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BRINGING THE REFORMATION TO THE WORLD: THE MEANS OF GRACE

AUGSBURG CONFESSION, ARTICLES 9–10

by Hans-Jörg Voigt

Introduction

ESTEEMED BRETHREN IN CHRIST, my sincere thanks to you for the opportunity to use this next hour or so to talk about the Means of Grace that Christ has entrusted to His Church. In preparation for this world conference, the executive committee considered how we can adequately prepare the jubilee of the Reformation in 2017. We all agreed that not Luther as a person but rather the Lutheran Confessions should be the center of our attention, which, of course, bear Luther's strong imprint. We are strongly convinced that just as Luther severely criticized an exaggerated cult of the saints in order to lead us back to the core of the Gospel, so in our time Luther's person can only be of secondary importance; the pure Gospel of Christ, which the Confessions expound so clearly, must be our primary emphasis.

Today's presentation will deal with the Means of Grace, as they are set forth in Articles IX and X of the Augsburg Confession (AC).

Article IX: "Concerning Baptism, our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation (MARK 16:16) and that God's grace is offered through Baptism (TITUS 3:4-7). They teach that children are to be baptized (ACTS 2:38-39). Being offered to God through Baptism, they are received into God's grace. Our churches condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the Baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism."

Article X: "Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper (1 COR. 10:16). They reject those who teach otherwise."¹

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*. 2nd ed., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 35.

My remarks begin with the thought that Article IV on justification in the Augsburg Confession pre-supposes that it is implemented and applied in the distribution of the Means of Grace. After that, I should like to take a look at the individual Means of Grace, always with the distinction of doctrine and practice. I will try to give a reason for making this distinction.

1. The Means of Grace are the practical application of the doctrine of justification.

1.1 The doctrine of the Means of Grace

It was Lutheran orthodoxy in the 16th and 17th century that molded and filled the concept of the "Means of Grace" (*media salutis*) in reference to the Sacraments and the preaching of the Word of God. The concept itself derives from Augsburg Confession, Article V: "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given."² From the word "instruments" — in German *Mittel*, that is, "means" — the concept of the "Means of Grace" developed.

The "Means of Grace," or the sacraments, are sacred acts "*qui habent mandatum Dei et promissionem gratiae, quae est propria novi testamenti*" — "for these rites have God's command and the promise of grace, which is peculiar to the New Testament" (Ap 13.4).

Properly, we say that the doctrine of justification is the chief article of the Christian faith. Luther says in the

The act of justification takes place in the distribution of the Means of Grace. Another way of putting it: The Means of Grace makes the doctrine of justification happen.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

How are the Means of Grace the practical application of the doctrine of justification?

Smalcald Articles: “Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls (Mk 13:31).” That sentence gave rise to the statement about the “*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*” with which the Church stands or falls.

But if we read carefully then, Article V stands within this context, something with which the Church stands or falls, because it refers directly to Article IV: “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” This relative clause explains how the doctrine of justification comes to us human beings, that is, through the Office of the Ministry that distributes the Means of Grace.

Therefore, this is how we could define it: The act of justification takes place in the distribution of the Means of Grace. Another way of putting it: The Means of Grace makes the doctrine of justification happen. To observe the jubilee of the Reformation can therefore only mean that we distribute, teach, emphasize and celebrate the Means of Grace!

1.2 The Means of Grace in practice

This is specific to the Means of Grace, that they are practiced and implemented. That’s the reason I consider it necessary that we consider how we practice the Means of Grace in our churches. That’s the reason why in this presentation I chose to make a distinction between doctrine and practice. When Jesus Christ instituted the holy Supper He said: “This do ...”

For that reason we should not be too quick to insist on the freedom in ceremonies as they described in Article XV, for ceremonies are human ordinances, but the practice of the Means of Grace is by institution of Christ.

In this connection we hear the old church statement *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which was originally formulated by Prosper of Aquitaine. The liturgical order of worship must correspond to the faith we believe. In other words: The worship service of the church (*Gottesdienst*) is the prayed confession of faith and justification in practice.

