

Justification and the Sacrament  
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Introduction

The connection between the biblical teaching of justification and the Sacrament of the Altar is obvious. Justification is the forgiveness of sins.<sup>1</sup> The Sacrament is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. There can be no justification of sinners without the body and the blood of Jesus, given and shed for the remission of sins. Since justification is the central topic of the body of Christian teaching<sup>2</sup> the Lord's Supper is at the heart of the Gottesdienst, or Divine Service. Herman Sasse, in commenting on the fact that the doctrine of the justification of the sinner through faith alone is "the article by which the church stands or falls," makes this observation about the relationship between the central article and the Lord's Supper. He writes:

This article cannot be purely preserved in the church apart from the celebration of the Supper, at which Jesus Christ himself preaches to us with his "for you". The converse also holds true, namely, that the Supper cannot be kept from distortion without this article.<sup>3</sup>

We Lutherans do not teach that the article on justification is the central article of the Christian religion merely because it was the focal point of the debate during the Reformation. We do not do so because it assumed such importance in Martin Luther's conscience in his existential search for a gracious God. We do so because we are Christians. Christians seek to know Christ. To know Christ is to know his benefits.<sup>4</sup> The benefits Christ provides are summarized in the Catechism as forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. These benefits are given to us by the words of the Sacrament.

The doctrine of justification is taught in the Holy Scriptures in the most systematic and thorough fashion by St. Paul, the apostle, especially in his Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians. It is only natural for us Lutherans to appeal primarily to these writings as we teach the central article. The topic set before us today gives us the opportunity to examine the central article from the words that came directly from our Lord's mouth just before he offered up on the cross the sacrifice by which the sin of the world was washed away. While there is nothing wrong with relying on St. Paul's writings to provide the biblical support for our insistence that justification by grace alone, for Christ's sake, through faith alone is the article on which the church either stands or falls, it is wrong to suggest that there is a hairsbreadth difference between St. Paul's teaching on the subject and what his Lord and ours said about it. What he said he said as he instituted the Sacrament of his body and blood and then proceeded to justify us by his blood.

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<sup>1</sup> Apology IV par 76

<sup>2</sup> Apology IV par 2

<sup>3</sup> The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters Volume 1, Hermann Sasse, "Church and Lord's Supper: An Essay on the Understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar," translated by John R. Stephenson, CPH, 2002, page 387

<sup>4</sup> Commonplaces: Loci Communes 1521, Philip Melancthon, translated by Christian Preus, CPH, 2014, page 24

We mustn't read the Gospels as collections of chapters and verses. Each Gospel is an undivided unit. Nor is it particularly helpful to read them according to scholarly fashion in search of perceived forms, literary styles, catechetical underpinnings, or through the lens of whatever academic fad might be in vogue. The Gospels should be read, each in their entirety, as Gospels. The good news of Jesus Christ is what the Gospels say it is. They all point us to the same event. They all point us to the same meaning of the same event. Jesus' birth, early childhood, baptism, assaults against the devil's kingdom, ministry, miracles, and teaching are not just biographical facts set forth to satisfy inquiring minds who want to know all about him. They are in each of the four Gospels arranged and set forth for the theological purpose of directing us to the cosmic battle between good and evil, God and the devil, righteousness and sin, heaven and hell that took place in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The argument that justification by faith alone is not the theme of the Gospels because the Gospels do not use the term is to impose a "theology by word study" upon the sacred text and to miss the forest for the trees.

We have the events and the interpretation of those events. The passion of our Lord and his resurrection from the dead constitute the climax of the events set down in all four Gospels. As St. Matthew writes, "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."<sup>5</sup> The definitive interpretation of Christ's passion is given in these words of Jesus, from the Institution of the Sacrament of the Altar:

Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me. . .  
 Drink ye all of it; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. This do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me.<sup>6</sup>

Here is the doctrine of justification from the lips of him who is the LORD our righteousness.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere else in all the Scriptures is this topic more clearly taught and more vividly set before us in all its fullness. Here is the Christological foundation of justification in the vicarious atonement, as the body and blood of the God-man, offered up to the penal justice of God to propitiate his wrath, is not only fully sufficient for the justification of the sinner, but positively guarantees it. Here is justification as God's free gift, excluding any intrusion of human merit or worthiness. It is not a covenant in which the promise of the one is contingent upon the faithfulness of the other. It is a testament: an unbreakable last will and testament of him whose word cannot be broken. Here is faith defined as pure receptivity. It receives the verdict of justification for Christ's sake. Nowhere is faith more clearly defined as that non-meritorious<sup>8</sup> purely passive organ that does nothing but to receive than where the penitent, burdened by sin and guilt, kneels to eat and to drink the body and the blood by which his sins are forgiven and he is set free from their bondage and accusation.

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<sup>5</sup> St. Matthew 16:21; see also Mark 8:31; Luke 17:25

<sup>6</sup> Taken from The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941, page 27

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 23:6

<sup>8</sup> FC SD III par 13

Jesus Christ establishes justification by faith alone as the central topic of Christian doctrine by the words he spoke and speaks in giving us his body and blood in the Sacrament.<sup>9</sup> The words, “Take eat, this is my body; drink of it all of you, this is the new testament in my blood” provide the foundation of justification in the vicarious satisfaction of Christ. The words, “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins” teach that the justification of the sinner is pure gift. The words, “for you,” teach us what justifying faith is. So let us follow this rough outline as we see how the Sacrament of the Altar teaches the doctrine of justification. We ask three questions about the Sacrament:

- 1) What is the Sacrament of the Altar?
- 2) What are its benefits?
- 3) What is the relationship between the Sacrament and faith?

From addressing these three questions about the Sacrament, we will find in this holy meal a clear and compelling summary of the chief topic of the Christian religion.

#### Part I: What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

Luther’s Small Catechism does not contain the word justification or the phrase justification through faith alone, though Luther taught the centrality of this doctrine. We who use Luther’s Small Catechism to catechize our catechumens teach them the article of justification at several points along the way. Surely, under the second article of the Creed, we can hardly teach about Christ’s redemption without reference to the doctrine of justification. The enchiridions in use among us place the topic of justification in the third article of the Creed to explain “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” It comes up again in the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and obviously in the teaching of Holy Baptism as well as in the Keys and Confession. But the most thorough doctrinal explanation of justification in Luther’s Small Catechism is under the sixth chief part on the Sacrament of the Altar. He asks five questions. The first is: “What is the Sacrament of the Altar?” The second is: “Where is this written?” In response to the next three questions, “What is the benefit of such eating and drinking”, “How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things,” and “Who then receives such Sacrament worthily” Luther cites the same words three times: “Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” We begin with the first question, “What is the Sacrament of the Altar?” Answer: “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.”

Jesus gives us his body and blood to eat and to drink. He wants us to eat his body. He says: “Take, eat.” He wants us to drink his blood. He says: “Drink of it, all of you.” He says to do this “in remembrance of me.” If he were telling us to remember him who is not here with us but somewhere else he would not have told us to eat his body and drink his blood. Jesus can hardly be absent from his own body and blood! He specifically tells us to eat his body and drink his blood when he tells us to remember him.

