pro Ecclesia* maintains that “The Eucharist is to be celebrated as a remembrance of the unique sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and, through that remembering, the celebrants allow themselves to be drawn into Christ’s giving of his life. This new interpretation of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, as well as agreement concerning the meaning of

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, advocates of the so-called “New Perspective” especially N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). By way of response, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran Paul and His Critics”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, David Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle’s Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> James Massa, “The Gift We Cannot Give Ourselves” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (April 2008), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Massa, 174

transubstantiation, however, needs to be given expression in a joint declaration analogous to the one on justification (1999). That said, the basic lines of an understanding on these topics have already been won in ecumenical discussion.”<sup>5</sup> In order to test these assertions, we need to examine trajectories within recent scholarship on the Lord’s Supper.

It is instructive to note how so much of contemporary scholarship is reluctant to begin with the *verba testamenti*. Joachim Jeremias 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>6</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,

---

<sup>5</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Ecumenical Tasks in Relationship to the Roman Catholic Church" *Pro Ecclesia* XV (Spring 2006), 171.

<sup>6</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* -Volume I: The Proclamation of Jesus, trans. John Bowen (London: SCM Press, 1971), 289-290. For challenges to 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 and Hermann Sasse, "The Lord's Supper in the New Testament" in *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 49-97.

not the distribution of a substance".<sup>7</sup> Rather the words of Christ observed Werner Elert are "extraordinary...without analogy of any kind."<sup>8</sup>

Historical -critical approaches to Holy Scripture created skepticism as to the reliability of the synoptic and Pauline accounts of sacrament's institution.<sup>9</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>10</sup> Moving beyond Hans Lietzmann's thesis that the Lord's Supper was derived from two sources, Gordon Lathrop proposes "The growing awareness of the gift of Jesus, this finding of the center of the concentric circles of eucharistic meaning, yielded Eucharist in the churches. The Eucharist did not have two sources an *agape* and a cross-cult meal. It had many sources – the yet, a single source-the gift and presence of Jesus Christ juxtaposed to that meal practice. Its origin was in a breaking of Hellenistic meal meanings to the purpose of the gospel, a breaking already found already in the meal practices of Jesus and received and understood and believed in the texts of Paul, Mark, and John."<sup>11</sup>

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>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Eduard Schweitzer, *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament*, trans. James M. Davis (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 37-38.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 303.

<sup>9</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; Also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*- Volume 3, trans. GW. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 283-284.

<sup>10</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>11</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 193.

<sup>12</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.

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. So a Eucharistic Prayer is mandated on the grounds that Jesus' gave thanks. Representative of this position is Robert Jenson who writes "This rite is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, made with words embodied as the bread and cup. It must be the initial rule of teaching about the Eucharist: when the prescribed action is not carried out, there is nothing for the promise to be about. When thanksgiving is not offered to the Father for his saving acts, and therein specifically for Jesus, or when thanksgiving is not embodied in the ritual presenting and sharing of bread and cup nothing happens about which 'this is my body and blood' could be true."<sup>13</sup> 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 memory.

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<sup>14</sup>. 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 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

---

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* –Volume 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 216. Contra this position see Oliver Olson, *Reclaiming the Lutheran Liturgical Heritage* (Minneapolis: Reclaim Resources, 2007), 65-86 and Dorothea Wendebourg, "Noch einmal 'Den falschen Weg Roms zu Ende gegangen?'" *Zeitschrift zur Theologie und Kirche* 99 (2002), 400-441. Wolfgang Simon attempts to counter Wendebourg presentation of the testamentary/promissory character of the Sacrament of the Altar by noting the positive place of thanksgiving in the Luther texts cited by Wendebourg. He does so by rejecting Luther's distinction of "word and response" as a scheme of "non-communicative poverty." See Wolfgang Simon "Worship and the Eucharist in Luther Studies" *dialog* 47 (Summer 2008), 143-156. Luther certainly recognizes the place of thanksgiving as the confession of Christ's work and gifts, but thanksgiving is not at the heart of the sacrament, rather it flows from the gifts received. Hence, Luther's insistence on the distinction between Christ's testament and the prayers and praises of the believing congregation. Prayer and praise have their place but they are not the gift. Here see Bryan Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Bramcote Notts: Grove Books, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> See especially the essays in *We Confess the Sacraments* and *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters* –Volumes 1-2 trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001 and 2002). Also see Pless, John T. "Hermann Sasse and the Liturgical Movement" *Logia* (Eastertide 1998), 47-51.

