

Introduction - Communion

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"You Are What You Eat." This motto has periodically been used to encourage a good diet. Our diets do point to who we are—our lifestyles, our priorities, and our preferences. Not only what we eat, but also how we eat reveals many things about us.

In our culture, millions increasingly eat quickly and in isolation from others though they may be in the midst of a crowd. This practice often points to a radical individualism. The social fabric is frequently woven apart from family and friends. The times when meals are defined by the presence of family and friends are fewer and fewer for many. Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter remain, but even then families strain to gather all their members due to schedules and geography.

Yet, there is a profound hunger in our day for relationships—whether of family or friends—that are true and enduring. All of us can recall a particularly festive meal with family and friends, which sparkles in our memory for its warmth and love. As the author of Proverbs states, "Better is a meal of herbs where there is love than the fatted calf with hatred" (Prov. 15:17).

Imagine a world where eating was viewed quite differently. Imagine a world where what one would eat, how one would eat, and with whom one would eat were questions at the center of daily life. Such was the world, which Jesus entered and lived in. Table fellowship among many of the Jews in Jesus' day was an expression of a common faith—an agreed upon world-view. The character of others and their views of God were significant when one sat down at the table. Think how far such a practice is from the day-to-day eating habits of the western world. When Jesus ate with publicans and sinners it was noticed (Luke 15:1-2).

A meal unlike any other, this meal bestows forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Lord's Supper or Eucharist was instituted by Christ in conjunction with the Passover. It is a holy gift to which the contrite and baptized children of God are invited. To participate in this meal is to participate in the very life of the Holy Trinity (I Cor. 10:16), for Christ is truly present. This meal, far from being private and individualistic, expresses the profound unity which God's people have been given. This meal is central to the church's understanding of her Lord.

Imagine now a city where this meal is so highly revered that Friday penitential services required that the streets be closed to other traffic in preparation for Sunday's observance of the Lord's Supper. Such was the situation in Bach's Leipzig as described in Gunther Stiller's *J. S. Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970, 106).

Imagine the Reformer, Martin Luther, holding the Lord's Supper at the center of the church's confession. Luther vigorously defended the Lord's Supper against Roman Catholic abuses and against Zwingli's challenge to the Real Presence. For Luther, it was unthinkable that this meal would be at the margins of Christian thinking or privately interpreted. As Hermann Sasse states: ". . . for Luther the Real Presence meant that the Incarnation was more than a historical fact of the past. It was reality. Here is God who became man; here is Christ in His divinity and humanity. Here is the true body and blood of the Lamb of God, given for you, present with you. Here forgiveness of sins is a reality—and, with it, life and salvation" (*This Is My Body* [Adelaide, S.A.: Lutheran Publishing House, 1997], 328). The centrality of the Real Presence to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and Scriptural Christology is captured definitively in Martin Chemnitz's *The Lord's Supper* (Tr. J. A. O. Preus. St. Louis: Concordia, 1979).

Has the acculturation of Lutheranism led to the loss of this holy and defining meal? When the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America declared altar and pulpit fellowship with various Reformed churches in Philadelphia (1997), Lutheran identity suffered a tragic loss. Further, the casual or mechanical manner in which many observe this holy meal is inappropriate to the reality of Christ being truly present in the bread and wine according to both His human and Divine natures.

Concordia Theological Seminary confesses with classic Lutheranism the mystery and wonder of this meal. We confess what this meal is. It frees us from sin. We no longer eat in isolation, but as a part of the church across time and space. We no longer eat without hope, but "as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we do show His death till He comes" (I Cor. 11:26).

May the articles of this issue renew and refresh you with the Scriptural portrait of this holy meal. Moreover, may John Gerhard's reflections on the Lord's Supper be reflected in our attitudes and practices at the Lord's table. Listen to his Sacred Meditation on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper:

How great the thanks I owe to You, highest God, that in the most sacred mystery of the supper, You feed me with the body and blood of Your Son! What in heaven or on earth is more precious and excellent than this divine body, personally united with Your Son? Where is there a more certain testimony and pledge of Your grace than in the precious blood of Your Son, poured out for my sins on the altar of the cross? It ever blesses me with new gifts of grace. In this body dwells life itself, from whence it restores me to eternal life and makes me alive. (Sacred Meditations XIII, Thanksgiving for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper)

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