The body that he wants us to eat is his body that was given for us. It is the body that bore our sins on the cross. The blood he wants us to drink is the blood he shed for us. It is the blood that washes away all sin. It is the blood by which God is propitiated. Christ is the propitiation for

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

our sins precisely in his giving his body into death for us and in his shedding his blood for us. When we eat and drink the body and the blood of the God-man we participate in a miracle. It is a miracle that opens up to us in a way that reason cannot fathom the mystery of Christ's incarnation and our justification. John Stephenson observes,

. . . the exalted God-man Jesus Christ performs a miracle in earthly time and space by giving His body to be eaten and His blood to be drunk under blessed bread and wine. Since this marvel is intimately connected with our Lord's divine person in its two natures and His justification of the ungodly, it lies at the very heart of the faith once delivered to the saints.<sup>10</sup>

The Sacrament sets Christology at the center of Christian piety. David P. Scaer's pithy observation, "All theology is Christology" is confirmed by Christ himself as he tells us to eat his body and drink his blood. The theological task does not begin with a contemplation of God. It does not begin with an attempt to define him or even to describe him. It begins where God becomes our brother and suffers. He is humbled. He who from eternity was equal to the Father by rights possessed the form of God also in his incarnation,<sup>11</sup> but we could not know God, even in his incarnation, by contemplating his divine form and majesty. Calvin's quest to ascend to Christ is doomed to failure from the get go. The incarnation as a mystery of our faith is inaccessible to us until the incarnate God suffers and dies.

This is why we must eat his body and drink his blood. The incarnation and the atonement belong together. This is what Jesus would have us know. This is why he insists that we eat his body and drink his blood. Jesus places the mystery of his incarnation where we can know it, even if we remain confused about which of the genera describing the personal union is which. Drinking God's body and blood is where dogma becomes food for the soul. St. Paul told the pastors in Ephesus to feed the church of God that he purchased with his own blood.<sup>12</sup> This is a feeding of both body and soul. By feeding our bodies with Christ's body and blood the Christological heart of the Christian religion is grounded in our regular and repeated experience of God. This experience is not achieved by our souls' ascent into heaven. It happens when heaven descends to earth. Christ crucified becomes all we know, all we want, and all we need. Our communion with God takes place where the bread and the wine become the communion, not of Christ's person, but of his body and blood. For it is to his body and blood, given and shed for us, that Jesus would have us go to find his person and work. Indeed, apart from his body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sin, we can know neither his person nor his work.

This is divine instruction. The Sacrament is God teaching us. In Luther's "Christian Questions with Their Answers," we are told (#15) to "remember and proclaim [Christ's] death and the shedding of His blood, as He taught us: This do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me." The next question and answer are:

16. Why ought we to remember and proclaim His death?

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<sup>10</sup> The Lord's Supper, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume XII, John R. Stephenson, The Luther Academy, 2002, pages 3-4

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 2:6

<sup>12</sup> Acts 20:28

That we may learn to believe that no creature could make satisfaction for our sins but Christ, true God and man; and that we may learn to look with terror at our sins, and to regard them as great indeed, and to find joy and comfort in Him alone, and thus be saved through such faith.<sup>13</sup>

We remember and proclaim his death “That we may learn to believe,” “That we may learn to look.” The Sacrament teaches us. We go to the Sacrament to learn. By eating and drinking Christ’s body and blood we learn that satisfaction for our sins cannot be achieved in any other way than by the death of the God-man, Jesus Christ. We learn that we find the person of Christ and the work of Christ where we find the body and blood of Christ.

Hermann Sasse criticizes Augustine for first establishing the universal idea of a sacrament common to all religions and then moving into a consideration of the Christian sacraments.<sup>14</sup> Sacramental theology is thus tainted at the outset. In fact, the sacraments cannot stand as sacraments unless and until they are properly subordinated to and grounded in the incarnation and the atonement. We will not understand the Lord’s Supper if we approach it from the vantage point of a generic sacramental theology with Christian particulars imported into it. Even the standard definition of the sacraments as institutions of Christ in which a sign is attached to his Word in which the promise of grace is given may miss the main point. When we seek to understand the Lord’s Supper by considering what it actually is, namely, the body and blood of Jesus, we are immediately confronted with the vicarious atonement to which it is bound and from which it cannot be disjoined without ruining it altogether.

The way theology is arranged matters. For example, if you want to find the Lord’s Supper in the Cyclopedia of Biblical Texts and Topics in the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, you look under the topic “Church” and then find “Sacraments of” and there you will find baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we see the Reformed theological method at work. Before they can understand the Lord’s Supper they must know what a sacrament is. Before they can know what a sacrament is they must know what the church is. For us Lutherans, our study of what the Lord’s Supper is begins by a consideration of what the Lord’s Supper is according to the words of him who instituted it. According to its essence, the Sacrament must be approached as a subtopic of Christology. This is so both on account of its dominical institution and on account of the words the Lord spoke in instituting it. Only when this is firmly established can we proceed to its benefits, what it has to do with faith, what is its proper use, how it identifies the church, and so forth.

Irenaeus binds together the incarnation, the atonement, and the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist in his argument for the resurrection of the body.<sup>16</sup> Martin Chemnitz appeals to his

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<sup>13</sup> A Short Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism, CPH, 1943, (The “Schwann” Catechism) page 34

<sup>14</sup> We Confess the Sacraments, by Hermann Sasse, translated by Norman Nagel, “Word and Sacraments: Preaching and the Lord’s Supper,” CPH, 1985, page 13

<sup>15</sup> Thompson Chain Reference Bible, The New Chain Reference Bible, Fourth Edition, B. B. Kirkbride Bible, Co. Inc. Indianapolis, Indiana, 1964, paragraph 761 (page 24)

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, chapter 2, paragraphs 2-3

argument as he provides extensive patristic support for the Lutheran teaching that the Lord's Supper is the body and blood of Jesus, saying:

Further, the reader should note that Irenaeus does not base his argument, as the adversaries do, on our bodies receiving only the external symbols of the body and Christ and that only the soul really receives the body of Christ and that from the soul a power afterward redounds to the body.<sup>17</sup>

Martin Luther makes the same argument.<sup>18</sup> The Sacrament of Christ's body and blood teaches us that the Word became flesh. It was God who became a man, not a man who became God. We do not limit the deity by the humanity. We confess that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

As we move from a discussion of what the Sacrament is to what its benefits are, let us make three threefold distinctions that may be helpful in understanding both the topic of justification and the Sacrament of the Altar. With respect to the Sacrament, we are considering what it is, what its benefits are, and what it has to do with faith. This threefold distinction helps us to understand what is happening within the threefold action of the Sacrament: the consecration, the distribution, and the reception. This also sheds light on the threefold distinction between forgiveness obtained, forgiveness bestowed, and forgiveness received.

First, there is the body and the blood. This is the vicarious satisfaction. The consecratory power by which the elements become the body and the blood of Jesus is not in the minister who speaks the words, but in the institution of the almighty God-man, Jesus.<sup>20</sup> He who offers up to God the body and blood by which the sin of the world is forgiven is the One whose word makes common bread and wine the very body and blood once and for all offered up to God. He says, "This is my body," and that makes it so. He says, "This is the new testament in my blood," and that makes it so. We are not quibbling about a precise moment when the body and blood are present. We are saying that the words of the Testator effect what they say and it is Jesus who says the words that the minister repeats at each celebration of the Supper. To argue that the bread and the wine are not the body and the blood until the communicants eat and drink is to cast doubt on the efficacy of Christ's words. We aren't concerned here about ministers. We are concerned about what they administer. That there can be a stewardship of the mysteries of God<sup>21</sup> requires that the mysteries of God have an objective reality that call for faithful stewardship. The bread that we break is the communion of the body of Christ and the cup of blessing that we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.<sup>22</sup> They do not become the body and the blood when received by the communicant. What is blessed and what is distributed is the body and the blood of Christ. The body and blood of Jesus are on the altar, in the pastor's hand, and in the communicant's mouth.