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 ask that those who come to the altar "believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament" are meaningless. As Albert Collver has demonstrated the language of the real presence is not yet a confession of Christ's body and blood.<sup>15</sup>

Michael Welker, a Reformed systematician teaching at the University of Heidelberg seeks to articulate an ecumenical answer to that question building on earlier documents such as the *Arnoldshain Theses* (1957) and the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973). Welker's work is instructive at a number of levels, not the least of which is the terminology that he uses in describing the action and gift of the sacrament. His book unfolds around three major themes:

1. In Holy Communion, human beings thank God and symbolically celebrate a community meal in a jeopardized world;
2. In Holy Communion, the presence of Jesus Christ is celebrated;
3. Holy Communion is the feast of the church of all times and regions of the world, the celebration of peace and of the new creation, and the joyful glorification of the Triune God

The action in Holy Communion is anthropological, that is, it is the human action of ritual celebration according to Welker. "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>16</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>17</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>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See Albert B. Collver III, "*Real Presence*" *A Confession of the Lord's Supper* (unpublished Phd Thesis, Concordia Seminary-St. Louis, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 36.

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>19</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>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 57-58.

<sup>20</sup> Alasdair I. C. Heron, *Table and 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 Naomichi 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* (Easter tide 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 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); Also see Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) who suggest a liturgy that echoes "God's heart beat" and a "woman's labor" in giving birth (112).

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>21</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>22</sup>

A second major theme developed by Welker is the presence of Christ in the sacrament as he asserts "In holy communion the risen and exalted Christ is present! With him the reconciliation of human beings with God is present, and the reconciliation of humans among themselves becomes effective."<sup>23</sup> Foundational to Welker's argument is the Emmaus road account of Luke 24:30-35, not the institution narratives of the synoptic gospels or I Corinthians. The sacrament has to do with Christ's self-giving. Body and blood indicate that which is perceived externally: "In the Supper, Jesus identifies his externally perceivable, earthly vitality and his most concrete, internal vital power with the bread and the wine: I am giving you that which I live here on earth!"<sup>24</sup>

Drawing on the formulation of the Fourth Confessing Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union in Halle in 1937, Welker observes that an understanding of "personal presence" moves beyond the impasse created by "real presence" and "spiritual presence."<sup>25</sup> Yet, Welker confesses that "personal presence" is inadequate to the task of articulating how Christ is present in the sacrament. Instead Welker suggests a re-worked doctrine of the "real presence" that moves away from a focus on the elements and is directed toward the reality that the Lord is Himself both giver and gift in the sacrament. The sacrament embraces praise of God, communal eating and drinking, and the celebration of reconciliation between God and humanity and among human beings. Welker says "In this process the whole Christ is present: the pre-Easter Jesus whom we remember, the Crucified One whom we proclaim, the Risen One to whom we bear witness, and the Human One whom we expect and wait. In the celebration of the Supper, the gathered community is permeated and surrounded by Christ, by the entire richness of his life. The notion of Christ's 'real presence' is better suited than that of Christ's personal

---

<sup>21</sup> Welker, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 71. Contrast with Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 89. Rather than speaking of the gift of Christ's body and blood, there is the language of the self-giving of Christ in the sacrament. See, for example, James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 52-69.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 92.

presence to provide a framework for the difficult task of understanding this complex of relations."<sup>26</sup>

A third feature of the sacrament according to Welker is its eschatological, universal, and doxological character. This leads Welker to conclude that "Participation in the Supper cannot and must not be refused to any baptized person. Neither an absence of bodily or mental health, nor deficient education, development or morality can be a reason for excluding persons from the celebration of holy communion."<sup>27</sup> The universality of the Supper is grounded in the "priesthood of all believers" for Welker<sup>28</sup> as this sacrament all the baptized are given access to the presence of the risen Christ and raised up to glorify Him as members of a new creation. In this way, the Supper anticipates the feast yet to come while giving God's children a vivifying, sensorial access to the present Christ.

