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SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION: A REAL FELLOWSHIP

Lutero e o Sacramento da Santa Comunhão: uma comunhão real

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Abstract:

Luther turns to the sacraments into to rewrite the contours of a Christian life (and theology). The sacraments and especially the sacrament of Holy Communion, as a place of proclamation, exercise us in faith. In order to highlight this characteristic, Luther works with the metaphor of the happy exchange – a metaphor that has been sidelined or even forgotten by some current of Lutheran theology. Yet, it is in the happy exchange that for Luther the real significant of this sacrament lies: a true fellowship.

Keywords:

Luther. Sacrament. Communion. Happy Exchange.

Resumo:

Lutero se volta aos sacramentos para rescrever os contornos de uma vida (e teologia) cristã. A fim de destacar esta característica, Lutero trabalha com a metáfora de uma troca feliz - uma metáfora que foi colocada de lado ou até mesmo esquecida por uma parte da teologia luterana atual. Mas é na troca feliz que reside, para Lutero, o significado real deste sacramento: uma verdadeira comunhão.

Palavras-chave:

Lutero. Sacramento. Comunhão. Troca feliz.

Center Broken Open

How “Lutheran” is current Lutheran eucharistic practice? The debate around what constitutes a proper celebration of the sacrament of the altar or Holy Communion is on-going. Voices will argue both for and against the use of the Eucharistic Prayer. Others will insist on only one narrow interpretation (significance) of the sacrament: the forgiveness of sins (bequeathing a testament). They will reject other configurations of the sacrament (as celebration or as something more than an individual reception). That so many approaches and interpretations of the sacrament exist within the history of Lutheranism in both Europe, the Americas and beyond is due to the fact that Luther himself never insisted on just one interpretation!

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The flexibility that Luther displayed in his understanding of the sacrament will serve us well today in helping us move beyond a rigid and too legalistic approach. Isn't it curious that we have used the sacrament of the Gospel – the gift of God's forgiveness for us – as a playground for debating rules (rules of presiding and rules of reception)! Luther warns us about this very danger: Don't turn this into a rigid law!²

Let us begin this reflection with a less well-known statement by Luther that seems to contradict his own admonition against rule-making! It is found in the *Treatise on the New Testament, That Is the Holy Mass*, written in 1520.

Christ, in order to prepare for himself an acceptable and beloved people, which should be bound together in unity through love, abolished the whole law of Moses. And that he might not give further occasion for divisions and sects, he appointed in return but one law or order for his entire people, and that was the holy mass... Henceforth, therefore, there is to be no other external order for the service of God except the mass.³

What surprises us is Luther's use of the word "law" here in relation to the celebration of Holy Communion (or Mass). How is he using this word? Could he be establishing a new legalistic "center" for worship? Yet, the fact that Luther had an aversion to law is nowhere clearer than in his writings on the liturgy. Despite his deep commitment to basic reformation insights such as communion in two kinds and the accessibility of Holy Communion (as opposed to private masses), when these insights were "forced" upon the people during his absence from Wittenberg, Luther left his "protective custody" at the Wartburg Castle, risking his life, to restore the old order of the Catholic mass! Why? Because he was afraid that the reforming insights were being made into new principles or laws and that the people, rather than being helped, were being confused. Even fundamental evangelical priorities were not to become a new law or new centers.

And yet, he writes, there is one law, one order for the whole people. A cursory reading of Luther may leave us perplexed. On the one hand, for example, he argues in 1520 that all the frills—the singing, the organ playing, the bells, vestments, the ornaments and all the gestures—are human inventions and have nothing to do with Holy Communion as it was celebrated by Jesus. And then, in a letter from 1539, when responding to a good friend in Brandenburg who was at a loss about how to respond to his sovereign's demand for all those "smells and bells," Luther responds that the Elector can process as many times as he wants—as long as the Word is proclaimed.⁴

Luther demonstrates a radical freedom with regards to the liturgical enactment of the Word because, I believe, he has two presuppositions always before him: there is an inner dynamic, an inner grammar, a center or pattern in all worship and, secondly, this pattern is not confined to what happens during the one or two hours that worship is celebrated. This pattern is itself proclamation and offers a grammar for living. Worship is not to be confined to just the service on Sunday morning but actually forms the very pattern of our lives in the world. Worship helps us become Christians!⁵ Worship sends us out to live our faith in the world. The center (Gospel) is continually sent out to the edges.

² Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service" in *Luther Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). *Luther Works* are hereinafter cited as LW.

³ LW 35:80-81.

⁴ Martin Luther to Georg Buchholzer in a letter dated 4/5 December 1539 (WA Br 8: 624-26).

⁵ LW 53:63.

The order that is the “Holy Mass”⁶ is not a new set of rules or principles—no matter how much we wish it were. (Isn’t life much easier when everything is neatly defined and we don’t have to think about what we are doing?). The order is not a new law or center but a grammar that reorients us and sends us out into the world.

Luther’s Sacramental Rewriting

Another expression used for the sacraments is “means of grace.” With the word “means” however we can quickly think of instruments or tools – as if the sacraments, baptism and holy communion, were channeling grace to us (as if grace were some type of supernatural substance). The danger is clear: some might believe that through these “means” something comes down to us or through the proper celebration of these means we somehow have access to God.

Let me say it up front: I’m arguing against that metaphor. Such a metaphor belongs to a vision of the world and God that is quite frankly medieval. The amazing thing of course is that that metaphor is still operative today. It is operative in all our churches and in many spiritual movements. It is operative wherever “God” is placed in one realm and we are placed in another. It is operative wherever anything of God’s realm is called “sacred” and anything in our realm is called “secular” – or any other such nominal distinctions we may make. It is operative in Catholic theology that reveres the sacraments as a connector between this world and God’s reality and it is equally operative in the most fundamental, evangelical theologies that revere “law” as a way to God.

What can the “means of grace” signify for us today, if they are not to be channels of supernatural power or simply memorial signs? How might they be redefined according to the Lutheran confessional writings? I will propose this definition: “A sacramental act is not the bridging of the gap between the sacred and the secular – it is not our “peep-hole” into God’s reality – it is the encounter of God’s grace through and in our need and the world’s need. In that encounter, life and human need are re-oriented and faith is created.”

In other words, the sacraments break us open. Perhaps “re-oriented” is an easier verb than “break open”. They don’t do this magically but because they are the encounter with Jesus Christ. They are not ladders nor channels but the encounter with a person: with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ promises that he is “in baptism, the Supper, and preaching until the end of the age, until he comes”.⁷

What does this encounter look like? What does it entail? For Luther there are three parts to the sacrament. He defines these variously, in different writings. From the Large Catechism we know that a sacrament is a) Some action instituted by Jesus with a clear command (“do this”) b) a word of promise attached to this act; and c) it gives benefits. In other writings, Luther will define the three parts in this way: a) sign b) significance and c) faith.

In the case of Holy Communion, the sign consists in the bread and wine and in the act of eating and drinking. The earthly component has two aspects: both the thing itself and the action associated with it (we are not to admire the bread and wine but to actually eat and drink them, as at a meal).

⁶ Unlike other places in his writings, Luther uses the word Mass in a wholly positive sense as the designation for the Service of Holy Communion.

⁷ LW 38:29.

The significance of the sacrament is at first glance obviously clear. The promise attached to the sacrament is forgiveness. Christ himself says: for the forgiveness of sin. Though Luther insists on forgiveness as the sure gift, he takes liberty to define how forgiveness is to be understood. Luther broadens the meaning of forgiveness beyond the restriction we often impose.

Too often, the forgiveness of sins is limited to the personal, individual act: my sins, your sins are forgiven. I am again made right with God. I am again in a personal relationship with God. But listen to Luther how he defines the significance of this sacrament, the forgiveness of sins:

The significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints. This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property and this love engenders love in return and [love] unites.⁸

And then:

It is as if he were saying, "I am the Head, I will be the first to give himself for you. I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you, so that you in your turn may do the same for me and for one another, allowing all things to be common property, in me, and with me."⁹

It is clear: the forgiveness of sins does not simply mean an individual experience but a communal reality. The forgiveness of sins involves the whole community. Through forgiveness, I am reintegrated into a larger community for which I also take responsibility. Just as I am carried so I too carry, bear my neighbor. Another word for this forgiveness is perhaps reconciliation.

