

Lenten Service: March 24, 2010  
The Lord's Supper

We have been reviewing the basics of Christian Faith during these Wednesday Lenten services as these are laid out in Luther's Small Catechism. As our principal resource we've been using Luther's Large Catechism that he wrote for pastors and heads of households to use in teaching. If the Small Catechism is the students' book, then, the Large Catechism is the teacher's manual. Tonight we come to the section that Luther calls "The Sacrament of the Altar", what we are more likely to call Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper.

Luther begins, "As we treated Holy Baptism under three headings, so we must deal with the second sacrament in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them... The words are these: (Read these together from the handout.)

*"Our Lord Jesus Christ on the night when he was betrayed took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.""*

*"In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"*

These words are of the greatest importance for they tell us that the Lord's Supper was not invented or devised by any human being. It was begun by Christ, without any discussion or consultation with others, and because this is true, "this blessed sacrament remains unimpaired and inviolate even if we use and handle it unworthily." (Even if the pastor is careless or distracted, even if you are careless or distracted, when you come to communion, you still get Jesus.)

What we receive in Holy Communion "is the true body and blood of the Lord Christ in and under the bread and wine which we Christians are commanded by Christ's word to eat and drink." Just as baptism is not just water, so Holy Communion "is not mere bread and wine, but bread and wine comprehended in God's Word and connected with it." It is God's Word that makes the difference. This is the essence of the sacrament.

The purpose for which the sacrament was instituted “is plainly evident from the words just quoted, “This is my body and blood, given and poured out *for you* for the forgiveness of sins.” It is “the very gift Christ has provided to you against your sins, death and all evils. Therefore, it is appropriately called the food of the soul since it nourishes and strengthens the new self” that God is creating within you.

“The Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger. For the new life should be one that continually develops and progresses.” But growing in faith is a struggle, Luther notes, because “The devil is a furious enemy” and when he sees us resist him, he tries all kinds of tricks. “He sneaks and skulks around everywhere... For such times, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord’s Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment.” Forgiveness of sins and nourishment that our faith may grow stronger is the purpose of the Lord’s Supper.

“It remains for us to consider who it is that receives this power and benefit...the answer is: It is he who believes what the words say and what they give.” The only way to receive what Christ gives us to trust his words: “given *for you*” and “poured out *for you*”. “Whoever lets these words be addressed to him and believes that they are true has what the words declare...The treasure is opened and placed at everyone’s door, yes, upon everyone’s table, but it is also your responsibility to take it and confidently believe that it is just as the words tell you.

This, now, is the preparation required of a Christian for receiving this sacrament worthily. Since this treasure is fully offered in the words, it can be grasped and appropriated only by the heart.” For this reason, Luther concludes that while fasting and prayer may serve a purpose in preparing to receive the sacrament, these practices are not essential.

Luther concludes by strongly encouraging us to receive Holy Communion frequently. “For we see that people are becoming listless and lazy about its observance. A lot of people who hear the Gospel...let a year, or two, three or more years go by without receiving the sacrament, as if they were such strong Christians that they have no need of it.” True Christians, of course, who cherish and honor the sacrament will come of their own accord. But others, though they should not be compelled, nevertheless, need a bit of encouragement.

“In the first place, we have a clear text in the words of Christ, “Do *this* in remembrance of me.”

“What should move and impel you is the fact that Christ desires it and it pleases him.”... This is the first point, especially for the benefit of the cold and indifferent, that they may come to their senses and wake up.”

“But”, Luther says, “suppose you say, ‘What if I feel that I am unfit?’ This is actually a temptation “to concentrate more upon ourselves than upon the words that proceed from Christ’s lips.”. If you try to wait until you have straightened out your life, “one week passes into another and one half year into yet another. If you choose to fix your eye on how good and pure you are, to work toward the time when nothing will prick your conscience, you will never go.” “People with such misgivings must learn that it is the highest wisdom to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness.”

In the second place, “a promise is attached to the commandment... that should most powerfully draw and impel us. Here stand the gracious and lovely words, “This is my body, given *for you*.” “This is my blood, poured out *for you* for the forgiveness of sins.” “Ponder, then, and include yourself personally in the “you”, so that he may not speak to you in vain.”

“In this sacrament he offers us all the treasure he brought from heaven for us, to which he most graciously invites us in other places, as when he says in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you.”

“If you are heavy-laden and feel your weakness, go joyfully to the sacrament and receive refreshment, comfort and strength. If you wait until you are rid of your burden in order to come to the sacrament purely and worthily, you must stay away from it forever.”

“Suppose you say, “What shall I do if I cannot feel this need or experience hunger and thirst for the sacrament?” Well, first of all you should check and see if you are still alive, if you are still flesh and blood and then check and see if you are still in the world. If you don’t know, ask your neighbors because if you are, there won’t be any lack of sins and needs. “If you cannot feel the need, at least believe the Scriptures.” The fact that you can’t feel your need is evidence that you are spiritually numb. “In short, the less you feel your sins and infirmities, the more reason you have to go to the sacrament and seek a remedy.”

“Try this, therefore, and practice it well. Just examine yourself, look around a little, cling to the Scriptures. If even then you feel nothing, you have all the more need to lament both to God and to your brother. Take others’ advice and seek their prayers, and never give up until the stone is removed from your heart.”

Let this serve as an exhortation, then, not only for us who are grown and advanced in years, but also for the young people who ought to be brought up in Christian doctrine and a right understanding of it. (“With such training we may more easily instill the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer into the young so that they will receive them with joy and earnestness, practice them from their youth, and become accustomed to them.”) “For it is clearly useless to try to change old people...Therefore, let every head of a household remember that it is his duty, by God’s injunction and command, to teach or have taught to his children the things they ought to know. Since they are baptized and received into the Christian church, they should also enjoy this fellowship of the sacrament so that they may serve us and be useful. For they must all help us to believe, to love, to pray and to fight the devil. Amen

*Quotes are from Luther’s Large Catechism, in the Book of Concord, pp.447-457.*