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Reformed Exegesis and Lutheran Sacraments: Worlds in Conflict

David P. Scaer

1. Theology and Biblical Studies

If a conflict does not exist between theology (dogmatics) and exegesis (the science or art of biblical interpretation), the potential for it is always there. Exegetical scholars can be critical of theologians for offering their views without adequate biblical supports or failing to exploit potentially superior citations. Theologians look first at exegetical conclusions and judge what is permissible within doctrinal or traditional boundaries. Luther's discovery of justification by faith, an exegetical finding, stood at odds with common church belief. By finding no New Testament reasons for prohibiting the ordination of women pastors, many biblical scholars have challenged traditional church practice limiting the pastoral office to men. Church theologians have responded with both dogmatic and biblical reasons against ordaining women. In the events that accompanied the disruption in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1974, some members of the Department of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, determined the methods of certain exegetical scholars were wrong because their non-historical interpretation contradicted church doctrine. Today the exegetical issue for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has shifted. Neo-Evangelical scholars, who influence the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, affirm biblical historicity, but, with roots in Reformed theology, they are non-sacramental in their reading of biblical texts. Where a sacramental interpretation cannot be avoided, they allow only for a symbolical interpretation. Lutherans dependent on these scholars are unlikely to utilize the full sacramental treasures of the Scriptures.

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a. Theology

Theology finds its focus in what a church believes (*fides quae*). It takes the faith of one generation, delivers it to another, adjusts it to new situations, and, where necessary, defends it. Creeds and confessions are static, but theologies are contemporary. Theology is a critical discipline, marking off the boundaries of the true religion from false alternatives. Without this critical function, theology regresses into historicism. In preserving a church's faith, theology distinguishes that church's belief from that of other churches and so presents reasons for its own existence. Without the apostolic succession of its bishops, Anglicanism would lose its *raison d'être*, and so this article is the non-negotiable item in its rapprochement with Lutherans. Vatican theologians are cognizant that the Council of Trent's distinguishing characteristics may be compromised in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and hesitate to conclude the treaty with Lutherans. If Luther's doctrine on justification is allowed, his continued excommunication and the last 400 years of Rome's history become less explicable. Large Lutheran churches have accommodated themselves with the Reformed, especially in allowing for a general presence of Christ in the Supper, but not specifically in the elements, and so undermine their own existence.

Theology also has an ecumenical task in preserving a catholicity that both transcends space and time and recognizes the expression of this catholicity in specific places and times. It is not, strictly speaking, a congregation's nor an individual's task to determine what is ultimately true. The "we believe's" of the Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions are the Synod's, congregations in communion with each other, accepting and preserving what was once delivered by the apostles to the saints. Church belief (*fides quae*) is an historical given and not a contemporary achievement of sovereign congregations individually or in a covenant arrangement. Paul delivers only those things that he has received to the churches. Neither he nor his churches are originators of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23), the prohibition against women pastors (1 Corinthians 14:34-37), and Christ's

resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3). These belong to the apostles' teachings and are the common possession of all the churches.

b. Biblical Studies

Scriptures for the exegete are fenceless prairies where he may roam, and so he is the envy of those whose goals are predetermined by tradition and official boundaries. Previously overlooked citations hold out a promise of discovery and provide a wider and deeper foundation for a church's theology. His field of exploration is the raw biblical data, a luxury not allowed the theologian, who has a concern for accepted church teaching, or the practical theologian (pastor), whose tasks are situationally determined and often unpredictable. A confessional fellowship requires a biblical scholar to know and evaluate traditional interpretations of the biblical evidences. Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Reformed traditions of biblical interpretation tend to be distinctive—or at least they should be. Even before the work of a particular scholar is examined, his conclusions are anticipated. A Baptist would hardly be expected to use the pericope of Jesus blessing the children as an indication that the baptism of infants was in vogue in the early church. Lutheran exegetes, whose church life centers in word and sacrament, can and should be open to discovering sacramental references everywhere. Regardless of bias or prior position, no serious Bible scholar claims to have exhausted the meaning of a particular pericope. Passages traditionally used to support a position may be found to have other vistas in sight. Hermeneutics is not a closed system. Dogmatically oriented groups may, for the sake of self-preservation and their own orthodoxy, limit permissible methods of interpretation. However, when the methods themselves are exempt from scrutiny and critique—that is, they possess an unchallengeable autonomous objectivity—they, in effect, replace the Scriptures as the final norm.