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<sup>17</sup> The Lord's Supper, Martin Chemnitz, translated by J. A. O. Preus, CPH, 1979, page 169

<sup>18</sup> AE, 37, 119

<sup>19</sup> Colossians 2:9

<sup>20</sup> FC SD VII par 74-76

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:1

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:16

Without the body and blood of Jesus there is no forgiveness of sins. With the body and the blood of Jesus there is the forgiveness of sins. We speak of the real presence. So do the Reformed. Perhaps we could call it the true presence. What we are saying is that the body and the blood of Jesus are on the altar, that the minister takes the body and the blood of Jesus in his hand, and that he gives the body and the blood of Jesus to the communicants, and that anyone – including an unbeliever – who with his mouth eats and drinks the bread and wine with the same mouth eats and drinks the body and the blood of Jesus. The doctrine of the true presence of Christ’s body and blood under the bread and the wine of the Sacrament has its concomitant in the doctrine of justification. As the hymnist puts it, “Where the paschal blood is poured, death’s dread angel sheathes the sword.” Since the body and the blood are present before they are received, the sins are forgiven before the Sacrament is received. Forgiveness of sins precedes the bodily eating and drinking. It precedes the spiritual eating and drinking. The true presence of Christ’s body and blood prior to their oral reception proves that forgiveness precedes the faith that receives it. First sins are forgiven. Then faith receives the forgiveness of sins.

We must be perfectly clear on this matter. When the body is given and the blood is shed those for whom the body is given and the blood is shed are forgiven of all their sins. Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for all men. He gave his body and shed his blood for the forgiveness of sins. This means the sins of all men were forgiven when he gave his body and shed his blood on the cross. That the body and blood of Jesus are really and truly present on the altar, in the minister’s hand, and in the communicant’s mouth and that even the ungodly Judas eats and drinks the body and the blood of Jesus is divine testimony that all sins of all sinners are forgiven. If they are not forgiven, then the body was not given for them and the blood was not shed for them. There is no body and blood except the body and the blood that are given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. This happened on Calvary. This is the same body and blood that are on the altar, in the minister’s hand, and in the communicant’s mouth. The communion between Calvary and the Sacrament of the altar requires the identification of the body and blood that are present, distributed, and received with the body and the blood that were crucified on the cross. Just as surely as the sacrifice on Calvary takes sins away, so surely the Sacrament bestows forgiveness. If the body given and the blood shed for the forgiveness of sins did not forgive sins when they were given and shed on the cross, they cannot forgive sins when they are distributed at the altar. It is, after all, the same body and blood.

So it is that the real or true presence of Christ’s body and blood supports and confirms what the old Synodical Conference – the Missouri Synod, the Norwegian Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod – unanimously taught concerning objective justification. Objective justification is summarized in “A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod,” in the words: “God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ.”<sup>23</sup> The teaching of objective justification is that God has justified the whole world for the sake of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction. There is not perfect conformity in the use of terms,<sup>24</sup> but there is unanimity in doctrine. The denial of objective or universal justification is a denial of the body and blood in the Sacrament. Take away the divine verdict of justification upon the human race for the sake of

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<sup>23</sup> From “A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod” paragraph 17

<sup>24</sup> In “Selected Articles on Objective Justification” compiled by Robert D. Preus, and published by Concordia Theological Seminary Press, Ft. Wayne, Indiana (no date), the terms “general justification” and “objective justification” are used interchangeably.

Christ's body and blood and you wring out of the body and blood the forgiveness of sins inherent in them. To speak in one breath of justification before the mercy seat of God and in the next to deny that God has declared the whole world to be righteous on account of the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat<sup>25</sup> is to deny the efficacy of the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat and to deprive faith of its sure foundation. It is to emasculate such soteriological terms as atonement, redemption, and propitiation, leaving us with an atonement that does not make peace, a redemption that does not set free, and a propitiation that does not propitiate. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the justification of those whose sins he bore.<sup>26</sup> What good is Christ's body and blood if not to forgive sins? We believe that the Sacrament of the altar is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Neither the essence nor the efficacy of the Sacrament is contingent on the faith, either of the ministrant or the communicant. Since the body and blood of Jesus are for the forgiveness of sins, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the altar requires, as its corollary, the doctrine of objective justification. No man can break the bond between Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins. Hermann Sasse writes:

You cannot believe the second part of the Word of Institution: 'given and shed for you, for the remission of sins', without believing the first part: 'This is my body', 'This is my blood'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This is the argument set forth in "Theses on the Article of Justification as Taught in Holy Scripture and the Confessions of Christ's Holy Church with Special Attention to 'Objective Justification'" adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese in North America, August 29, 2013, pages 4-6. In this document, ELDoNA repeatedly attacks the doctrine of objective justification as taught throughout the history of the Synodical Conference by such men as C. F. W. Walther, H. A. Preus, Francis Pieper, George Stoeckhardt, Adolf Hoenecke, and Robert Preus, as well as by the synods themselves: the LCMS, the WELS, the ELS, and various smaller synods. It falsely claims that Robert Preus came to their understanding of the doctrine "late in his life" (see footnote #14). In fact, Robert Preus clearly confessed objective justification until he died. Nothing ELDoNA gleans from the dogmatic tradition of Lutheranism and sets against the doctrine of objective justification was not already taught by Robert Preus for many years in his class on Justification at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield and Ft. Wayne in the seventies and eighties. While Robert Preus was teaching the material from Lutheran orthodoxy that the ELDoNA cites to disprove objective justification, he was also teaching objective justification. Efforts to oppose the doctrine of objective justification by an appeal to the orthodox Lutheran fathers will invariably drive an artificial wedge between the acquisition of the divine verdict of justification and the divine verdict of justification. Robert Preus was the primary author of the Missouri Synod's CTCR "Theses on Justification," published in May of 1983. Thesis #23 reads: "By 'objective' or 'universal' justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God's unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man's response to it and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ's sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Ap IV, 40-41; SA II, i, 1-3; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD XI, 15)" See also the "Critique of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America's Theses on Justification" by the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches on February 9, 2014 available at <http://theaclc.org> For an excellent defense of objective justification as it pertains to the efficacy of the absolution, see "The Justification of the World," by H. A. Preus, translated by Herb Larson at <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/preuspapers.html>

<sup>26</sup> Romans 4:25

<sup>27</sup> This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence on the Sacrament of the Altar, Hermann Sasse, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, South Australia, 1977, page 91.



This brings us to our second question.

Part II: What Are the Benefits of the Sacrament of the Altar?

In Luther's Small Catechism we ask and answer two questions pertaining to the benefits of the Sacrament of the Altar:

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? That is shown us by these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; namely, 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. How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things? It is not the eating and drinking indeed that does them, but the words here written, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"; which words, besides the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.<sup>28</sup>

What the Lord's Supper is and the benefits it provides are closely related, as we have already seen. The Sacrament is the body and the blood of Jesus. The benefits it provides are shown by the words of Jesus, "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." The benefits of the Lord's Supper are "forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation." The benefits are given us through the words, "Given and shed for you, for the remission of sins." It is impossible to consider the benefits of the Sacrament without a consideration of the words by which they are bestowed and the faith through which they are received. Nevertheless, it is useful to speak about the benefits of the Sacrament before talking about the faith that receives the benefits of the Sacrament.

In speaking of the benefits of the Lord's Supper we are confronted immediately by a scandal of church history. What makes this Sacrament most precious to us Lutherans is what divides us most sharply from both Rome and the Reformed. The Reformation was fought over the Lord's Supper. It is good to remember those battles and why they had to be fought. With a large portion of nominal Lutheranism in America willing to invite members of Reformed bodies to the altar and with Lutheran understanding of Roman Catholic doctrine at an all-time low, it is good for us to know what was fought and why.

