

THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION

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The past four decades or so have witnessed significant changes in the place of the Lord's Supper in the life of Lutheran congregations. On the positive side there has been a frequency in the availability of the Sacrament. Weekly celebrations of the Lord's Supper are no longer uncommon. On the part of a significant number of pastors there is increased awareness of the dogmatic significance of the Lord's Supper due to the work of such Lutheran theologians as Hermann Sasse, Werner Elert, Norman Nagel, Jobst Schoene, and B.W. Teigen. On the negative side of the ledger, however, there are such matters as open communion, lack of reverence, disposable cups, inadequate catechesis, substituting other elements for the dominically-mandated bread and wine, liturgical forms borrowed from non-Lutheran traditions, and laity serving as officiants at Supper.

Three powerful movements have emerged that have had negative effect on the place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the *Lutheran* congregation: the ecumenical movement, the liturgical movement, and the church growth movement. The influence of these theological movements set within the context of a culture that is characterized by a drive for autonomy, a rejection of any boundaries, and a lust for immediacy have turned the Lord's Supper into the Christian's Supper to paraphrase Luther.

It is beyond the reach of this paper to investigate the roots and fruits of the above-mentioned movements. Others have already done that work.¹ What I would like to do at this point is to engage in a bit of diagnostic work. How does our language about the Lord's Supper reflect our understanding of its significance in congregational life? As scholarship does have a trickle down effect in the life of the church, I will use Michael Welker's book *What Happens in Holy Communion?* as a starting point.

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 See Charles Evanson, *Evangelicalism and the Liturgical Movement and Their Effects on Lutheran Worship* (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 1989) for a discussion of the inter-relatedness of these two movements. For a critique of the negative impact of the liturgical movement, see Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* (May 1974), 110-157. Also see Charles Evanson, "New Directions" *Logia* (Epiphany 1995), 3-9 and Timothy C.J. Quill, *The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on American Lutheranism* (Landham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1997). Also see Ernst Volk, "Evangelical Accents in the Understanding of the Lord's Supper" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Summer 1987), 185-204 for a Lutheran critique of ecumenical conversations on the sacrament.

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."² 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."³ 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."⁴

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.⁵ 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."⁶

² Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 29.

³ Ibid, 36.

⁴ Ibid, 36.

⁵ Ibid, 57-58.

⁶ Alasdair I. C. Heron, *Table an 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 16th 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.

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."⁷ 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."⁸

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."⁹ 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

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* (Eastertide 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).

⁷ Welker, 67.

⁸ Ibid, 71. Compare *A Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice* from the Florida-Georgia District of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Contrast with Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E.Nagel (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

⁹ Ibid, 87.

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!"¹⁰

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."¹¹ 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 presence to provide a framework for the difficult task of understanding this complex of relations."¹²

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."¹³ The universality of the Supper is grounded in the "priesthood of all believers" for Welker¹⁴ 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,

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Ibid, 92.

¹² 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), 288. Also see G. Bromiley, "Lord's Supper" in *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, 142-146.

¹³ Ibid, 146.

¹⁴ Ibid, 147.

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."¹⁵

I have used Michael Welker's book as a compendium of contemporary thought on the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper. But even if they are not articulated with the same degree of sophistication, many of these themes come to surface in preaching, liturgical practices, hymnody, catechesis and popular piety even in confessional Lutheran circles. You might call it the effect of a "grass roots ecumenism" nurtured by lack of attention to the evangelical purpose of the sacrament itself. Now some observations with suggestions for pastoral practice.

It is instructive to note how so much of contemporary scholarship refuses to begin with the *verba testamenti*. Joachim Jeremais 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."¹⁶

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.

¹⁵ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremais, *New Testament Theology* - Volume I: The Proclamation of Jesus, trans. John Bowen (London: SCM Press, 1971), 289-290. For a refutation of 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.