Confessional subscription does not require lockstep methods or precise, predetermined conclusions for each pericope. It does require that the exegete be aware of his own tradition and the bias of the scholars who influence him. Biblical scholars of

particular churches ideally are obligated to preserve their confessional positions. Left unchecked, they damage their traditions. After Vatican II, Roman Catholic schools of theology acquired instructors without regard to church allegiance. This generated the disasters now being reversed by the present pontiff. Lutherans, too, are not immune to external and often damaging influences.

c. Head to Head

The greater freedom with which biblical scholars ply their trade inherently carries with it a potential hazard to one's ecclesiastical health, as Luther discovered. He and the confessors made every effort to demonstrate that the doctrine of justification was not an exegetical novelty by citing the church fathers, but this proved unconvincing to their Roman adversaries—hence excommunication and Reformation. Luther's removal demonstrates a general rule that the body politic prefers the *status quo*, which its theologians, rather than its biblical scholars, are more likely to preserve. Court theologians tend to lack the virtue of self-analysis, and their pronouncements tend to be predictable.

Tradition guides biblical interpretation, but tradition may not be substituted for it or allowed to hinder it. *Sedes doctrinae* have value in showing how the church does its theology, but they may not become barriers to discovery in the other words of God. They do not have a stranglehold in demonstrating revealed truth, so that other passages are prevented from being used. Each word of God has an inherent value in and of itself. Designating a passage as *sedes doctrinae* is a *theolegoumenon*, that is, it is a theological, not a hermetical, decision. Not unexpectedly, each church (confession) has its favored *sedes*.

A lack of clarity in a pericope is perceived and not intrinsic. Responsibility for not seeing the importance of a passage rests in the interpreter and certainly not in the text or the Holy Spirit. No one interpreter can be familiar with the *Sitz im Leben* of every citation. He may not have extricated himself from an inherently flawed or inadequate method or tradition.

Discarding a Scripture in theological formulation because of a perceived inadequacy may reveal more about the interpreter than the citation. Plenary inspiration holds out the possibility that every biblical citation has more than what any interpreter can discover. Simply because certain Old Testament messianic prophecies are hallowed by tradition does not preclude a much wider field of discovery. In fact, the entire First Testament is messianic in goal and purpose. The Small Catechism's use of the four accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper does not suggest that other words of Jesus cannot define the sacrament, as Luther himself showed. A similar principle applies to baptism. If the traditional *sedes doctrinae* from the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline Epistles support a Lutheran sacramental theology, we have every liberty to look for sacramental references elsewhere in these Gospels and the Fourth Gospel. Oft-cited pericopes are not fences beyond which we dare not look, but guides.

2. Cross Pollination

a. Scholarship Across Boundaries

Because the divine word appears in human language, biblical scholars take advantage of secular sources and scholars outside their tradition. In the ancient church, Gnostic sources provided materials for the church, which proved itself to be catholic and orthodox. Qumran, Gnostic gospels, and rabbinic sources are no less significant than the Greek philosophy and mythology in which Lutheran pastors have been trained since the Reformation. Biblical studies cross established lines dividing one confession from another and from those without acceptable religious convictions. Rudolph Bultmann, John A. T. Robinson, Joseph Fitzmeyer, W. D. Davies, Dale Allison, Michael Goulder, and Raymond Brown prove themselves useful quite apart from church alliances or lack of them.

b. Reformed Consistency

Unlike Lutherans who are bound to one set of confessions, Reformed Protestantism is not tethered to one particular

document, and it is found in many denominations.¹ In encompassing groups with diverse practices and differing doctrinal details, Reformed Protestantism is as much a frame of reference as it is a church. Its Congregationalist form moved towards Unitarianism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A biblically committed form expressed itself in Fundamentalism and later in neo-Evangelicalism, whose exegetes have produced a remarkable and enviable harvest of biblical scholarship from whose droppings conservative Lutherans often glean. Lutherans may find themselves in alliances with neo-Evangelicals, who arguably are the most articulate preservers of the Reformed faith today. Even without being fully bound to confessions, neo-Evangelical scholars consistently bring their biblical scholarship in line with the Reformed principles of Zwingli and Calvin. While they insist on biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and historicity, their defining principle—that God’s simplicity does not allow a full and personal involvement in His creation (*infinitum non capax finiti*)—is squarely at odds with Lutheran thought.² In Reformed thought, faith, and not the sacraments, is seen as necessary for salvation. This anti-sacramentalism is cloaked in an explicit anti-Roman Catholic polemic and surfaces in non-sacramental interpretations of biblical texts. Where references to baptism and the Lord’s Supper cannot be avoided, they are presented according to Reformed definitions. Their scholars often reject

¹Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, translated by John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 1. Lutherans often assume that the Reformed enjoy doctrinal unity. In surveying the traditional Reformed confessions, Rohls dispels this notion. The Reformed work from general philosophical and theological principles, which produce variant views.