The sacrament is seen as a trinitarian event. Noting this theme in such ecumenical documents as the Lutheran-Roman Catholic, *The Eucharist* and the so-called Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Welker observes the trinitarian structure of the liturgy as thanksgiving to the Father, remembrance (*anamnesis*) of the Son, and invocation (*epiklesis*) of the Holy Spirit as narrating God's presence in the sacrament. "God's vitality and love can be recognized in the Trinity's work of creating, delivering, and raising up creatures. In the celebration of the Supper, we encounter the rich work of the triune God woven together in a way that can be cogently and clearly narrated and understood. In the poverty of a symbolic meal, God grants the divine glory to human beings."<sup>29</sup>

I have used Michael Welker's book as a compendium of contemporary thought on the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper. His work demonstrates something of a convergence in ecumenical thinking about the Lord's Supper and its relationship to the sacrificial work of Christ. Contemporary Roman Catholic theologies of the Mass do not appear to be that far removed from current Reformed articulations of the Lord's Supper at least in the use of *anamnesis* as the participation in the sacrifice of Christ. But does this convergence- as widespread and inclusive as it appears to be - do justice to the Evangelical-Lutheran claims of the gift-character of the Lord's Supper or more specifically of the Sacrament as the Lord's giving of His body and blood for sinners to eat and to drink and not a representation of the sacrifice of Christ? Is it true as Massa asserts that contemporary historical critical scholarship has opened to us a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of *anamnesis* that leads us beyond sixteenth century

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 100. Note the similarity to Yngve Brilioth's argument that the sacrament is a multi-dimensional reality of thanksgiving, communion, commemoration, eucharistic sacrifice, and mystery. See Yngve Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Evangelical and Catholic*, trans. A.G. Hebert (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1930), 288. Also see G. Bromiley, "Lord's Supper" in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, 142-146.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 176. Ernst Volk suggests that such Trinitarian richness is obtained at the expense of evangelical clarity. See Ernst Volk, "Evangelical Accents in Understanding the Lord's Supper" *Lutheran Quarterly* I (Summer 1987), 185-204.



controversies?<sup>30</sup> Was Luther wrong with his dogged insistence that in the Lord's Supper, sacrifice and sacrament, testament and prayer be kept distinct, distinct as heaven and earth? Or to use the words of J. Michel Reu's essay of an earlier generation, "Can We Still Hold to the Lutheran Doctrine of the Lord's Supper?"

As our necessarily brief and selective overview of recent theological and liturgical scholarship on the Lord's Supper has pointed out, there does seem to be an echoing of several key themes: remembrance, representation and the simultaneity of sacrament and sacrifice. It is impressive that these themes are often articulated in similar ways by voices from a variety of theological and liturgical traditions. Yet I would contend none of them finally come to the heart of what it is that God is doing in the Lord's Supper.

Massa's (and behind him, Benedict) claim that Luther's view of history rendered him incapable of seeing the unity of the cross and the sacrament, must be evaluated in light of what Luther actually said in his 1525 treatise, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in Matters of Images and Sacraments*: "We treat the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved or won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world...If I now 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 the 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 gospel, the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness of sins which was won on the cross" (AE 40:213-214).

Here the Reformer holds cross and sacrament together while distinguishing between them as between acquisition and bestowal. On the cross, Christ Jesus purchased and won redemption in the shedding of His blood. The sacrament does not make us contemporary with Good Friday nor Calvary contemporary with us. Rather the forgiveness of sins

---

<sup>30</sup> So also Robert W. Jenson who writes "The specific sacramental relation of the eucharistic sacrifice of Christ to the sacrifice on Calvary is *anamnesis*, 'the making effective in the present of an event of the past.' Catholic-Reformation consensus is achieved when it is understood on both sides that Trent's word 'representation' need not mean 'doing again' but as a translation of the biblical *anamnesis* must mean 'presenting again.' Recovery of a biblical and patristic understanding has made it 'possible ...to state faith's conviction (both) of the uniqueness and perfection of Jesus Christ's offering on the cross and the breadth of its *anamnesis* in the church's celebration of the Eucharist....We may simply summarize and appropriate the results of the Catholic-Protestant dialogue devoted specifically to this matter. Jesus on the Cross gave himself to the Father for us and gave himself to us in obedience to the Father; just this is his sacrifice. Thus what he gives us is communion: with him and so with the Father and so with one another. Conversely, what we materially share in this communion is Jesus himself, and specifically his sacrificial self-giving. And insofar as this sacrifice is *anamnetically* present, so that it is the bread and cup of the Eucharist by which he now gives himself, the eucharistic event is determined by these relations"-Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology-Volume 2: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 266-267. One may also note the similarity with Wolfhart Pannenberg on this score. See W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology- Volume 3*, 305-311. Pannenberg's influence should not be underestimated here. See his *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) as well as the articulate refutation by Steven D. Paulson, "What is Essential in Lutheran Worship?" *Word & World* 26 (Spring 2006), 149-161.