It is commonplace for Lutheran pastors catechizing their catechumens to set the Lutheran teaching on the Sacrament as lying between the extremes of Rome and the Reformed. Rome teaches transubstantiation. The Reformed teach some sort of representation. The Lutherans affirm that Christ's body and blood as well as ordinary bread and wine are all present. Thus we are the happy medium between Roman and Reformed extremes.

This misses the point in two respects. First of all, it places Rome's philosophical explanation of the sacramental union on the same plane as the Reformed denial of the sacramental union. Lutherans disagree with transubstantiation because it is the unnecessary intrusion of human philosophy into a divine mystery. Besides, the Scriptures speak of the consecrated elements as bread and wine. But Rome does not deny the essence of the Sacrament by burdening the explanation of it with such philosophical baggage. It is not important for us that the consecrated bread and wine are still bread and wine. Bread and wine provide us with no benefit. The body

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<sup>28</sup> From the "Schwann" Catechism

and the blood of Christ do. What matters is that the bread and wine are Christ's body and blood and Rome affirms this.

On the other hand, the Reformed teaching that the body and blood of Christ are confined to heaven and are not present on the altar, in the minister's hand, or in the communicant's mouth, but that the communion between the communicant and Christ's body and blood takes place only spiritually by faith is a denial of the very essence of the Sacrament, which is Christ's body and blood. Thus, it is misleading to put Rome's doctrine of transubstantiation and the Reformed doctrine of the real absence (which they falsely call the real presence) on the same level as if they are of equal seriousness. They are not.

In the second place, it misses the point to present the Lutheran teaching as the happy medium between the Roman and Reformed extremes because when it comes to the benefits of the Sacrament Rome and the Reformed are closer to one another than either is to the biblical and Catholic doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Both Rome and the Reformed define the use of the Sacrament in terms of earth reaching up to heaven. The Evangelical Lutheran Church speaks of heaven coming down to earth.

The Reformed can appreciate the importance of the sacraments, their centrality in Christian worship, and their relationship to the atonement of Christ, but even when extolling the sacraments they cannot regard them as means of grace in the same way Lutherans do. Methodist theologian, Vincent Taylor, while insisting that the sacraments are central to Christian worship, nevertheless regards them as "a means whereby man approaches God."<sup>29</sup> The principled Calvinistic refusal to bind the Spirit to the means of grace flows from Calvinism into the myriad mutations of it and reactions to it so that within the Protestant mainstream the best the Lord's Supper can do for us with respect to the bestowal of the benefits of Christ's vicarious atonement is to be a reminder of it and perhaps the occasion of it, but certainly not the means by which and through which these benefits are actually given to us. Thus faith must figure out another way to obtain the fruits of Christ's redemption. Faith ascends to heaven to find Christ there. The direction of the sacrament is not sacramental, but sacrificial.

The Reformed severance of the Holy Spirit from the Word of God is a matter of principle that prevents them from retaining means of grace as means of grace even if they wanted to. Let me illustrate this with a couple of personal experiences. The first took place in October of 1978. As a fourth year seminarian, I was invited to participate in the first meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy at which they adopted the document, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," which served as the topic of my M. Div. thesis.<sup>30</sup> Several Missouri Synod theologians participated, including Robert Preus and Harold Bult. The conference was dominated by the Reformed, as you would expect, represented by such men as R. C. Sproul, the author of the ur text of the document that was finally adopted, James Packer, Norman Geisler, James Montgomery Boice, and others. During the discussion of the document, as we were talking about the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, it became clear that the Reformed were unable to speak of that testimony as coming through the words of the Holy Scriptures –

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<sup>29</sup> The Atonement and the Sacraments, Robert S. Paul, Abingdon Press, 1960, page 312.

<sup>30</sup> "The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Chicago Meeting 1978" by Rolf Preus, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, May 4, 1979

alongside of yes; but not through. While the Lutherans and the Reformed agreed on inspiration and inerrancy, they did not agree on the Bible as a means of grace. The Reformed had no problem in asserting that the words of the Bible were the words of the Holy Spirit, but they could not bind the Holy Spirit's activity to those very words. This would militate against the sovereignty of God. This aversion to binding the Spirit's power to the words God has spoken keeps the Reformed from affirming an objectively efficacious means of grace. Within the Reformed theological system, God's sovereignty in conversion and the limited atonement go together. While the Reformed can speak of means of grace, their means of grace do not cause faith. Only the eternal and electing grace of God can cause faith! And while historic Calvinism must reject the inherent efficacy of the means of grace also on account of their limited atonement, those branches of Evangelicalism that have broken with Calvinism by affirming a universal atonement remain true to the Calvinistic principle that refuses to bind the Spirit to the Word.

This destroys the means of grace as means of grace. This brings me to another episode that happened a few years later. I was asked to write an article about Fundamentalism by the editor of "Affirm" magazine. It received the attention of the editor of a Fundamentalist Baptist magazine called "Sword of the Lord." I had been reading "Sword of the Lord" since I graduated from the seminary. It was free and I wanted to become more familiar with Fundamentalism. Imagine my surprise when I opened up the latest issue of the "Sword of the Lord" one day and read the editor's criticism of the article I had written for "Affirm". I did not know that Fundamentalists read "Affirm"! An argument between him and me ensued. The editor of "Christian News" was kind enough to publish it. We argued about the millennium and the sacraments. In response to my accusation that he denied the means of grace, he responded with indignation asserting: "The only means of grace is faith." Well, that certainly cleared things up! This Baptist theologian – Robert Sumner was his name – brought Calvinism to its logical conclusion. Since the Spirit cannot be bound to the means of grace but works faith immediately, there is no good reason to retain the means of grace as means of grace. Sacraments give way to ordinances and are relegated to mere signs of the church's presence, like prayer, discipline, and various good deeds.<sup>31</sup>

This is how the Reformed theological system frustrates its own evangelical purpose. The system attempts to tie the benefits of the atonement to the Sacrament. The communicant ascends into heaven to feed by faith upon the body and the blood of Jesus. But it does not work. The refusal to bind the spiritual to the material prevents any effective communion between the vicarious atonement and the Sacrament. Thus, the benefits of the Sacrament in Reformed theology cannot be the benefits of Christ's vicarious atonement. The Sacrament must be man approaching God. It cannot be God approaching man. It thus degenerates into a human work.