²The Reformed doctrine of inerrancy must be viewed in connection with their doctrine that the law is God’s last word to Christians, and so the Bible is appreciated for its correctness in providing rules for Christian living and not because the Spirit is actually tied to the words. See Rohls, *Confessions*, 177-181. In Lutheran theology the Scriptures are understood incarnationally and sacramentally. In them, Jesus Himself is present and calling believers to baptism and to the Lord’s Supper.

Zwingli with the Anabaptists, but follow Calvin without identifying their position as his.³

Great neo-Evangelical theological schools like Trinity, Gordon-Conwell and Fuller; publishing houses like Moody, Baker, Zondervan and InterVarsity; and scholarly societies like the Evangelical Theological Society and the Institute for Biblical Research are stalwart defenders of biblical history, a matter of fundamental importance to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. On the other hand, they are consistently Reformed in not allowing such Lutheran views as the ubiquity of Christ's human nature, baptismal regeneration, and an identification of the sacramental bread with Christ's body. What is characteristically Lutheran, as shaped by our confrontation with the Reformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has no part in the neo-Evangelical agenda and is seen as alien or inimical. A common or neutral ground attempted by Lutherans and neo-Evangelicals is *de facto* a concession to the Reformed.

Neo-Evangelicals are recognized for their scholarship even by those who do not share their commitment to biblical inspiration and inerrancy (historicity). The downside is that neo-Evangelical exegetical methods embody intrinsically anti-Lutheran biases derived from Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin, whose theology involves a neo-Platonic Augustinianism, which does not allow a full participation of God in the incarnation and Jesus in the sacraments.⁴ The Spirit's direct working obviates a saving necessity for sacraments. Neo-Evangelical exegetes consistently, though perhaps unknowingly, incorporate this philosophy into their biblical methods, which, predictably, results in a minimalist sacramental hermeneutic.

³Though Zwingli's radical views were rejected, his neo-Platonic/Augustinian concept of God as the highest good and his sacramental dualism were retained in Reformed theology. Jan Rohls describes the Second Helvetic Confession (1561) as "the classic document of this modified Zwinglianism" (*Confessions*, 16).

⁴Rohls, *Confessions*, 16.

c. Reformed Theology as Rationalistic

Lutherans who admire the neo-Evangelical defense of the biblically supernatural may not recognize that they deny a full divine intervention in the sacraments. What appears to be a contradiction in Reformed theology really is not. The human Jesus no more performed miracles than he is really present in the sacraments. Classical Reformed theologians opposed the eighteenth century Enlightenment, but its Rationalism was a conclusion of Reformed thought. The highly developed Reformed doctrine of general revelation, which invites human beings to fear and love the true God, anticipated Rationalism, which disposed entirely of special revelation in favor of what could be known of God through nature.⁵ Their doctrine of providence prepared the way for the Deistic belief of Rationalism that the Creator was no longer personally involved in the world.⁶ Neo-Evangelicalism is faithful to classical Reformed theology and resists Rationalism's arguments against miracles, but all three movements spring from the same roots.

d. Lutherans in a Neo-Evangelical World

Lutherans may be drawn to neo-Evangelical scholars by a shared commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle, but rarely has this produced a commonly held theology. It may be that a shared commitment may be more apparent than real. Neo-Evangelical scholars are faithful to Calvin's heritage in avoiding sacramental biblical interpretations almost without exception. Lutheran interpreters, in the tradition of Luther and the great Lutheran dogmaticians like Johann Gerhard, should be expected to arrive at a full sacramental interpretation of the biblical texts. By drawing on neo-Evangelical scholars without being critically aware of those interpreters' Reformed heritage,

⁵Rohls, *Confessions*, 30-33. Reformed theology speaks of God's self-revelation as two books, one in nature and another in special revelation (*Confessions*, 31). Natural revelation in Reformed thought serves primarily, so it seems, as an adjunct to their doctrine of election in excusing God from not electing everyone.