2. Holy Baptism

2.1 The doctrine of Holy Baptism

Article IX of the Augsburg Confession speaks of Baptism

as necessary for salvation. In the Small Catechism, Luther quotes Titus 3:5–7: “God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

The Augsburg Confession briefly and succinctly approves the practice of children’s Baptism, which is not disputed today in the Roman Church but certainly was at that time.

And in the Large Catechism, Luther takes up the questions posed by the Anabaptists, and he explains what it is with the faith of children. Luther clearly states that children believe because faith is worked by the Holy Spirit. Yet that is not the reason why we baptize, rather because Christ commanded it. For Luther, this is at all times the decisive criterion: that Christ commanded it; nothing else counts! We read in the Large Catechism: “Further, we say that we are not very concerned to know whether the person baptized believes or not. For Baptism does not become invalid on that account. But everything depends on God’s Word and command ... So we do likewise in

infant Baptism. We bring the child in the conviction and hope that it believes, and we pray that God may grant it faith. But we do not baptize it for that reason, but solely because of God’s command.”

In our own time the disputes about infant Baptism have increased greatly.

1. Baptist and Pentecostal churches are growing strongly in Latin America, and as they sow doubts about our doctrine of the faith they influence our own congregations.

2. The importance of infant Baptism increases in significance because the beginning of our faith life greatly influences what gives support and certainty to the end of our life. I am writing this with the awareness of the increasing sickness of dementia in our societies. I have visited church members who are increasingly mentally weak and in old age are unable to pray the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed and finally not even a

Hermann Sasse wrote,
“Both are one: the
Sacrament, the *verbum
visibile*, and the Word,
the *sacramentum audibile*;
the Sacrament that can
be heard and that is
heard.”

hymn verse. What is the spiritual foundation on which we can stand if at the end of our life we lose our entire faith knowledge (*notitia*)? The answer: “We pray that God may grant faith. But we do not baptize for that reason, but solely because of God’s command.” This confession from the Large Catechism accompanies me on my visit to those suffering from dementia. It is a confession that is scriptural and fit for our time.

2.2 The practice of Baptism

In individual cases, doubts may arise about the legitimacy of someone’s Baptism. I’m thinking of the case where someone was baptized by Baptists or other denominations “in the name of Jesus” but not in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Since it was not certain whether that was a valid Baptism, we baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity.

Our Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK), together with ten other churches, have subscribed to an ecumenical declaration for the mutual recognition of each other’s Baptism. We agreed to this statement:

There we recognize as valid every Baptism according Jesus’ command performed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the sign and action of submersion in the water or the pouring of water over the person that is baptized. This mutual recognition of Baptism is an expression of our bond of oneness in Jesus Christ (EPH. 4:4-6). A Baptism performed in this manner is unique and not repeatable.

Here the criteria for a validly performed Baptism are clearly stated: the Trinitarian Formula and the submersion in or the pouring on of water.

3. Repentance and confession of sin

3.1 The doctrine of the confession of sins

It is quite noteworthy and yet sad that especially the Lutheran Church stands in danger of losing the rite of Confession, even though the Confession and Absolution is the clearest event of justification in our life. Forgiving sins is justification handed out and delivered. Absolution

is, in fact, justification distributed, because as the minister forgives in the name of Christ, your justification is forensically declared before the heavenly Judge Himself. We confess in the Formula of Concord, Article III, the righteousness of faith before God: “We believe, teach and confess that according to the usage of Holy Scripture the word *justify* means, in this article, ‘to absolve’, that is, to declare free from sin.”

And for that reason the confession of sins and absolution is properly called a sacrament, as our Confessions indeed do. In Apology XII, we read that great sentence: “According to Luke 10:16, ‘The one who hears you hears me’. Therefore, the voice of the one absolving must be believed no differently than we would believe a voice from heaven. Absolution can properly be called a Sacrament of repentance.” And that the Sacrament of the Confession and Absolution is a voice from heaven we can also read in Article XXV.