The doctrine of justification in Reformed theology is sound in most respects. That the justification of the sinner takes place by the imputation of the obedience-wrought righteousness

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussion of this, see Rolf Preus, "Roman Catholicism or Evangelicalism: Which Poses a Greater Challenge Today?" *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, Volume XVI, Number 1, Epiphany 2007, also available at [http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/RomanCatholicism\\_Evangelicalism.html](http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/RomanCatholicism_Evangelicalism.html)

of Jesus Christ is clearly affirmed by Reformed theologians<sup>32</sup> in opposition to the “New Perspective” of Paul that rejects this fundamental truth that is confessed by both historic Lutheranism and historic Calvinism.<sup>33</sup> It is only fair to recognize this. However, their deficient pneumatology, bound as it is to their aversion to any understanding of the means of grace that would challenge the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, serves in practical terms to construct a wall between Christ’s vicarious atonement and the Lord’s Supper. Justification is pure gift but where is it actually given? The more sovereign the grace is the more impotent it becomes. Why? Because it cannot be located with any certainty! Neither can justification retain its natural centrality in either the church’s theology or in her piety. That God justifies the sinner freely by his grace becomes more and more a theoretical construct if the sinner cannot identify when and where it actually occurs in his own experience. John Stephenson comments on what happens when justification is removed from its setting within the sacraments:

Accordingly, any exposition of justification ripped from this setting runs the risk of turning the chief work of God through the means of grace into a cerebral abstraction.<sup>34</sup>

We will talk more about faith later, but at this point it would be helpful for us to consider the experience of faith. We post-pietistic, post-Liberal Lutherans are loath to discuss religious experience in general, much less the experience of faith. After all, we would not want to reduce religion to psychology. But it is precisely because we need to preserve faith as faith that we must consider the experience of faith. Lutherans err when they argue against American Evangelicalism by arguing doctrine against the experience of faith. Faith that is not experienced is the false faith of the demons!<sup>35</sup> The question is not whether faith must be experienced. The question is who decides what that experience will be. The Reformed do well to ground justification in the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus and to identify the righteousness that avails before God as Christ’s obedience and suffering, excluding any human merit. But as long as the blood by which sinners are justified is as far from the sacramental elements as heaven is high above the earth and as long as the Holy Spirit does not bind himself to act efficaciously through his own words, the divine verdict of justification is not assured wherever and whenever the communicant communes. If the Holy Ghost will not bring about this experience by doing his job, the penitent must do the Holy Ghost’s job for him. Thus, the Sacrament becomes man reaching up to God and ascending by faith to the throne of grace.

Lutherans in America, surrounded as we are by the denial of the true presence of Christ’s body and blood in the bread and wine of the Sacrament, might feel kinship with Rome’s clear confession of this mystery. In question #1381 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, after citing Cyril of Alexandria to say concerning the true presence of Christ’s body and blood, “Do not doubt whether this is true, but rather receive the words of the Savior in faith, for since he is

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<sup>32</sup> See The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright, John Piper, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2007; The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and New Perspective on Paul, Cornelis P. Venema, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, UK, 2006; Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation, Brian Vickers, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> See Paul in Fresh Perspective, N. T. Wright, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2005; Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision, N. T. Wright, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Stephenson, page 69

<sup>35</sup> James 2:19

the truth, he cannot lie,” the Catechism goes on to quote the beautiful confession of the Supper written by Thomas Aquinas that includes these words:

Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived;  
 How says trusty hearing? that shall be believed;  
 What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;  
 Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.<sup>36</sup>

As most nominal Lutherans in America officially share altars with Reformed bodies that teach that the body and blood of Jesus are as far removed from the bread and wine of the Sacrament as the heavens are above the earth, such Lutheran sounding language coming from the Catechism of the Catholic Church is refreshing indeed. We Lutherans, it seems, are trained to identify sacramental error primarily with the Reformed. We are a sacramental church. When we are looking for a foil by which to bring our sacramental realism into bold relief Reformed theology, or some variant of it, will do nicely. We lump Calvin, Zwingli, and a few others together, dismiss them all as Sacramentarians, and generally give Rome a pass, at least when it comes to our polemics. After all, Luther famously said: “Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood.”<sup>37</sup> This is often cited as Luther saying he would rather drink blood with the pope than mere wine with Zwingli. In fact, Luther's criticism of the Roman sacrifice of the Mass was clear, strong, and unrelenting. It is critical to an understanding of his doctrine of justification. What good is blood that does not give you the forgiveness of your sins?

Rome's sacramental theology has not been and cannot be disengaged from the scholastic categories into which it was dogmatically bound by the Council of Trent. If you want to receive the forgiveness of sins you go to the sacrament of Reconciliation and observe whatever is required of you there. The Supper is for saints; not sinners. Hermann Sasse observes:

According to Roman doctrine Holy Communion is for the righteous only, for those who through the sacrament of penance have been made righteous. According to Luther, Holy Communion is for sinners only, for people who remain sinners even after they have received absolution. For Christ came from heaven, where he dwelt among sinless saints, in order that he might dwell on earth among sinners. If this is the meaning of his incarnation, it is also the meaning of the Real Presence of his body and blood in the Sacrament.<sup>38</sup>

In the Roman Catholic Church each sacrament has its own purpose. Forgiveness of sins is not why you receive the Lord's Supper. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, venial sins are wiped away<sup>39</sup> in the Eucharist and we are preserved from future mortal sins. But

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<sup>36</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paulist Press, 1994, page 348.

<sup>37</sup> AE, 37, 317

<sup>38</sup> Sasse, This is My Body, page 90.

<sup>39</sup> CCC par 1394

The Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins – that is proper to the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, by a clever bait and switch, Rome invites the penitent to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, and then informs him that the only sins forgiven in the Sacrament are venial sins. You can live without forgiveness of venial sins. They won't condemn you. Mortal sins damn you to hell. Those sins must be confessed to a priest. They've got you. Yes, the body and the blood are there. You don't have to ascend into heaven by faith to feed on the Jesus who is confined in a place where you cannot go. Jesus' body and blood are right here. He is present in the Sacrament in both his divine and his human natures. The whole Christ is present in each of the elements. But going to the Supper, eating and drinking the body and the blood, and believing the words Jesus says of that body and blood, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," will not send you to your house justified.<sup>41</sup> That is not, according to Rome, how the Eucharist is ordered.

Thus is it that the very place where the justification of the sinner by God's grace for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction should be most clearly taught is where it is most emphatically denied. To argue that since the body and blood of Jesus on the cross is a sacrifice to God this means that his body and blood on the altar is a sacrifice to God<sup>42</sup> is to deny the gospel of justification by faith alone.<sup>43</sup> It is to argue a theology ripped away from the clear words of the Lord who tells us what the benefits of his body and blood are. "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." The reason this cannot be a sacrifice is because it is a testament. It is the New Testament in Christ's blood. It is a testament. It is from God to us. God gives and we take. Luther writes:

For whoever makes a sacrifice out of it cannot consider it to be a testament, because it is impossible for a sacrifice to be a testament. The former we give, the latter we take; the former occurs through us, the latter without us.<sup>44</sup>

Luther relies on the words of the One who gives us his body and blood to eat and to drink. The One who gives us his body and blood to eat and to drink tells us, not only what they are – his body and his blood – but also what the benefits of that body and blood are. We do not know what the benefits of his body and blood are unless God tells us. He has to tell us what the benefits are. He tells us. We hear his words and we hear the benefits. The benefits that are given here and now are the benefits that Jesus obtained then and there when he suffered and died on the cross.

"Behold, the man!"<sup>45</sup> Pilate spoke prophetically, just as he did when he ordered Jesus identified on the cross as the King of the Jews.<sup>46</sup> The man offers up to God his body and blood. He is the

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<sup>40</sup> CCC par 1395

<sup>41</sup> Luke 18:14

<sup>42</sup> CCC par 1366

<sup>43</sup> AC XXIV 28-29

<sup>44</sup> AE, 36, 180

<sup>45</sup> John 19:5

man, the representative man, the God-man, the propitiation for our sins and for the sins of the whole world.<sup>47</sup> The blood that propitiates God is the blood that we drink. This is true. Jesus identifies the body and blood given and shed then and there with the body and the blood distributed and received here and now. This is what the communion of Holy Communion means in the first instance. It is the communion of the sacramental union. The body and blood that we eat and drink are the body and blood of the propitiatory sacrifice.