⁶Rohls, *Confessions*, 58.

Lutherans are in danger of undoing the Reformation and losing their own heritage. This creates a tension between biblical interpretation with Reformed presuppositions and a Lutheran sacramental theology and church practice – hence this paper’s title, “Reformed Exegesis and Lutheran Sacraments.” This has consequences for preaching and pastoral practice. Where the biblical texts *a priori* are deprived, in the neo-Evangelical style, of their inherent sacramental potential, Lutheran dogmatics, preaching, and practice must resort for final refuge to the *sedes doctrinae*, which are precious few in comparison with the wide expanse of Scripture. Such an approach acknowledges that the Bible is only occasionally sacramental, with the biblical bulk given over to the Reformed hermeneutic of the neo-Evangelicals. Lutheran attempts at sacramental preaching are forced to become artificially dependent on traditional dogmatics and not on the biblical texts themselves. What cannot be found in the biblical texts is found in the Confessions and Luther. This leaves the neo-Evangelicals as the true defenders of the *sola scriptura* and gives them reason to see Lutheran commitment to their Confessions as an infringement on this principle.

e. Neo-Evangelicals Speaking for Themselves

In *The Dying of the Light*, James Burtchaell detailed how Christian colleges became detached from their religious foundations.⁷ A much larger task is attempted but not completed in identifying Reformed biases in neo-Evangelical biblical scholarship. Such neo-Evangelical scholars as Donald Guthrie, Donald A. Carson, Leon Morris, and F. F. Bruce are widely known in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. They are admired by confessional Lutherans – among whom I happily include myself – for their defense of biblical history in the face of Bultmann’s demythologizing. True to Reformed tradition, however, they keep sacramental references to a minimum or provide a Reformed interpretation. A case in point is

⁷James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

John 3:3-5, especially verse 5: "except a man be born of water and the word, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Lutherans use this citation to demonstrate baptism's regenerative qualities for adults and infants and its saving necessity, both of which have no place in neo-Evangelicalism. Morris, an Australian Anglican, deprives this pericope of any sacramental meaning with a clear anti-Lutheran bias. First he toys with removing the word "water" as a later textual interpolation. This would establish his case for an anti-sacramental reading, that is, Christians would be born of the Spirit and not the water, a fundamental Reformed tenet. Because he opposes the radical higher critics who tampered with the text to arrive at an earlier form, he takes the text as it is. This is not a harbinger of better things. Quite the contrary, he is determined to defuse the text of any reference to baptism and its regenerative qualities. He offers three possible interpretations for "water": 1. purification with repentance; 2. water as a sign of the Spirit's working; and 3. Christian baptism. Option one is rejected, because it would suggest that something happens to the individual in and because of baptism, a view unacceptable to the Reformed.⁸ For support, Morris references another scholar to show that "'entrance into eternal life is not conditioned by a magical renewal of the physical nature to be obtained by prescribed rites, but by a birth *from above*, from God' (on v. 3)."⁹ "Magical renewal of the physical nature" is anti-Lutheran code. Birth from above for Morris and all neo-Evangelicals is conversion connected with "personal faith" and not baptism. Morris also rejects the third option that Christian baptism is in view: "Nicodemus could not possibly have perceived an allusion to an as yet nonexistent sacrament," (a frequently used argument against a eucharistic interpretation of John 6).¹⁰ By

⁸Rohls, *Confessions*, 217. For the Reformed, baptism does not really do anything, and hence there is no reason for an emergency baptism.

⁹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 191. In response to Morris, let it be said that a birth from above does not preclude the renewal of man's physical nature through the spiritual nature. Resurrection from the dead is the ultimate renewal of the physical nature.

¹⁰Morris, *John*, 192-193.