Luther emphasizes this view in his Large Catechism. As he does in the Small Catechism, Luther connects contrition and repentance with Holy Baptism when he writes: “Here you can see that Baptism, both in its power and meaning, includes also the third Sacrament, which has been called repentance.”

In the practical life of church members and in our teaching the view of Confession and Absolution as a sacrament has not been generally accepted or recognized, probably because Augustine’s definition of a sacrament is frequently cited, which defines a sacrament as an element joined to the Word. The Lutheran Confessions do not make a hard a fast definition of a sacrament, sometimes using Augustine’s formula while also allowing for a broader definition that includes Absolution because it is instituted by Christ and delivers the forgiveness of sins. That Christ Himself instituted Confession and Absolution, there can be no doubt. “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (JOHN 20:21-23).

Martin Luther said, “If thousand or many thousand worlds were mine, I would lose all rather than have the least piece of confession be left out of the church. For the forgiveness of sins is spoken by the priest in God’s stead

There is no essential difference between the Christ lying in the manger and the Christ who under bread and wine gives us His very body and His very blood.

and therefore it is nothing other than God's Word with which he consoles our heart."

3.2 Practicing Confession and Absolution

The increasing disuse of individual confession at the end of the 19th and the 20th century is decried in many churches today. In our old Lutheran churches in Germany, we now practice chiefly the General Confession, also called confessional devotion. In most of our congregations, General Confession takes place 30 minutes prior to the Sunday Communion service (*Hauptgottesdienst*). In other congregations, Confession is at the beginning of the main service.

The order for the General Confession usually begins with the Greeting of Peace, followed by the words in which Christ instituted confession and absolution. Christ says to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (MATT. 16:19) And to His disciples Jesus says: "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (JOHN 20:22-23).

This is followed by the reading of a penitential psalm and the reading of the Ten Commandments or a confessional address by the pastor. And then people in silence confess their guilt and speak Luther's confessional prayer or another prayer.

After that they come forward to the altar and the ordained pastor (and only the ordained pastor) lays his hands upon their head and pronounces: "Your sins are forgiven, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

In my pastoral work, it has repeatedly happened that such a general Confession and Absolution led to the practice of private confession. When people experience a particular sense of guilt at a certain time and seek to talk about it, then I can take it from that point and tell them: "After this confession I can, if you wish, pronounce God's forgiveness in Holy Absolution." We should never underestimate this.

We really are in need of Confession and Absolution, as is indicated by a story from Luther's life. With Justus Jonas he happened to be in Eisleben at the barber shop. And as

his hair was being cut, he said to him: "Man's original sin is like the beard of a man, which even if it were trimmed off today so that the chin would be smooth, it would still have regrown into a beard by the next morning. Such growing of the hair and beard does not stop while man lives, yet when the shovel is brought into action, then this process stops. So also original sin remains in us and is active whilst we live; yet one must constantly resist it and cut off such hairs."

We should teach more and more about the holy Sacrament of Confession. And the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses," should not be put in opposition to the Absolution. Certainly God hears the petition for forgiveness; there can be no doubt about that. But the Absolution, instituted by Christ Himself, grants an even clearer measure of certainty of forgiveness at the very judgement seat of God.

Adherence to the
Lutheran Confessions is
essential to the Church
at all times and at all
places.

Excursus on ordination

Again, depending upon how a sacrament is defined, we also could call ordination a sacrament, because it

was instituted by Christ. And the Words of Institution for this are the same as for Absolution. "He breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit." In Article XXVIII, the Augsburg Confession says just that about the office of bishops, which of course refers to the ordained office: "Our teachers' position is this: the authority of the Keys (MATT. 16:19) or the authority of the bishops — according to the Gospel — is a power or commandment of God."

Remember what we heard in Article V: "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted." The English translation is obviously reflecting the Latin text. But it is the German text that is authoritative, and this is what it says: "To obtain such faith God has instituted the office of preaching" (*Solchen Glauben zu erlangen hat Gott das Predigtamt eingesetzt*).