It is also important to note that this Christ is not an esoteric, white, sparkling Jesus that we might like to imagine and hold on to. This is Jesus coming in the suffering and sin, merits and joys of the neighbor. This Christ has flesh, a real presence. And a presence that confronts us for we can too easily imagine (create) our own God when left to our own machinations but when Christ comes as the neighbor, as the "least of these" (Matthew 25), we cannot so easily turn that other body into what we want it to be. The significance of the sacrament is literally embodied.

The third part of the sacrament is faith. It is not enough just to know what the sign and significance are but that you "desire it and firmly believe that you have received it." (60). Faith is here defined as "desiring" and "believing" that this is "for you"

Faith, as defined by Luther, is not a human work. It is not my effort to believe or understand. But rather faith is the recognition of my need (a recognition that gets expressed as desire) and the stretching out of my hands (believing that God truly comes to me). The stretched-out hands speak without words. They speak need, desire, belief. How or why can I stretch out my hands? I cannot of my own power or will or understanding believe that Christ is present in bread and wine but because Christ has promised to be here, in this bread and wine ("This is my body."), because Christ comes in the body, faith is created.

Christ's real presence makes me aware of my need and brings me to the meal. Faith means that the forgiveness of sins is not just a concept but that Christ engages me, that the Spirit

⁸ LW 35:50-51.

⁹ LW 35:55.

molds and shapes me. The sacrament in other words has consequences! It reorients us in the world, towards the neighbor, in fellowship, communio, to live the faith we have received as gift.

Communio: The Happy Exchange

Having briefly analyzed Luther's tripartite definition of a sacrament, let us look more closely at one of the three areas – the significance of the sacrament. The liturgical movement outwards is perhaps best described by Luther in his "Treatise on The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods."¹⁰ Here, Luther argues outwards from the Sacrament of the Altar. Holy Communion is truly a *communio* (Greek: *synaxis*) that, when received, forms a fellowship, a communion, a community (the true significance). Even the sign of the sacrament – bread and wine, eating and drinking – point to the significance, to this fellowship. For example, just as the bread is made out of many grains mixed together, taking "upon itself the common body of the bread... so it is and should be with us." The fellowship consists in this happy exchange: Christ taking upon himself our form and this, in turn, "enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life and blessed."¹¹ But that is not all. There is another part of this so-called happy exchange, one that we tend to overlook.

Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is the real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament.¹²

The sacrament as real fellowship invites us into a different "grammar" of life—one in which communion with my neighbor, the other, is equated with my own communion in Jesus Christ. It is noteworthy that in this treatise on the Sacrament of the Altar Luther also deals with the subject of "brotherhoods." In the late Middle Ages, the "brotherhoods" were, among other things, to be a special "fraternity" dedicated to doing good works and helping others (perhaps something akin to our charitable organizations?). Instead, Luther points out, they are full of gluttony and drunkenness where the moneys collected go only to the maintenance of the group.¹³

On the contrary, the "real fellowship" would "gather provisions and feed and serve a tableful or two of poor people, for the sake of God."¹⁴ The pattern witnessed in the sharing of the bread and the wine, the pattern of God's grace towards us, is lived out in the world and not simply within our local community. This distinction is important. We can all share to some degree within our local parish community. We can all pledge part of our income. We can all donate our time. But the "real fellowship" is with those who are not like us. Luther calls them the poor—the ones who do not have enough to eat. We might call them the poor, too, but we can also call them the homeless, the immigrant, the single mom, addicts. We might also call them those who are in spiritual, physical or mental distress – the bereaved, the sick, those in anguish, the dis-abled—all those suffering and in need within our communities. Are they at the table or do our assemblies resemble the brotherhoods"?

¹⁰ LW 35:49-73, written in 1519.

¹¹ LW 35:58.

¹² LW 35:58.

¹³ LW 35:68.

¹⁴ LW 35:68-69.