But while we identify the body and the blood of Calvary with the body and the blood of the Sacrament of the altar, we distinguish between the offering up to God and the giving out to God's people. The former happened only once. The latter happens as often as we eat and we drink in remembrance of Jesus. We do not separate the body and blood given here and now from the body and the blood given then and there but we distinguish between the giving to God and the giving from God. Here is how Luther expressed this distinction in his polemic against Karlstadt:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. . . . If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. . . . But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.<sup>48</sup>

The purpose of the body and blood are, as the words of Jesus declare, the forgiveness of our sins. We cannot fly back to Calvary. In response to the baritone crooner who repeatedly asks the question, "Were you there?" we must answer with a firm and solemn: "No." No, we weren't there. Furthermore, we cannot transport ourselves thence by any spiritual or mental exercise. Furthermore, the sacrifice then and there offered can never be offered again. Jesus cannot die again.<sup>49</sup> That Christ's sacrifice on Calvary takes away all sin once and for all is stated clearly in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another— He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being

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<sup>46</sup> John 19:19

<sup>47</sup> 1 John 2:2

<sup>48</sup> AE, 40, 213-214

<sup>49</sup> Romans 6:10

sanctified. But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” then He adds, “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.<sup>50</sup>

The Sacrament cannot be understood rightly unless we teach that Christ’s vicarious sacrifice on Calvary propitiates God. We must teach the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for our justification if we are to distinguish between Calvary and the Sacrament. They cannot be separated inasmuch as the body and the blood of Calvary are the same body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. Calvary and the Sacrament must be sharply distinguished, however. The offering on Calvary propitiates God. The Sacrament does not. The Sacrament is not an offering to God. It cannot be. If it were it would be because the sacrifice Jesus offered was insufficient. But that is blasphemy. Luther writes:

The priest offers up once again the Lord Christ, who offered himself only once [Heb. 9:25-26], just as he died only once and cannot die again or be offered up again [Rom. 6:9-10]. For through his one death and sacrifice he has taken away and swallowed up all sins. Yet they go ahead and every day offer him up more than a hundred thousand times throughout the world. They thereby deny, both with their deeds and in their hearts, that Christ has washed sin away and has died and risen again. This is such an abomination that I don’t believe it could be sufficiently punished on earth if it rained pure fire from heaven [Luke 9:54]. The blasphemy is so great that it must simply wait for eternal hell-fire [Matt. 18:8-9].<sup>51</sup>

Luther argues against the Sacrifice of the Mass, not by importing the doctrine of justification into the Lord’s Supper, but precisely by an appeal to the words of the Supper. The words of the Sacrament teach the objective reconciliation, propitiation, and justification that Christ achieved on the cross. The words that Jesus spoke in giving us his body and blood to eat and to drink are normative in understanding the efficacy of his giving up his body and blood on the cross. To offer up the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood to God for the purpose of reconciling him is idolatry.<sup>52</sup> Luther writes:

In order to remove this delusion from your minds Christ himself indicated in his own words how he was to be reconciled, when he said: “Which is given for you. Which is poured out for you.” Therefore desist from your accursed and harmful reconciliation. There are not several ways to reconcile God, but one way alone. His majesty is much too high to be reconciled by the blood of all the men on earth and the merit of all the angels. The body of Christ is given and his blood is poured out, and thereby God is reconciled, for it was given and poured out for you – as he says: “For you” – so that he may avert from us the wrath of God which we by our sins have deserved. And if the wrath is gone then the sins are forgiven. Therefore he says it shall be given and poured out for the

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<sup>50</sup> Hebrews 9:25-26 & 10:11-18

<sup>51</sup> AE, 36, 320

<sup>52</sup> AE, 36, 176



forgiveness of sins. If the body were not given and the blood not poured out, then the wrath of God would remain upon us and we would retain our sins.<sup>53</sup>

By presuming to achieve in the Sacrament what was fully achieved on the cross, Rome denies what was fully achieved on the cross and thus denies as well the benefits given in the Sacrament. She has the blood, but she hasn't the benefit of the blood. The benefits of the Sacrament in Rome's doctrine of the Lord's Supper can be described by the familiar lament, "Water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink." The body and the blood are there, but the benefits are not. Rome's confusion about the benefits of the Sacrament result from her denial that the righteousness by which sinners are justified is the obedience and suffering of Jesus. This righteousness is replaced by a righteousness that, in this life, remains incomplete: the interior cleansing of the soul effected by the working of the Holy Spirit. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it: "It [justification] conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy."<sup>54</sup> By denying that justification is the imputation of Christ's merit, Rome cannot distinguish between Christ's merit and the distribution of that merit. Luther's criticism of Zwingli applies as well to Rome. He writes:

The blind fool does not know that the merit of Christ and the distribution of merit are two different things. And he confuses them like a filthy sow. Christ has once for all merited and won for us the forgiveness of sins on the cross; but this forgiveness he distributes wherever he is at all times and in all places, as Luke writes, chapter 24 [:46f.], "Thus is it written, that Christ had to suffer and on the third day rise (in this consists his merit), and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name (here the distribution of his merit comes in)" This is why we say there is forgiveness of sins in the Supper, not on account of the eating, not because Christ merits or achieves forgiveness of sins there, but on account of the word through which he distributes among us this acquired forgiveness, saying, "This is my body which is given for you." Here you perceive that we eat the body as it was given for us; we hear this and believe it as we eat. Hence there is distributed here the forgiveness of sins, which however was obtained on the cross.<sup>55</sup>

It is not enough to have the body and the blood. We must have the gospel. The gospel interprets their meaning. The gospel is words. It is received through faith in the words. The body and the blood are present for the sake of the gospel. The words by which the Sacrament is to be interpreted and understood, is the gospel. Luther writes:

For if you ask: What is the gospel? you can give no better answer than these words of the New Testament, namely that Christ gave his body and poured out his blood for us for the forgiveness of sins. This alone is to be preached to Christians, instilled into their hearts, and at all times faithfully commended to their memories.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> AE, 36, 177

<sup>54</sup> CCC page 482

<sup>55</sup> AE, 37, 192

<sup>56</sup> AE, 36, 183

When we say that the Sacrament is the gospel we are speaking of its benefits and those benefits are known by the words Jesus spoke in instituting it.

This brings us to our third question.

### III: The Sacrament and Faith

The Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. He is the Spirit of truth and the source of faith. The devil is the father of lies and murderer of souls. His business is to turn faith into idolatry. How? How does the Holy Spirit do what he does and how does the devil do what he does? I am reminded of a story we used to tell in our family about my little brother who listened attentively to our mother warn him, as she sent him off to school, not to accept a ride from a stranger. After she was finished talking, he solemnly replied, "That's right, Mom. You never know who might be a stranger." Clearly, the boy didn't know what a stranger was. And so it is that the spiritual and theological distinctions between good and evil, truth and falsehood, faith and idolatry are well understood in the abstract while Christians in the specificity of their concrete lives wander into soul-destroying error with their eyes wide open, not having a clue that they are doing so. They don't know who might be a stranger!

Jesus explains. He says:

And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."<sup>57</sup>

At first his disciples did not understand. Their obtuseness was not on account of the difficulty of the illustration. It's an easy illustration. Luther hit the nail on the head when he wrote in the Smalcald Articles,

Thank God, today a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd (John 10:11-16).<sup>58</sup>

The voice of the Shepherd is the word of God. Faith is bound to the word of God. This is what we need to learn and we have a hard time learning it. We want to think of faith as originating within. In this way we can take charge of our own so called spirituality. But inside is nothing but sin and death. There is no faith without the word. Faith trusts the word by which it is engendered and sustained. To speak of justification by faith alone is to speak of justification that is reckoned by the word that God speaks, for without that word faith is not faith but only delusion and idolatry.