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, not the distribution of a substance".¹⁷ Rather the words of Christ says Werner Elert are "extraordinary...without analogy of any kind."¹⁸

Historical -critical approaches to Holy Scripture created skepticism as to the reliability of the synoptic and Pauline accounts of sacrament's institution.¹⁹ If uncertainty exist 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.²⁰ Both of these approaches shift away from body and blood to events and acts. This shift is demonstrated in the *Manual on the Liturgy-Lutheran Book of Worship*, as the authors seek to make the case for the omission of the post-communion blessing, arguing "This blessing which is provided is optional for a number of reasons. It is a reflection of the medieval mentality which saw the communion in terms of things-bread and wine; body and blood-rather than in terms of a personal encounter with the risen Christ."²¹

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 drinking²²

¹⁷ Eduard Scheitzer, *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament*, trans. James M. Davis (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 37-38.

¹⁸ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 303.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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).

²¹ Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy-Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 246-247.

²² 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*

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. 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. 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 a 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 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 Dr. Albert Collver has demonstrated the language of the real presence is not yet a confession of Christ's body and blood.²³

The themes that we have isolated in contemporary ecumenical theologies of the Lord's Supper provide a frame of reference for understanding the incessant drive for open

Feuerhahn on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, edited by J. Bart Day et al (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 121-129.

²³ See Albert B. Collver III, "*Real Presence*" A Confession of the Lord's Supper (Unpublished Phd Thesis, Concordia Seminary-St. Louis, 2001).

communion. After all, if the Supper is a communal recognition of the presence of Jesus as the One who welcomes sinners and an activity of thanksgiving, why ought not all people be urged to participate? Hence the preference of the terminology of "eucharistic hospitality" over against the older language of altar and pulpit fellowship. Closed communion is seen as exclusive (which it is) and thus a stumbling block to mission in a culture that prides itself on being open and inclusive.

How difficult it is for many of our pastors and congregations to articulate the biblical teaching of closed communion can be seen by sampling church bulletins and visiting congregational websites. For example, an LCMS congregation in Southgate, Michigan contains the following explanation of communion practices (after, I might add, describing the Lutheran doctrine as that of consubstantiation!): "There are also three ways to practice communion, to decide who is able to receive communion in a given church. The first is 'closed communion' in which communion is shared only with people who are like us, of the same denomination (Catholic, Lutheran, etc.). The church decides who can receive communion. The second method, the one that we practice is 'close communion,' a similar name but with a different meaning. We (share) communion with those whom we are close in our view of what we are doing. We are receiving Jesus' body and blood in a miraculous way, trusting in him to take us to heaven. If someone wishes to receive communion here, we ask them (sic) three questions. Are you trusting in Jesus alone to take you to heaven? Are you sorry for your sins? Do you believe that you receive Jesus' body and blood in a miraculous way in this sacrament? If they say yes, we are close in our view. We leave the decision up to the individual."²⁴ This is seen as "close" in opposition to both "closed" and "open communion." We have lost our ability to even use the same vocabulary in speaking about the Supper and admission to the altar.

The words of Christ still stand. He gives us His body to eat. He gives us the blood of His new testament to drink for the forgiveness of our sins. "Around the Lord's Table is gathered the church. At the Table of the Lord, the church knows what it most profoundly is: the body of Christ. There has been no doubt of this since the days of the apostles. Where the Lord's Supper is no longer known or celebrated, there the church dies, irretrievably lost"²⁵ wrote Hermann Sasse in 1941.

One of Sasse's "letters to Lutheran pastors" is entitled "Word and Sacrament: Preaching and the Lord's Supper."²⁶ This letter points to the crucial connection between sermon and sacrament, preaching and the Lord's Supper. Preaching is essential to the sacrament. In a

²⁴ www.ctk-church.org/goodnews/lesson6.

²⁵ Hermann Sasse, "Preface to *Vom Sakrament Des Altars*" in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*- Volume II (1941-1976) trans. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 12. Sasse was a man who called the church to repentance. It is a salutary thing that Matthew Harrison, Ronald Feuerhahn and others are making Sasse available to us today. We have much to learn from him when it comes to the place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the congregation. He lived and suffered through the decay of Lutheranism in Germany. He has much to say to our situation as well. For an overview of his contributions, see John Stephenson and Thomas Winger (editors), *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998).