accomplished by the Lamb of God on the cross is now delivered to us in the gift of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. This gift is "for you." Oswald Bayer has observed that "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 Jesus Christ, cannot be summarized more succinctly and specifically than by using these words. This must be stated clearly as a critique of 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 is defined in a precise way in its essence by means of connection between the Word of Christ that has effective power and faith."<sup>31</sup>

There is in Luther a simplicity that does not need the framework of Neo-Platonic theologies of earthly and heavenly realities or anthropological theories of festivity to understand what is going on in the Supper. For Luther as for Paul, the Lord's Supper is the proclamation of the death of Christ in that in the Sacrament, Christ Himself gives the fruits of His sacrifice, His body and His blood, for us to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. The very forgiveness of sins acquired by the Lord in His death on the cross is now declared and bestowed as gift "for you."

This is no narrowing of the Sacrament contrary to the claims of Brilioth, Pannenberg and others; it rather gets to the heart of what the Lord's Supper is. Simply put it is Christ's testament<sup>32</sup>. Drawing on Hebrews 9:16-17, Luther finds the conceptuality of testament to comprehensive of evangelical message. Writing in 1520 in *A Treatise on the New Testament, That is, the Holy Mass*, Luther says "For if God is to make a testament, as he promises, then he must die; and if he is to die, then he must be a man. And so that little word 'testament' is a short summary of all God's wonders and grace, fulfilled in Christ" (AE 35:84; also see AE 36:38). In the making of the new testament, God suffers death in His Son. The new testament is made not with the blood of a Passover lamb, but God Himself. It is blood shed not for deliverance from Egypt for the forgiveness of sins. Thus it brings to an end the old; the Lord's Supper is not the new Passover but the new testament.<sup>33</sup> This is lost in Massa's assertion that "The Passover is the form in which the essential eucharistic reality – Christ's involvement of us in his self-offering – is imparted to the believing community."<sup>34</sup> The Christian's involvement in the self-offering of Christ is not the same as Christ imparting the benefits of His once and for all death to the believer.

---

<sup>31</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 271-272.

<sup>32</sup> See Gerhard Forde, "The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus" in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 146-151 and Reinhard Schwarz, "The Last Supper: the Testament of Jesus" *Lutheran Quarterly* IX (Winter 1995), 391-403.

<sup>33</sup> See Hebrews 8:13. On this point also see Mark Throntveit, "The Lord's Supper as New Testament, Not New Passover" XI (Autumn 1997), 271-289.

<sup>34</sup> Massa, 171.

The movement is not from humanity to God but from God to humanity. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* also from 1520, Luther notes “Whatever can be said about the forgiveness of sins and the mercy of God in the broadest and richest sense is all briefly comprehended in the word of this testament” (AE 36:56). Then he goes on to argue that it is precisely the promissory, testamentary character of the Lord’s Supper that necessitates a distinction between sacrifice and sacrament: “Therefore these two things—mass and prayer, sacrament and work, testament and sacrifice – must not be confused; for the one comes from God to us through the ministration of the priest and demands our faith, the other proceeds from our faith to God through the priest and demands his hearing. The former descends, the latter ascends” (AE 36:56).