Thus, I have absolutely no understanding for the fact that in some German territorial churches (and not only in them) ordination is simply understood as an administrative act (*Ordnungsakt*), and this apparently derives from a false understanding of the term *rite vocatus* in Article XIV, where it says: "Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the church or administer the

Sacraments without a rightly ordered call.”

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we read (13, 11f): “But if ordination is understood as carrying out the ministry of the Word, we are willing to call ordination a Sacrament.”

4. About preaching

4.1 The doctrine of preaching

In a systematic-theological sense, the doctrine of preaching and of the Holy Supper are closely connected because they both distribute the forgiveness of sins. Preaching and Sacrament form a unity. They are rather like the focal points of an ellipse, “for the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (JOHN 1:14). This means that in Christ, the Logos, the Word and flesh and blood are united.

Hermann Sasse wrote, “Both are one: the Sacrament, the *verbum visibile*, and the Word, the *sacramentum audibile*; the Sacrament that can be heard and that is heard.”

Thus the preached Word authoritatively identifies sin by the Law of God, and it comforts and pronounces authoritatively forgiveness through the one Word, Christ, which is also at work through Baptism, Absolution and the Lord’s Supper. That is why preaching is intimately bound to ordination, and we need to distinguish it from the many other forms of proclaiming the Gospel like home devotions, Sunday School, in classrooms and in various other devotional forms, as well as our reading services.

4.2 The practice of preaching

Preaching in our time seems to suffer from a lack of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, especially in our Lutheran churches, where we really were taught to know about this distinction.

The sermon seems to be quite clear when the Law is used to identify sin; we refer to that as the *usus elencticus*. In this regard, the preacher today has sufficient explanatory material at his disposal, for sin is wherever people are, and we read and see a great deal about it.

The pronouncement of forgiveness through the sacrificial death of Christ has a firm theological place. However, the preaching of the Gospel tends to become flat and drab, because the love of God in Christ is really without parallel. And this point we should invest a great deal of effort into our preaching.

But a real difficulty arises when we follow the preaching practice of the New Testament and address the congregation of the redeemed and baptized with words of admonition and correction. Here we must remember three things:

1. Biblical admonition corresponds to the Third Use of the Law. This means preaching Law. The Formula of Concord teaches us, “Because of these fleshly lusts, God’s truly believing, elect and regenerate children need the daily instruction and admonition, warning and threatening of the Law in this life” (FC SD VI, 9).
2. Such admonition, according to the Third Use of the Law, can be heard by terrified Christians as the Law that identifies sin and kills spiritually.
3. The preacher, in the midst of all frustrations of everyday parish life, must ask the decisive question: “From what source do I expect a change to the better in the life of the congregation and in my own life? From the preaching of the Law, or from those Christian admonitions that also require the deeds of people, or is it the preaching of the Gospel that works change in the life of the hearers?”

I am going to quote the answer from the Solid Declaration: “The Law indeed says it is God’s will and command that we should walk in a new life. But it does not give the power and ability to begin and do so. The Holy Spirit renews the heart. He is given and received, not through the Law, but through the preaching of the Gospel (GAL 3:14).”

In the end, it is through the preaching of the Gospel that life in the congregation is changed. This is a sacramental statement of faith, and it often seems contradicted by our experience in the world.

5. Concerning the Lord’s Supper

5.1 The doctrine of the Lord’s Supper

When we talk about the Lord’s Supper we are talking about the other high point of the Lutheran service. Here we have the heartbeat of the Lutheran Church. In the following section, I want to present the doctrine of our church by pointing to the practice of the Sacrament.

There seems to be very little disagreement among us about the doctrine of Holy Communion. The Formula of Concord takes up Article X of the Augustana and says: “Article X has been approved in which we confess the

following: We believe that in the Lord's Supper Christ's body and blood are truly and substantially present."

This confesses not less but more than the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation as formulated by Thomas Aquinas. Luther rejects all philosophical explanation attempts with their distinction between substance and accidents. And ours is not less than the Roman transubstantiation; it is more than that.