²⁶ Hermann Sasse, "Word and Sacrament: Preaching and the Lord's Supper" in *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 11-35..

sermon on I Corinthians 15 from 1532-33, Luther asserted "For the pulpit can and must alone preserve Baptism, Sacrament, doctrine, articles of faith, and all estates in their purity".²⁷ Sermon and sacrament stand or fall together. One is not to be played off against the other.

There is a caricature that those who are committed to weekly celebrations of the sacrament and liturgical integrity give little attention to quality preaching.²⁸ Such criticism is over-stated and misplaced. One could point out the heavy-handed moralism that has invaded Lutheran pulpits under the influence of American Evangelicalism. Nevertheless the criticism might contain a grain of truth. There is an old joke that Methodist preaching is three points and a poem and Lutheran preaching is three points and a few words about the sacrament. Sacramental cliches abound with predictability. Preaching then ends up as something of a commentary on the liturgy or the significance of the particular day in the church. This is the death of liturgical preaching.

Some of the blame can be placed on Peter Brunner who asserted "Our task is not primarily to expound a text but to interpret an action that takes place in our midst".²⁹ Here preaching is not seen as the delivery of the words of Jesus, words that are spirit and life, but preaching stands only to interpret the liturgy or point to that which is to come, the sacrament. Preaching is liturgical not only because it occurs in the context of the Divine Service but because it is of one piece with the liturgy where the Lord Christ Himself is giving out His gifts. The sermon itself is a speaking of absolution. Through the words of preaching, God is forgiving sins. Preaching that conforms to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures is God's Word. The sacrament evokes liturgical preaching, that is preaching that lays open the new testament of Christ's blood for troubled consciences. It is not talk about the Gospel or the sacraments but a proclamation of the Gospel that also encompasses the externality of the body and blood we are given in the Supper. In this way the reminder of Gerhard Forde is helpful that the sacrament will not allow the Word "from disappearing into the inner life."³⁰

²⁷ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing House, 1955-1986), 28:62. Hereafter abbreviated as LW.

²⁸ See, for example, Gracia Grindal, "On the Decline of Preaching" *Worship Innovations* (June 1996), 1-4

²⁹ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans Martin Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968). Brunner was a leading liturgical scholar who would have far reaching influence in American Lutheran liturgical circles. Sasse criticizes Brunner for surrendering the Lutheran doctrine of the sacrament via the *Arnoldshain Theses*. Sasse writes "This modern Lutheranism no longer refuses altar fellowship to the Reformed Christians. Its representatives, including Professors Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner, have produced the Arnoldshain Theses, which try to overcome the old contrast in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper by a compromise. Even Peter Brunner has no objection against altar fellowship between adherents of Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism" H. Sasse, "Inclusive Lutheranism" in *The Lonely Way*- Vol. II, 342-343. Oliver Olson has pointed out Brunner's indebtedness to Odo Casel. See Oliver Olson, "Liturgy as Action" *dialog* (Spring 1975), 108-113 and "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology."

³⁰ Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 160. Forde observes "Sundered from the sacraments, that is, the spoken word can go awry and fail to reach its goal. 'Help' must come from the outside, from a more irreducibly external word....They will not let the Word be swallowed up in our internality. They remain always external, from without. They guarantee the character of the Word

Preaching the Lord's Supper is not done by way of analogy but by proclaiming the Lord's words, their "for you" character. These words Luther understood as the words of Jesus' testament. Incarnation and atonement are comprehended in the word testament³¹ for the God who makes this testament takes on flesh and blood in order to die. "What is the whole gospel" Luther asks "but and an explanation of this testament?"³²

Along with preaching there is catechesis. Luther's treatment of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Catechisms has the pastoral aim of preparing people for a salutary reception of the Lord's body and blood. His pastoral goal was that the Christian would know what the sacrament is, the blessings given in this gift, and how it is to be used in faith. The conclusion of the Apostles' Creed confesses "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." These gifts are delivered to the communicant in the Lord's Supper as Luther notes that the words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins" show "that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation."