rejecting John 3:3-5's reference to Christian baptism, Morris explicitly denigrates Luther's view that "water ... becomes a very spiritual bath through the Holy Spirit or through the entire Trinity." To refute Luther, the biblically conservative Morris cites the radical J. D. G. Dunn: "John seems to be challenging any sacramentalism on the part of his readers." With that Morris wipes away any possible sacramental reference in the whole of John's Gospel. Morris is not casually non-Lutheran, but deliberately and explicitly anti-Lutheran. In promoting his own interpretation of "water" as "spiritual water," that is, the Holy Spirit, he could have omitted any reference to Luther's baptismal interpretation or included it without refuting it. He fails to tell the reader that his own view, that "water" is the Spirit, is, in fact, Calvin's, knowledge of which he could not have been unaware.¹¹ Without our looking at his conclusions about John 6 (the discourse on the Bread from Heaven) and John 19 (the blood and the water flowing from Christ's side), we know that any sacramental inferences are effectively eliminated. An entire Gospel is taken out of sacramental discourse. Morris' biblical scholarship is nothing but traditional Reformed theology. F. F. Bruce, an equally honored scholar, has no use for the kind of arguments offered by Morris that baptism has no meaning for Nicodemus. He notes that, at the time of the Gospel's writing, John's baptism had ceased and been absorbed into Christian baptism, a defensible argument holding much promise for Lutheran theology. The good that Bruce accomplishes is immediately undone when he talks about baptism, according to a Reformed definition, as symbolizing a new spiritual life, thus appropriately distancing himself from "the notion of baptismal regeneration by an *opus operatum*," a censure intended for proponents of baptismal regeneration

¹¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV:XVI. 25. "By 'water and the Spirit,' I simply understand the Spirit, which is water." One may see David P. Scaer, *Baptism*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, volume 11 (Saint Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999), 62. Rohls notes that the Lutheran doctrine of baptismal necessity is the same as Rome's (to which is attached the practice of emergency baptism), which is specifically rejected (*Confessions*, 216-217).

(Lutherans).¹² He consistently argues that Jesus, in John 6, “expound[s] the truth which the Lord’s Supper conveys,” by which Bruce means the rite is only a faith event.¹³ Donald Guthrie, whose *New Testament Introduction* is in use in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, sees “water” as a reference to a physical birth and not baptism. John’s baptism possesses no regenerative power.¹⁴ He comes down on the same side as Calvin, Morris, and Bruce. Infusion of neo-Evangelical biblical scholarship into Lutheran veins contaminates them with the Reformed anti-sacramental virus.

3. Luther and Sacramental Exegesis

Luther’s failure to find a eucharistic allusion in John 6, the discourse on the Bread from Heaven with its requirement that believers eat His flesh and drink His blood, may seemingly provide Lutherans with a minimalist sacramental hermeneutic. His approach would then fall in line with Reformed doctrine and contemporary neo-Evangelical biblical methods in limiting the biblical sacramental references. We do not attempt here to unearth the underlying causes for Luther’s treatment of John 6, but we know that Zwingli used John 6, especially the words “the flesh profits nothing,” to support his view that the Supper was nothing but a memorial meal. Luther took the battle to the *verba* in the institution narratives, concentrating on the word *est* in *hoc est corpus meum*. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that his interpretation of John 6 exhausts his biblical method in handling sacramental texts. Along with such Luther scholars as Martin Brecht and Jaroslav Pelikan, Ulrich Asendorf claims an authentic picture of Luther as a theologian and biblical scholar emerges in his *Genesis Lectures* (1535-1545),

¹²F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) 84-85. General Editors for The New International Commentary on the New Testament, in which Morris’ *John* appeared, are in succession Ned B. Stonehouse (1946-1962), F. F. Bruce (1962-1990) and Gordon D. Fee (1990 -).

¹³Bruce, *John*, 161.

¹⁴Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 728.

where he is, to put it mildly, sacramentally promiscuous.¹⁵ At the time of the *Genesis Lectures*, the Reformation's formative years had passed, and the fanatics, with their anti-sacramental attitudes, had replaced the pope as the church's chief enemy. Arthur A. Just calls attention to Luther's sacramental reading of Genesis, an idea that Naomichi Masaki elaborates on in his Master of Sacred Theology thesis subtitled, "Sacramental Instruction of Dr. Martin Luther According to his Lectures on Genesis 1535-1545."¹⁶ Just as God is only known through His Son and the Spirit, so the Triune God comes to man through coverings, which, for Luther, are sacraments, means of grace.¹⁷ Among these Luther includes the gentle breeze to Adam, the mercy seat of the tabernacle, the cloud, and the pillar of fire in the desert. Just as God is present in the New Testament sacraments, He was present in these coverings in the Old Testament, which are no less sacraments than the New Testament rites. Luther's Old Testament sacramentology does not indicate that in his declining years he returned to an earlier medieval Catholicism. Rather it emerges from his belief that God is married to His creation, a view that sets him off from the Reformed, who cannot get beyond the philosophical barrier that a real and full participation of the infinite God in the finite creation is impossible. Now compare Luther for whom the