There is no essential difference between the Christ lying in the manger and the Christ who under bread and wine gives us His very body and His very blood. Luther writes: "And it is not a spiritual nor an imagined body and blood. But it is the proper, natural one coming from the holy, virginal really human body of Mary, but now seated at the right hand of God in majesty, and as a divine person, which Christ Jesus is now called as proper, true and eternal God, from which he was born before all eternity."

5.2 The practice of Holy Communion

Sometimes I do have my doubts whether the clarity of our Confessions really are reflected in the life of our churches. The way we practice the Lord's Supper seems to show this, and we can see that in the way we celebrated Holy Communion.

5.2.1 The duration of the real presence and the consumption

Let me begin with some practical considerations at the end of a Communion celebration. What happens with the precious gifts of the body and blood of Christ that were not distributed and used? The Scriptures do not define the precise time when the body and blood of Christ joins with the elements and when that sacramental union ends. The Scriptures are clear that the intention is to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Luther put the greatest emphasis on the fact that we do what Christ commanded. And He said to "eat" and "drink." Christ said nothing about keeping His body and blood in reserve. He also did not say that after the end of the celebration His Word is no longer valid. Thus we should eat and drink and fully consume the body and blood of Christ.

Should larger quantities remain, then we should consume them with some elders after the service in the sacristy.

5.2.2 The practice of consecration

If we believe "that in the Lord's Supper Christ's body and

blood are truly and substantially present," and that this happens because of the power of the divine Word, then it must be clear what elements we put under God's Word, what we will consecrate. We need to be quite clear about the question: What is to be consecrated and what not?

It is good Christian practice to put the elements to be consecrated on a corporale, a white cloth. We should try to ascertain the approximate number of wafers and the amount of wine presumably needed. This is then put in the middle of the altar, while additional containers like pyxis and flagon are set off to the side. If the latter are consecrated, they should also be in the center.

5.2.3 Second consecration

If during distribution the consecrated elements run out, then we would certainly have to consecrate the additional bread and the wine brought to the altar. Where this does not happen, mere bread and wine are distributed. In accord with the Lutheran doctrine of Holy Communion, it is absolutely necessary to consecrate bread and wine brought to the altar additionally. And it is false doctrine for such additional bread and wine to be distributed without consecration.

This second consecration takes place by interrupting the distribution and then speaking the words of consecration over both the additional bread and the additional wine.

5.2.4 Purification

If we as Lutherans believe "that in the Lord's Supper Christ's body and blood are truly and substantially present," then this would require a careful cleaning of paten and chalice. This is referred to as purification. The crumbs remaining from the body of Christ are wiped into the chalice, and the chalice should be cleaned with water or with non-consecrated wine. Then dry the chalice with an appropriate cloth (purificatorium).

Just before his death, on his last trip to Eisleben, Luther made a stop in the city of Halle because the river Saale was flooding. While there Luther conducted a mass. Because of his age and illness he was rather frail and infirm, and during distribution some wine spilled on the floor. And in full vestments the old man knelt down and sucked what had been spilled from floor; nothing of the precious blood of Christ should be stepped on. The whole congregation — so it is reported — observed this with many tears and loud crying.

5.2.5 Communion linens

The linens we used for the celebration of Holy Communion are very illustrative, and they have only symbolic meaning. We already mentioned the corporale, a white linen. On it we place the communion vessels. It symbolizes the shroud at the burial of Jesus.

And according to ancient custom, a purificator is placed on the chalice and it can remind us of Jesus' swaddling clothes that the angel expressly mentions as a sign of the Incarnation to the shepherds in Bethlehem: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (LUKE 2:12).

The veil of the chalice in the colors of the Church Year together with the stiff square kind of form a tent. It could be useful to preach a sermon about this tent to which St. John refers in the Revelation: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (REV. 21:3). The reference here is to a tent, and what John sees is already fulfilled where Holy Communion is celebrated. God is tenting among us.

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