

For the

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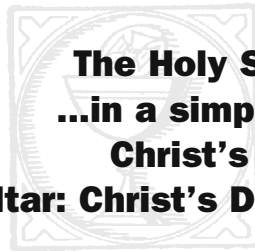
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Cover Photo: The cover photo features the Walther Chalice. Popular myth states that it is one of two ornate European chalices that were brought over to the United States in the 1830's by the Saxons. Photo by Concordia Publishing House from the collection of Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Mo.

Sacrament

Christ's Daily Food

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon noted, “it is certain that most people in our churches use the sacraments, absolution and the Lord’s Supper, many times in a year” (*Apology*, page 180 in the Tappert edition). Less than a decade later, however, Luther painted a strikingly different picture, “Now that the people are free from the tyranny of the pope, they are unwilling to receive the sacrament and they treat it with contempt.” Luther bemoaned the situation, yet counseled patient teaching on the part of pastors in trying to correct the situation. “Here, too, there is need of exhortation, but with this understanding: No one is to be compelled to believe or to receive the sacrament, no law is to be made concerning it. . . . We should so preach that, of their own accord and without any law, the people will desire the sacrament and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer it to them” (*Small Catechism*, 340-1). Luther’s comments sound remarkably contemporary, for many pastors hope to achieve these very things. Yet, there seems to be a disconnect of sorts between pastors and people. All of us who have served in the parish have heard the responses from our people— “Having communion more often would make it less special,” “I am not prepared for receiving the sacrament every Sunday,” and the like.

What happened? Luther blamed it on “enthusiasm”—the idea that God deals with human beings apart from His Word and sacraments. In the Smalcald Articles he reserves some of his



The Lord’s Supper is about the presence of the gracious Christ who gives forgiveness of sins, light, and life. It is about the work of Christ for us, not an act of our obedience to Him. It is God’s application of an external, alien righteousness to sinners in need of forgiveness.

means of grace—that the mere reception of the sacraments guaranteed God’s favor. Spener argued that, though such a faith is a “fleshly illusion . . . There are not a few who think that all that Christianity requires of them is that they be baptized, hear the preaching of God’s Word, confess and receive absolution, and go to the Lord’s Supper, no matter how their hearts are disposed at the time” (Philip Spener, *Pia Desideria* [Fortress, 1965], 64, 65).

In contrast, true Christianity, according to Pietism, centers on the inner life of the believing Christian, the establishment and

strongest language for a condemnation of the “enthusiasm” that he believes clings to every human being. So why is it that so many of Luther’s heirs have lost his perspective on this point? A partial explanation lies in the historical and theological development of Lutheranism. Simply put, the enthusiasm Luther feared found its way directly into Lutheran theology and practice and remains with us in the present.

Following

Luther’s death in 1546, various Lutheran theologians attempted to “complete” Luther’s reforming work. One significant group, later called Pietists and led by Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705), believed that, while Luther had taught justification by grace through faith more clearly than anyone since Paul, he had not succeeded in wedding that doctrine with a vigorous practice. Worse yet, they claimed that of some of Luther’s followers (the so-called “Orthodox”) endangered the Lutheran Confessions by over emphasizing the

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cultivation of the mystical union between the believer and Christ. “Our whole Christian religion consists of the inner man or the new man, whose soul is faith and whose expressions are the fruits of life, and all sermons should be aimed at this” (*Pia Desideria*, 116). Not surprisingly, then, Pietism’s reason for receiving the Sacrament of the Altar differs radically from Luther’s biblical teaching. For Pietism, the body and blood of Christ, while really present, are chiefly pledges and signs that move the Christian to a fuller expression of godliness (*Pia Desideria* 63, 67). Thus, Spener downplays God’s objective promises realized in the present Christ. He stresses instead the experience of the human participant. “It is not enough that *we* hear the Word with *our* outward ear, but *we* must let it penetrate to *our* heart, so that *we* may hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort *feel* the sealing of the Spirit and the power of the Word. Nor is it enough to be baptized, but the inner man, where *we* have put on Christ in Baptism, must also keep Christ on and bear witness to Him in *our* outward life. Nor is it enough to have received the Lord’s Supper externally, but the inner man must truly be fed with that blessed food. . . . Nor, again, is it enough to worship God in an external temple, but the inner man worships God best in *his own* temple, whether or not *he* is in an external temple at the time” (*Pia Desideria*, 117; emphasis added). Thus, for Spener and Pietism generally, the Word and the sacraments are effective only to the person who faithfully believes and accepts them.

By emphasizing the preparedness and faithfulness of man, later Pietists effectively barred believers from the Lord’s Table; the Supper was off limits to all except those deemed sufficiently “spiritual.” August Herman Franke (1663-1727) put it like this, “This then, beloved in the Lord Jesus, is the pure and unblemished worship in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ, considered according to a threefold duty toward oneself, toward one’s neighbor, and toward God, and consisting in the practice of the same through the power of the Spirit. Now enter into your hearts and observe there your circumstances in regard to this threefold duty. See how far you have progressed in them or how far you have not progressed. And if you do not wish to deceive yourself, you must admit that it is clear that your present Christian state does not yet merit the name of a righteous beginning. What help is there for us, then, if we always consider our worship to consist in . . . at a certain time going to confession and the Lord’s Supper, and yet always living according to our old manner?” (*Pietists—Selected Writings* [Paulist Press, 1983], 162).

What would Luther say to all of this? The Lord’s Supper “is not founded on the holiness of men”—either the officiating priest or the receiving layperson—“but on the Word of God” (*Large Catechism*, 448). For Luther, the Lord’s Supper is about the presence of the gracious Christ who gives forgiveness of sins, light and life. It is about the work of Christ for us, not an act of our obedience to Him. It is God’s application of an external, alien righteousness to sinners in need of forgiveness. “The Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance” to comfort the person whose “heart feels too sorely pressed” (*Large Catechism*, 449). Should we choose to follow the path of the Pietists, we will become self-engrossed and miss the gracious promise that Christ has for us. And even if we don’t feel like receiving the Lord’s Supper, Luther advises, “if you cannot feel the need . . . at least believe the Scriptures,” which tell us that the Supper gives us “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” (*Large Catechism*, 455; *Small Catechism*, 352). For, “if you choose to fix your eye on how good and pure you are . . . you will never go” (*Large Catechism*, 453). Thus, “he is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words, ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins’” (*Small Catechism*, 352).

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2a), not ourselves. In reality, Pietism’s overemphasis on man necessarily leads to enthusiasm; it replaces Christ with the human subject. This is and will always be the danger for we human beings. Better instead to heed Luther’s warning, “Enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy. . . . Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit, apart from such Word and sacrament, is of the devil” (*Smalcald Articles*, 313). Listen also to Luther’s advice, “I go to the Sacrament of the Altar not on the strength of my own faith, but on the strength of Christ’s Word. I may be strong or weak; I leave that in God’s hands. This I know, however, that He has commanded me to go, eat, and drink, etc. and that He gives me His body and blood; He will not lie or deceive me” (*Large Catechism*, 444). The crucified and risen Christ is really present to us in this “daily food and sustenance” so that we might have “life and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

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