Christ crucified is not a work we offer to God. The language of representation so noticeable in contemporary liturgical theologies is no great advance over the earlier claims of Trent for it still leaves the traffic moving in the wrong direction, from earth to heaven. The initially promising title of Father Massa’s article, “The Gift We Cannot Give Ourselves: The Eucharist in the Theology of Pope Benedict XVI” finally disappoints as the author concludes “At the end of the day, it must be said that Christians have nothing to give to God except Christ, and all that Christ enables us to do once we are united to him in faith and worship. The Eucharist can become the gift of the church only because it is Christ who associates himself with us as members of his ecclesial body.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than Christ given by the Father to sinners, Christ becomes the gift offered by the faithful to the Father. The church’s mystical participation as the body of Christ in the life of the Head, not Christ’s gift of the forgiveness of sins becomes the defining center of the sacrament. Luther’s accent on Christ as gift (*donum, sacramentum*) is displaced by themes of union and participation. Now the worshiper is no longer characterized by receptivity but by ritual and ethical activity in a covenantal community whose head is Christ. Massa’s appropriation of Benedict’s eucharistic theology does not move beyond Odo Casel’s classic statement “Both of these sacrifices flow together; they are fundamentally one; the Church, as the woman of the new paradise and the bride of Christ, acts and offers in his strength. Christ living in time made his sacrifice alone on the cross; Christ raised up by the Spirit makes the sacrifice together with his church which he has purified with the blood from his own side and thus won her for himself. It is not as if the Lord, now in the *pneuma*, were making a new sacrifice with the Church: through the one sacrifice he has reached the term of offering, and reigns now forever at the Father’s right hand; he himself the glorified sacrificial gift. The church, not yet brought to her completion, is drawn into this sacrifice of his; as he sacrificed for her, she now takes an active part in his sacrifice, makes it her own, and is raised thereby with him from the world to God, and glorified. Thus Christ becomes the saviour of the body, and the head of the Church: God has given Christ to the ecclesia as the head which towers over all, given him her who is his body”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Massa, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), 13. Compare to Arthur Carl Piepkorn: “Yet the good that we do, even though we do it in Christ, *we* do. It is *our* sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, *our* oblation of service, *our* offering of faith. But because the impulse and the power come from Christ, because He works both the will and the deed within us, it is still Christ who is the ultimate Priest, the One who is really offering the sacrifice of perfect obedience in deed and in suffering to His heavenly Father. To deny this or to minimize this, is to deny the Biblical doctrine the Head and the

The conceptuality of the Lord's Supper as a representation of Christ's sacrifice has been borrowed by some Lutheran theologians. Most notably, perhaps, Peter Brunner whose magisterial *Worship in the Name of Jesus* would exercise deep influence in contemporary American Lutheranism. Brunner writes "Thus in the act Holy Communion, bracketed with its proclamation, the historical salvation-event concentrated in Jesus' cross is indeed present for us with its redemptive gift through 'effective representation'." <sup>37</sup> More recently Risto Saarinen in attempting to articulate a theology of gift and giving responsive to both ecumenical concerns and philosophical/anthropological theories of the reciprocity of giving has argued "That the Mass does not add anything to the value of Christ's unique and complete sacrifice. In this sense the two are completely different. But there is also a moment of identity which can be described in temporal terms, as memory, or in iconic terms, as representation. The eucharistic sacrifice in some way represents the sacrifice of Christ and is done in remembrance of Christ's passion. Memory and representation thus connect the eucharistic sacrifice to Christ's work of satisfaction on the cross"<sup>38</sup>

The mingling of the once and for all sacrifice of Christ and the ongoing sacrifices of the Christian individually and corporately is to confuse law and gospel, sanctification and justification. When the two sacrifices flow together, the certainty that Christ Jesus intends for broken sinners in the gift of His body and blood is lost as they are thrown back to their own pious activity and thus endangered by either presumption or despair.

There is yet another dimension of contemporary liturgical theology that needs to be addressed in relation to the question of liturgical participation in the atonement. It has to do with the place of the blood of Christ. The theologies that we have examined have all

---

Body, of the Bride and the Bridegroom"- Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Sacrament, Stewardship and Sacrifice" in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* edited by Michael Plekon and William Wiecher (Delhi, New York: ALPB Books, 1993), 212. More recently John Milbank, a key thinker in so-called Radical Orthodoxy makes a similar connection: "The fully efficacious character of Christ's death must mean that in his death this continuously renewed mode of life is already present, such that this death occurs already within the context of the Church, which is both the transmission of the signs of atonement, and the repetition of an atoning practice (as spelt out by Paul and the *Epistle to the Hebrews*). One can add that the eucharist is *both these aspects at once*" -John Milbank, "*The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 161. Already in 1941, Hermann Sasse critiqued the notion of L.A. Winterswyl who made the case the union of Christ with His Body makes it possible to speak of a heavenly offering made present in the eucharistic anamnesis. See Sasse, "The Lord's Supper in the Catholic Mass" in *Lonely Way*-Vol. 2, 28-30.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* trans. Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 170. Oliver Olson has pointed out Brunner's indebtedness to Casel. See Oliver Olson, "Liturgy as Action" *dialog* 14 (Spring 1975), 108-113 and "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* (May 1974), 110-157. Pannenberg draws extensively from Brunner in that the anamnesis "was deeply rooted already in Jewish tradition, particularly in connection with remembrance of Passover. From that point of view it is not a great step to the view of Christian worship, especially baptism and the Eucharist, that Casel shows extensively to be that of the fathers, namely, that we have in it a presentation and representation of the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus" *Systematic Theology*, Vol.3, 306.