The Small Catechism, without engaging in explicit polemics against either Rome or the Sacramentarians, addresses both of these errors.³³ Question 1, "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" and question 3 "How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?" confess the gift of Christ's body and blood under the bread and wine and connects the physical eating and drinking with faith in Christ's words. These questions seem to be addressed particularly to those followers of Zwingli who would deny the presence of Christ's body and blood and see in the sacrament nothing more than a spiritual eating and drinking. Question 2, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" and question 4 "Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?" address Roman abuses of the sacrament as Luther confesses the forgiveness of sins at the heart of the sacrament and faith in Christ's words as necessary for worthy reception.

The Large Catechism addresses these same themes but in a more explicit fashion. Luther notes that the Lord's Supper is established by the Word of Christ and is to be used according to His Word: "All this is established from the words Christ used to institute it. So everyone who wishes to be Christian and go to the sacrament should know them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come."³⁴

as what Luther could call an 'alien' Word, a Word from without, from out there in the world of things and bodies" (169).

³¹ See LW 36:38 and 35:84.

³² LW 35:106. Also see Gerhard Forde, "The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus" *Word & World* (Winter 1997), 5-9. Forde writes "The conceptuality of testament sets forth and insists upon the gospel character of what occurred" (6). Also see Reinhard Schwarz, "The Last Supper: The Testament of Jesus" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 1995), 391-403.

³³ See Charles Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 170-172. Also see Timothy Wengert, "Luther's Catechisms and the Lord's Supper" *Word & World* (Winter 1997), 54-60.

³⁴ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, translators, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 467. Hereafter abbreviated as Kolb and Wengert.

In the Large Catechism, as in the Small Catechism, Luther catechizes for an evangelical use of the sacrament. That is he wants the sacrament to be recognized for the gift that it is and received accordingly. The Lord's Supper refreshes and strengthens the Christian in the ongoing fight for survival against the wily devil, the treacherous world, and the deceptive flesh: "Therefore, it is appropriately called food for the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature....Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger."³⁵

Luther exalts the sacrament on account of Christ. The forgiveness of sins won on the cross is delivered and distributed in the Supper. "Therefore it is absurd for them to say that Christ's body and blood are not given and poured out for us in the Lord's Supper and hence that we cannot have forgiveness of sins in the sacrament. Although the work took place on the cross and forgiveness of sins has been acquired, yet it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word."³⁶ Thus Luther urges that the sacrament be received frequently not as a work or expression of human piety but on account of our deep need. "What I mean is that those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that people are becoming lax and lazy about its observance."³⁷ Christ's command and promise coupled with our own condition ought to draw us to the sacrament: "We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed the body is helped as well."³⁸

A faithful and reverent liturgical practice will catechize. Such a practice is not about a ritualistic fussiness but an attentive reverence to the Lord's mandate and gift. The words of Jesus Christ are at the heart of the Supper. They give and proclaim His body and blood. Without the words of Christ there is no sacrament. This is the point made by the Formula of Concord: "Indeed, in the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung publicly in the congregation, and in no case are they to be omitted. This is done, first, so that Christ's command, 'Do this,' may be obeyed. Second, it is done so that Christ's words will arouse, strengthen, and confirm the hearers' faith in the nature and benefits of this sacrament (that is, the presence of Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits that have been won for us by Christ's death and the shedding of his blood, which are here given to us in his testament). Third, it is done so that the elements of bread and wine are sanctified and consecrated in this holy practice, whereby Christ's body and blood are offered us to eat and to drink, as Paul says (I Cor. 10:16), 'The cup of blessing that we bless...' This of

³⁵ Ibid, 469.

³⁶ Ibid, 469. Also note Luther's words in his *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525): "If now I 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 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 the gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives me the forgiveness which was won on the cross" (LW 40:214).

³⁷ Ibid, 471.