¹⁵Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1531-1546*, translated by James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 36; Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction to Volume 1," in *Luther's Works, Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, volume 1 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), xii; Ulrich Asendorf, "Luther's Genesisvorlesung als Paradigma christlicher Weltverantwortung," *Christentum und Weltverantwortung* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1992), 71-94. Robert Kolb notes ("Sixteenth-Century Lutheran Commentary on Genesis and the Genesis Commentary of Martin Luther," *Etudes de Philologie et d'Histoire* 43, edited by Irena Backus and Francis Higman, [Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1990], 243-58) that later Lutherans did not follow Luther. Further references to the Genesis volume will be abbreviated LW1.

¹⁶Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:-9:50*, Concordia Commentary Series (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1996), 18; Naomichi Masaki, "Genesis as Catechesis," Master of Sacred Theology Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1997.

¹⁷LW1:11.

touching of Jesus' garment by the woman is sacramental. For him, God is continuously sacramental from His creation to the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and, finally, to the Lord's Supper. The divine creative word comes to conclusion in the redemptive and sanctifying sacramental word. In His redemption God continues as the creator. Luther draws a line from the water in creation through the water of the Red Sea to the water in baptism. In all these acts God kills and makes alive.¹⁸ God is working through coverings, that is, sacraments, to come to His people. All Old or New Testament rites are qualitatively the same kinds of divine actions in that God is working in and through them.¹⁹ In the light of his *Genesis Lectures* (1535-1545), Luther's interpretation of John 6 can no longer be read as evidence for an anti-sacramental hermeneutic. Quite to the contrary! Luther may have excluded John 6 with the feeding of the 5000 from the sacramental debate, but he understands the same incident in Matthew 14 sacramentally.²⁰ The bread is a covering, a means of grace, under which God is working.

4. Rome and Geneva: Strange Bedfellows

Excessive sacramental interpretations of biblical texts are often labeled as Roman Catholic. It is also the appropriate Protestant thing to say about Lutherans who are thought to have one toe in the Tiber. We do not want to belabor the point that according to their own definition, the Reformed do not have sacraments. That something happens in a Reformed baptism is a Lutheran and not a Reformed claim. For the Reformed these rites are means of grace only in a noetic sense—to inform us that God gives grace—but not in the rites themselves.²¹ A prior, symbolical interpretation of the Old Testament rituals of circumcision and Passover supports their understandings of baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbolical rites without

¹⁸LW 1:35.

¹⁹Masaki, "Genesis," 19.

²⁰LW 1:33.

²¹Rohls, *Confessions*, 185-186.

inherent content. They take consistent approaches to both Old and New Testaments.²²

Strange as it might seem, Roman Catholicism, with its highly developed sacramental theology, agrees with the Reformed in denying that God's Old Testament people had real sacraments. Rome made this her official position at the Council of Florence (1439) and confirmed it in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Against both the Reformed and Roman Catholicism, the great Lutheran dogmatician Johann Gerhard insisted that the Old Testament sacraments were effective means of grace. Robert Bellarmine, Rome's champion, asserted that grace was only given in the New Testament rites.²³ Old Testament rites, rituals, sacrifices, historical events, and celebrations of historical events were only symbolical. If the Reformed took offense at Rome's extra sacraments, they found an ally in holding that God did not provide Old Testament saints with sacraments—strange bedfellows, but on Calvin's terms.

Luther's sacramental reading of the Old Testament was hardly the Reformer's idiosyncratic quirk; Johann Gerhard adopted it.²⁴ Gerhard holds that baptism and circumcision cannot be equated, but both exhibit Christ's presence and are sacraments of initiation.²⁵ He agrees with Luther in seeing such things as the Old Testament sacrifices and the rainbow as sacraments. Unlike their New Testament counterparts, the Old Testament sacraments are limited in respect to time, but they are still sacraments in which Christ is present.²⁶ In Lutheran theology, the function and purpose of one sacrament, whether in the Old

²²Rohls, *Confessions*, 191.

²³Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, edited by Edward Preuss (Berlin: Gustaf Schlawitz, 1866), 4:174 (18:60).

²⁴Gerhard, *Loci*. 4:184 (18:46); 4:177 (18:64).

²⁵Gerhard, *Loci*. 4:141 (18:10); 4:160-161 (18:44).