<sup>38</sup> Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift: An Ecumenical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 83.

engaged the language of the body of Christ (both as church and in the sacrament) but what about the blood of Christ which the New Testament explicitly links with the forgiveness of sins (see, for example, Mt 26:28, Rom 5:9, Eph 1:7, Col 1:4; Heb 9:14-25, I Pt 1:2,19, I Jo 1:7, Rev 1:5, 5:9 etc)?<sup>39</sup> Why is it that these writers give only minimal, if any, attention to the words regarding the blood, the cup of the new testament in the instituting words of the sacrament? Perhaps it is easier to speak of a mystical body than mystical blood. Christ's words concerning his blood given in the cup of the new testament link atonement and Lord's Supper not in the sense of a mystical reenactment or representation of the cross event but as Jesus' death yields the forgiveness of sins. Christ's blood shed on the cross now cleanses from sin and gives peace with God. The blood of Christ in the sacrament keeps the Lord's Supper from evaporating into a Platonic sphere that would reduce the atonement to a mere metaphor and make of the cross a metaphysical cipher for some higher but hidden reality.

The position that I am attempting to articulate in this paper is not ecumenically convenient; it is a minority stance to be sure. The majority position fits well with the classically Reformed statement of the Heidelberg Catechism's, Question and Answer 75: "How are you reminded and assured in the holy supper that you participate in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross and all his benefits? In this way: Christ has commanded me to and all believers to eat of this broken bread, and to drink of this cup in remembrance of him. He has thereby promised that his body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and his blood was shed for me, as surely as I see with my eyes that the bread of the Lord was broken for me, and that the cup is shared with me. Also, he has promised that he himself as certainly feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life with his crucified body and shed blood as I receive from the hand of the minister and actually taste the bread and the cup of the Lord which are given to me as sure signs of the body and blood of Christ."<sup>40</sup> Given all of their diversity there appears to be a point of convergence in current ecumenical thinking that is coherent with Heidelberg but not with Wittenberg. Liturgical forms should not simply be evaluated by standards of ecumenicity or antiquity, but by faithfulness to the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus given to sinners to be received by faith alone. For Lutherans this is the critical liturgical criterion.

Here the work of Oswald Bayer in his recently translated book *Theology the Lutheran Way* is particularly helpful. In a discussion of the Divine Service as the context for theology, Bayer observes that "Divine service (*Gottesdienst*) is first and last God's service to us, the sacrifice he made for us in Christ, which he distributes to us in the particular divine service: 'Take and eat! I am here for you!' (compare I Cor. 11:24 with Gen. 2:16). We misunderstand this divine service, which is meant to delight us, if we want to give as a work what we are meant to take as a gift. Here we 'are not offering a good work, we are not *actively* receiving the Lord's Supper,' as if our actions could bring about the self-realization of the church. Rather, we receive through the 'priest,' as the servant of the divine word, 'the promise and the sign, and we receive the Lord's Supper

---

<sup>39</sup> Here see the helpful section on the "Ritual Use and Abuse of Blood" in John Kleinig, *Concordia Commentary: Leviticus* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 354-372.

<sup>40</sup> *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* edited by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 151.

*passively.*’ The sacramental gift-giving word is not a prayer; and the gifts we receive are not to be offered to God as a sacrifice. The Lord’s Supper is not a ‘sacrifice that we offer to God.’ Rather, God in his gracious condescension and self-surrender gives himself to us in this meal. We are the recipients; we simply *receive* his sacrifice.”<sup>41</sup> It is this insight that contemporary Lutherans need to reclaim and let shape our liturgical theology and practice.

John T. Pless  
VI.18.2008

---

<sup>41</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* trans. Jeffrey Silcock and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 90.