We must not set into opposition or tension the written word and the oral word. They go together. When Luther directs us to the words of the Sacrament, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," in the questions and answers of the Small Catechism, in the first and third instance he is referring to the oral words of the minister who consecrates the elements and in the second

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<sup>57</sup> John 10:4-5

<sup>58</sup> SA III XII 2

instance he identifies them as “the words here written.” Spoken or written, God’s word is God’s word and the source and power of faith.

This is why the words are the most important thing in the Sacrament. Luther calls them the “chief thing” in the Sacrament. That is because these words justify us. They bind the Sacrament to justification. Luther writes:

Everything depends on these words. Every Christian should and must know them and hold them fast. He must never let anyone take them away from him by any other kind of teaching, even though it were an angel from heaven [Gal. 1:8]. They are words of life and of salvation, so that whoever believes in them has all his sins forgiven through that faith; he is a child of life and has overcome death and hell. Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are, for they are the sum and substance of the whole gospel. This is why these words are far more important than the sacrament itself, and a Christian should make it a practice to give far more attention to these words than to the sacrament.<sup>59</sup>

The words are critical because faith cannot live on anything else. God must speak and what God says is what he gives. God’s words cannot be impotent. They need no catalyst to activate them. The Words of Institution are the words of the Word made flesh. Hidden under the appearance of weakness is almighty power. Commenting on these words, Luther writes:

That is, you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely Christ with his flesh and blood and everything that he is and has.<sup>60</sup>

On the one hand, the bodily eating and drinking appear to be insignificant and unimportant. On the other hand is God’s command to eat and drink. Appearances may not be permitted to contradict God’s word and command. If God, by his word, attaches spiritual treasures to sacramental elements we are dealing with the divine majesty, regardless of what appears to our senses. Luther says:

However carnal the words may seem to them, they are, nevertheless, as no one can deny, the words and deeds of the highest Majesty and in no way carnal or insignificant because indeed forgiveness of sins, life eternal, and the kingdom of heaven are attached to these insignificant and, as it would seem, carnal things by the word of God. Therefore, they should by no means be disparaged or be held in contempt as insignificant but should be held in high esteem and regarded as sublime and spiritual.<sup>61</sup>

The word gives what it says. Two things are at stake here, and they go together: God’s honor and our salvation. In Melanchthon’s magnificent defense of justification by faith alone in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession he repeatedly joins the glory of Christ to the comfort of

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<sup>59</sup> AE, 36, 277

<sup>60</sup> AE, 36, 278

<sup>61</sup> AE, 38, 38

sorrowing sinners. The same may be said of the Sacrament. It is the arrogance of unbelief to denigrate the merits of Christ by denying justification by faith alone. The same arrogance denigrates what God has chosen as a means of bestowing justification. Faith takes God at his word. Since his word is the word of forgiveness, faith treasures what that word gives. Justification and the Sacrament are joined together by God's word and faith. The purpose of the Sacrament is the personal justification of the one who receives it. Luther writes:

But when Christ [his body and blood] is given to you, forgiveness of sins is also given to you, and all that is procured through the treasure. If you have grasped it with your heart (and it cannot be grasped in any other way) and if you believe, you must say: "No work, no deed, will help me out of my sins, but I have another treasure, the body and blood of my Lord, given to me for the forgiveness of sins. This is the only treasure, the only forgiveness, and there is no other in heaven or on earth."<sup>62</sup>

This is through faith alone. The bodily eating and drinking is not something separate from faith. It pertains directly to faith. What makes the eating and drinking beneficial is the forgiveness of sins. The only way the forgiveness of sins can be received is through faith alone. Rather than this rendering the bodily eating and drinking unimportant, it transforms bodily eating and drinking into something essentially spiritual, as Luther writes:

It is plain that the eating of Christ's body is profitable because it is connected with the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Because every promise requires faith, faith is a spiritual knowledge. Therefore, the bodily eating itself, when it takes place in faith, must also become a spiritual matter. It is sufficient for me that such a profitable body be set before me to be eaten.<sup>63</sup>

Bodily eating and drinking is distinguished from spiritual eating and drinking. The former is done orally, that is, with the mouth. The latter is done spiritually, that is, through faith. They go together. The benefit is always the forgiveness of sins and "where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation." This means that the Lord's Supper, in justifying us, transforms us as well. Luther writes beautifully of this mystery in the words:

To give a simple illustration of what takes place in this eating: it is as if a wolf devoured a sheep and the sheep were so powerful a food that it transformed the wolf and turned him into a sheep. So, when we eat Christ's flesh physically and spiritually, the food is so powerful that it transforms us into itself and out of fleshly, sinful, mortal men makes spiritual, holy, living men.<sup>64</sup>

Luther draws a tight connection between the oral eating and drinking and the spiritual eating and drinking, but he distinguishes between the two. He weaves together the oral and the spiritual eating and drinking in a 1525 Maundy Thursday sermon:

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<sup>62</sup> AE, 36, 350-351

<sup>63</sup> AE, 38, 46-47

<sup>64</sup> AE, 37, 101

I most certainly have the Body and the Blood of Christ through the Word of God, “This is My Body which is for you,” “This is My Blood, which is shed for you” etc. The reason why Christ thus gives me His Body and His Blood is so that I may have them forever. If this then be true, and likewise this, that the righteousness of Christ and all that He has are mine, and if this is much more certain than that my body and blood are my own, then it is necessary that I believe the Body was given for me and the Blood shed for me. And this is what Christ is saying in John 6: “Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me and I in him.” For Christ and I are being baked into each other in such a way that my sin and death become His and His righteousness and life become my own. In short a most blessed exchange is taking place here.<sup>65</sup>

First we have Christ’s body and blood through God’s word in the Sacrament. With this body and blood we have the righteousness of Christ, indeed, we have all that Christ has. Therefore, we must believe that the body was given for us and that the blood was shed for us. This believing is to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus and to experience the mystical union and the blessed exchange. It all goes together: the sacramental union, the benefits of Christ’s righteousness and the forgiveness of sins, the oral eating and drinking of Christ’s body and blood, the spiritual eating and drinking of his flesh and blood through faith, and communion with Christ.

We Lutherans are not quibbling over an exegetical detail when we insist that the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of the Son of man in John 6, apart from which no one has eternal life,<sup>66</sup> is not the oral eating and drinking of the sacramental elements but rather the eating and drinking of faith.<sup>67</sup> Jesus makes it crystal clear what he means by eating and drinking here when he says, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”<sup>68</sup> The claim that Christ’s words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood refer to the oral eating and drinking leads the Eastern Orthodox to teach that reception of the Lord’s Supper is necessary for salvation. Notes on these verses from the Orthodox Study Bible assert: “His words are clear: To receive everlasting life, we must partake of His Eucharistic flesh and blood.”<sup>69</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church, in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the universal testimony of the ancient Church, teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation, and for this reason baptizes babies.<sup>70</sup> It does not teach that the Lord’s Supper is necessary for salvation, and for this reason does not commune babies, but communes only those who have first been examined.<sup>71</sup>

Lutherans who advocate infant Communion may do so for the most evangelical of reasons: to magnify the unmerited grace of God, in recognition that infants can and do believe the gospel, and from a sincere belief that this practice is rooted in history. But for us Lutherans, practice is always subordinated to doctrine and doctrine is clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures. Put simply,

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<sup>65</sup> WA 17 I.174, 21-175,10 Translated by John R. Stephenson in “The Holy Eucharist: at the Center of Periphery of the Church’s Life in Luther’s Thinking?” *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985, page 163 footnote 34.