²⁶This matter is scheduled for a future volume in The Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series. It is briefly discussed in Scaer, *Baptism*, 31-33. One may also see David P. Scaer, "Sacraments as an Affirmation of Creation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 54 (October 1993): 241-264; and David P. Scaer, "Luther, Baptism, and the Church Today," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 62 (October 1998): 247-268.

or New Testament, is not the same as another. For the Reformed, they are seals of grace and have the same content, and so distinctions among them are insignificant.²⁷

5. Towards a Lutheran (Sacramental) Hermeneutic

Neo-Evangelical biblical scholarship correctly requires a biblical history as foundational, but, in defusing the Scriptures of the possibility of a sacramental interpretation, it preserves the classic Reformed belief, with its neo-Platonic underpinnings; that dead, transitory objects are not fit vehicles for "God as eternal, incomprehensible Spirit."²⁸ Among such contaminated objects are images such as crucifixes and the sacramental elements of water, bread, and wine.

Yes, the Scriptures are thoroughly historical, but past events are presented within a theological *Weltanschauung*, which, for Luther, included a Creator who was intimately involved with His creation and who was therefore thoroughly incarnational and sacramental. Lutherans, following their theological father, expect to find an abundance of incarnational and sacramental references everywhere in the Bible, an impossibility for neo-Evangelical scholars. The biblical evidences do not merely allow but require a distinction between the events (facts) and the Evangelists' theological reflection on the events. Only after the resurrection do Jesus' disciples come to a full understanding of the temple cleansing. Only with the bestowal of the Spirit do they have a complete theological reflection on what Jesus had done (John 15:26-27; 16:23). When the biblical events are treated in isolation from one another, that is, not as a post-Easter reflection of the apostles in the life of the church that was born in baptism and was nourished by the Lord's Supper, a non-sacramental reading of the biblical texts is inevitable.²⁹

²⁷Rohls, *Confessions*, 191. This may provide an explanation, at least in part, why Karl Barth did not write a volume on the Lord's Supper.

²⁸Rohls, *Confessions*, 48.

²⁹Some contemporary critical scholars, in distinguishing between the event and later theological interpretations of the event, attempt to identify the steps from the event, which for them is often unrecoverable, and the final form in the Gospels. Much of this is speculation and rests on the unproven

The late Raymond Brown summed up the matter well.

Moreover, among the four Gospels it is to John most of all that we owe the deep Christian understanding of the purpose of baptism and the eucharist. It is John who tells us that through the baptismal water God begets children unto Himself and pours forth upon His Spirit (iii 5, vii 37-39). Thus baptism becomes a source of eternal life (iv 13-14), just as the eucharist too is an indispensable means of transmitting God's life to men through Jesus (vi 57). In a symbolic way John shows that eucharistic wine means a new dispensation replacing the old (the Cana scene, and the description of the vine in ch. xv) and the eucharistic bread is the real bread replacing the manna (vi 32). Finally, in a dramatic scene (xix 34) John shows symbolically that both of these sacraments, baptismal water and sacramental blood, have the source of their existence and power in the death of Jesus.³⁰

If we can find a magnificent sacramental theology in John, is there any reason to conclude that the Spirit of Jesus did not provide similar sacramental treasures in the other three Gospels, which we have both the happy obligation and freedom to

assumption that Jesus and His immediate followers were not as theologically advanced as those who came later. Such methods are not without value in that the earliest church reflections on the Lord's Supper are seen to resemble closely what later became the classical Reformed view of a symbolical meal. Texts in their final form, as we have them in the Bible, were encrusted with views now associated with Lutherans and Catholics. Because the Gospels preserve both earlier and later reflections on the Last Supper, Lutherans and Reformed justified their accommodation as biblical with each other on the Lord's Supper in the *Formula of Agreement*. Though the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod rejected this kind of method, especially because it produced no certain knowledge about Jesus and divorced His teaching from that of the church, the biblical texts in their final form according to these scholars often supported a high Lutheran sacramentology. By assuming that the Gospels are written after the Epistles, some conservative Lutheran scholars perhaps unwittingly buy into this developmental concept of doctrine. It does support the general neo-Evangelical understanding that hesitates in recognizing sacramental texts.

³⁰Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1987), 1:cxiv.

uncover? As students of the Bible, we are happy to have the guidance of a Roman Catholic scholar like Brown, but we do not have to cross our own confessional boundaries. Luther and Johann Gerhard can be our guides.