³⁸ Ibid, 474.

course takes place in no other way than through the petition and recitation of the Words of Institution."³⁹

The teaching of the Formula of Concord needs to be accented in our own days over and against blatant receptionism that is often seen in practice. For example, one of the current liturgical fads has the pastor and congregation singing responsively a loosely paraphrased version of the *verba testamenti*. The rubric in the *Lutheran Worship-Altar Book* states: "If the consecrated bread and wine are spent before all have received Communion, the presiding minister shall consecrate more, saying as much of the Words of Institution as pertains to the elements to be consecrated. He should not consecrate more than will (in his judgment be needed to complete the distribution. In no circumstances should bread or wine that has not been consecrated be administered to the communicants".⁴⁰ The Formula of Concord is ignored or rejected when pastors do otherwise. More importantly, communicants are left without the sacrament.

Faithfulness to Christ's institution of the sacrament mandates that the elements with which He established His testament, that is, bread and wine be used. There are no acceptable alternatives.

While "hand communion" has become popular in recent years, the historical practice of the Lutheran Church is to place the host in the mouth of the communicant thus demonstrating that the communicant is completely on the receiving end of Christ's benefaction. Calvinists insisted on communion in the hand as a sign that the wafer was merely bread and not the body of Christ. After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Church promoted "hand communion" as a sign that the communicant was participating in the sacrifice of the mass.

Communion vessels are to reflect the gifts that they carry. Individual cups and more recently disposable cups make it more difficult to treat Christ's blood with reverence. Where these are used, attention ought to be given to an appropriate means of disposal. When all of the consecrated elements are consumed, the speculative questions that arise regarding the *relicta* are prevented.⁴¹

Finally, a few words about cultivating a piety around the gift of the Lord's Supper. Notice I did not say piety. Piety is a good thing; pietism is not. Liturgical pietism can be just as obnoxious as theological and moral pietism.

³⁹ Ibid, 607.

⁴⁰ Commission on Worship- LCMS, *Lutheran Worship-Altar Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 32. Contrast this with *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1997) issued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1997. This statement says "...in the rare event that more of either element is needed during distribution, it is not necessary to repeat the words of institution"(25).

⁴¹ See Jobst Schoene, "Pastoral Letter Regarding the Divine Service and Sacrament of the Altar" in *A Reader in Pastoral Theology* edited by John T. Pless (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 2002), 103-111 for a good discussion of this and other practical issues related to the administration of the sacrament.

The Lord's Supper will be recognized for what it is. It is the gift of the Lord's body and blood given under bread and wine for Christians to eat and to drink to paraphrase the Small Catechism. It is the Lord's gift not the church's activity of celebration, ritual remembrance or hospitality. This ought to be reflected in liturgical practice, preaching, and catechesis.

Piety does not grow overnight. Norman Nagel is fond of saying that the liturgy grows by inches not yards. The same can be said for piety. A few weeks ago I had a conversation with a recent seminary graduate. He related to me that the seminary prepared him to be a Lutheran pastor; it did not prepare him for the reality of serving a congregation that did not know what it means to be Lutheran. He inherited a congregation where the liturgy had been set aside for an ever-changing configuration of praise songs and testimonies. The altar was open to all who showed up. There was no catechesis shaped by the Small Catechism. Where does one begin? My friend began by establishing a very basic liturgical order so that at least the congregation would begin to see a pattern of stability even as the praise songs remain for the time being. This accompanied by repetitive preaching of salvation done and delivered by Christ. Things are moving in the right direction, inch by inch.

The Lord's Supper is the Gospel. It is not our ascent to Him but His coming to use in His body and blood to sustain us in the forgiveness of sins. As Sasse put it, the Lord's Supper is our heaven on earth until we enter heaven⁴². Only where the Lord's Supper is acknowledged as the Gospel gift that it, will it have the prominence in the life of the congregation that our Lord intends.

-Prof. John T. Pless
Easter Monday 2004

⁴² Hermann Sasse, "The Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church" in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, 9. Also note Luther's comment in his 1527 essay, *This is My Body*: "But here in the Lord's Supper he (Christ) wants to be neither born nor seen nor heard nor touched by us but only eaten and drunk, both physically and spiritually. Accordingly, by this eating we obtain just as much and arrive at the same point as they (the apostles) with their bearing, seeing, hearing, etc; and he is just as near to us physically as he was to them" (LW 37:94).