<sup>66</sup> John 6:53-56

<sup>67</sup> FC SD VII 61-62

<sup>68</sup> John 6:35

<sup>69</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible*, St. Athanasius Academy, 1993, page 229

<sup>70</sup> AC IX

<sup>71</sup> AC XXIV 6; Apology XXIV 1

the Bible teaches us to baptize babies and the Bible does not teach us to commune babies.<sup>72</sup> That's why we do the one and not the other. We may not establish our practice by seeking a foreign ideal unknown to our fathers, cherry-picking historical references to it, and claiming it as catholic practice. Historically, Lutherans do not commune infants. The Eastern Orthodox churches do. Orthodoxy is steeped in mysticism and synergism. They cannot understand what Jesus means when he says that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood because they reject justification by faith alone. Nowhere else in the Gospels is the doctrine of justification by faith alone taught so clearly from the lips of our Savior than in these words: "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."<sup>73</sup> What is it about Christ's flesh and blood that gives eternal life? Luther says:

Then there is no right use of the Lord's Supper unless thou believest that this body was offered for thee and this blood was poured out for thee; then thou hast, what thou believest. When thy conscience troubles thee and says: There and there thou hast sinned and thou art anxious to be free from thy trouble, then go to the Sacrament and say: Have I sinned, then this body has not sinned, it is without guilt; this body is offered for me, and this blood is shed for me for the remission of sins, this I do believe and as a token of it I will receive the Sacrament.<sup>74</sup>

The benefits of the Sacrament are given through the word of God. Faith requires the word of God. Everything depends on the word of God. The "words, 'for you,' require all hearts to believe."<sup>75</sup> Believe what? Believe that the body and the blood that are given and shed are given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. Faith trusts the truth of the divine doctrine. "Given and shed" mean the vicarious satisfaction and the propitiatory sacrifice. "For you" mean the universal atonement and the objective validity and inherent efficacy of the word of God. "For the forgiveness of sins" means the non-imputation of guilt and the reckoning instead of the righteousness Jesus obtained by going to the Father by way of perfect obedience and sacrificial dying, a righteousness that is wholly pleasing to God, that renders us righteous before God and, ensures us of his favor. This divine doctrine is communicated to us in the Holy Scriptures by the Holy Spirit in the very words God himself guided the holy prophets and apostles to put down in writing for us to read and to hear.

God communicates. The word of God communicates. It is cognitive discourse. God uses words and sentences that convey meaning that can be grasped by the mind and understood and taken in as divine truth. To rescue faith from a sterile intellectualization or a spiritless rationalization does not require that we protect it by voiding it of its intellectual content. As we discuss among ourselves the relationship between faith, catechesis, and the question of when, in a child's life, he should begin to receive the Sacrament, we must never forget that the justification of the sinner before God is never less than divine doctrine, the teaching of which is the means by which the Holy Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God. The old definition of faith as being

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<sup>72</sup> John 3:5 teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation. John 6:53 does not teach that receiving the Lord's Supper is necessary for salvation.

<sup>73</sup> John 6:54

<sup>74</sup> Sermons of Martin Luther, Translated and Edited by John Lenker, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Reprinted 1988, Volume II, page 229

<sup>75</sup> Luther's Small Catechism

knowledge, assent, and trust just might keep us from falling off the bridge on the side of either mysticism or rationalism. Lutherans who mimic the liturgical piety of the Evangelicals may lose the means of grace as means of grace and fall into fideism. Lutherans who mimic the liturgical piety of the Orthodox may lose faith as faith and fall into mysticism. In either case it is trading off sound doctrinal substance for the right religious experience.

#### Conclusion: The Ministry of the Word and Sacrament

The reason Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper is so that we would look to his suffering for us for our salvation. But it is more than that. The preacher preaches Jesus Christ and him crucified to everyone in general and to no one in particular, but the preaching of the Sacrament is always individual and personal. As we rightly emphasize the churchly character of the Sacrament against a radical individualism that cares nothing about where one communes or with whom, we must not neglect the intensely personal and individual nature of the gospel proclamation of the Sacrament. Luther writes:

Therefore we too are preaching the death of Christ according to the words: "Do this in remembrance of me." However, a distinction has to be made here. When I preach his death, it is in a public sermon in the congregation, in which I am addressing myself to no one individually; whoever grasps it, grasps it. But when I distribute the sacrament, I designate it for the individual who is receiving it; I give him Christ's body and blood that he may have forgiveness of sins, obtained through his death and preached in the congregation. This is something more than the congregational sermon; for although the same thing is present in the sermon as in the sacrament, here there is the advantage that it is directed at definite individuals. In the sermon one does not point out or portray any particular person, but in the sacrament it is given to you and to me in particular, so that the sermon comes to be our own. For when I say: "This is the body, which is given for you, this is the blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins," I am there commemorating him; I proclaim and announce his death. Only it is not done publicly in the congregation but is directed at you alone.<sup>76</sup>

The preacher does not preach until he is called. God calls him through his church. So then, as the church gathers in the name of Jesus, the minister faces the altar as the spokesman for those who believe and are baptized. On their behalf he invokes the name of the Holy Trinity, the name that rests upon the church that is gathered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Then he turns and faces the church of Christ as the minister of Christ to speak the words of Christ. He is talking to those who believe and are baptized. He is a minister of the church. The Lord Jesus, who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister,<sup>77</sup> continues to serve his church until the end of time. The Shepherd and Bishop of our souls<sup>78</sup> feeds the church that he purchased with his own blood through the pastors that the Holy Ghost has put into office.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> AE, 36, 348-349

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45

<sup>78</sup> 1 Peter 2:25

<sup>79</sup> Acts 20:28

This is why we do well to claim Walther's teaching as our own when he, in his first two theses on the ministry, identifies the preaching office as the pastoral office.<sup>80</sup> We do so, not in the spirit of legalism as if to impose human forms upon a divine institution, but trusting in the words of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus who instituted this office when he sent out the first preachers to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.<sup>81</sup> We define the preaching office as the pastoral office because preaching and teaching God's word go together with baptizing and feeding with Christ's body and blood. When the office is truncated so as to exclude the administration of the sacraments, legalism is at pounding at the door.

We have no right to preach anything at all except by God's call to us to preach and God sends us to preach through the call of the church.<sup>82</sup> Take away the sacraments and what happens? The slice and dice model of the ministry invariably sets justification off into a ghetto somewhere where it can be kept safely in a hermetically sealed container to be talked about in reverent terms, to be sure, but not actually bestowed by the words Christ ordained to bestow it. When the administration of the sacraments is taken away from the office, that is, when it is no longer the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, the article on justification is compromised. Binding the preaching to the font and altar binds it to the preaching of the gospel of justification. Baptism has to do with regeneration. The Lord's Supper has to do with justification. Without these, the office will be captured by some form of legalism, whether by the legalism of the classroom where we are judged by our performance or by the legalism of a bureaucracy pretending to be the Church. We join the preaching to the font and to the altar not in service to intramural sectarian debates about who gets to be called a minister of Christ, but for the sake of the ministry of Christ that was instituted by Christ that we may obtain the faith that believes that we are received into God's favor and our sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death has made satisfaction for our sins.<sup>83</sup> When the preacher preaches the blood and righteousness of Jesus and the hearer eats and drinks Christ's body and blood, proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes,<sup>84</sup> there it is that Jesus saves.

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<sup>80</sup> Theses on the Ministry, by C. F. W. Walther, translated by W. H. T. Dau, CPH, 1938

<sup>81</sup> Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-16; Luke 24:45-49 and Acts 1:8; John 20:19-23 and 21:15-17

<sup>82</sup> AC XIV

<sup>83</sup> AC IV & V

<sup>84</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:26