When worship draws us towards the center, it draws us finally towards Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. But Christ is never trapped in any of our words, no matter how eloquent, no matter how theologically compelling; Christ is not trapped in any of our liturgies or symbols no matter how beautifully celebrated. All these things – words, water, bread and wine, prayers and preaching – proclaim the presence of Christ to us yet that same proclamation sends us out to share the water of life with the thirsty, food with the hungry, justice for the oppressed and excluded. That is the heart of worship in Word and sacrament – forming our lives in the proclamation of Christ with us, and Christ waiting for us, outside. Luther’s understanding of the sacrament embodies this dynamic.

There is another point that we have sometimes missed in Luther’s early writing on the Lord’s Supper. Luther will almost never mention “Christ” without adding “and all the saints.” Christ and the communion of believers are inextricably linked. Incarnation and community are inseparable. The neighbor and the believer are both caught up in the incredible gift of God’s continual revelation through Word and sacraments. Through the participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we are made one with Christ and with all the saints in their works, sufferings and merit.¹⁵ Union with Christ does not lead to individualistic piety (Jesus and me) as has often happened in our present-day practice. By insisting on communion in the suffering and merit with all the saints, Luther gives no space for an individualist religion concerned only with personal salvation. Many grains become one bread means that we too become one with all the others. In the sacrament, we are continually made aware of the neighbor and our common life and witness. This confrontation breaks us open.

The breaking open of the center—of our selves—becomes our call. In the sacrament, faith is given as gift rather than as possession (to be sacrificed). In the distribution of Christ’s Body and Blood, faith is created. In the distribution of God, God conforms us to Christ in the assembly, and God conforms us to Christ in the suffering neighbor. Evangelism can then happen, not as our work, but as God’s work of real fellowship in the world.

The immediacy of the sacrament, of God’s revelation, is expressed symbolically, in language and in gesture. One of the primary recommendations of the early regulations for Reformation churches (Kirchenordnungen) was that there always be a common chest for the poor.¹⁶ After a lengthy chapter on the use and misuse of the mass (and instructions on how the mass should be enacted), Pastor Johannes Bugenhagen follows up with a chapter on the common chest. The line from the eucharist to the common chest, though not explicitly stated, is strongly suggested.¹⁷ “All the trials (literally ‘cries for help’) of body and soul of our brothers [and sisters], whether rich or poor, should be mine.”¹⁸ There should be no sharing in Holy Communion without this sharing in humanity’s plight. However, now the correlation between the two is not “extrinsic,” that is, not a cause and effect, not “I do this in order to... or because of...,” but rather is “living,” that is, the promise of God is living the liturgy in the pain of the world. The symbolic language of the liturgy, the pattern of worship, is the language of faith and love, the language of communion with the other.

¹⁵ LW 35:60.

¹⁶ Johannes Bugenhagen, *Kirchenordnung für die Stadt Braunschweig* (Wolfenbüttel: J. Zwizler, 1885). The Braunschweig church order of 1528, written by Wittenberg chief pastor Johannes Bugenhagen, was the first and formative model for all the later church orders. See Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 142.

¹⁷ Bugenhagen, *Kirchenordnung*, 153-270.

¹⁸ Bugenhagen, *Kirchenordnung*, 270.

In the sacrament (in the promise of forgiveness), we are made one with Christ and with the neighbor. The confrontation occurs in “being made one with...” We are confronted in our self-centered tendencies whether they are self-justification, pride, individualism, self-gratification of religious emotions or reason itself. Sin works through these different forms always isolating the individual from a restored communion with Christ and the neighbor.

For Luther, sin is strongly identified with rebellion against God (unbelief) and escape from human community. He considers those who are unwilling to be confronted by the sacrament to be people afraid of the world. They do not want to suffer “disfavor, harm shame or death although it is God’s will that they be thus driven.”¹⁹ They do not want to share in the suffering to which forgiveness of sins calls them. They may be willing to pray in the liturgy but they minimize what beseeching entails. They may recognize the thanksgiving (the original meaning of the Greek word *eucharistia*), but they ignore the sharing. Yet, the gift of faith that comes to us in Word and sacrament is God re-integrating and re-creating a communion, not only between God and us but also between the neighbor and us. The sacrament of the altar “bursts open all the bolts and fetters of this perishing world of death.”²⁰ The sacrament of Holy Communion bursts open all the fetters and self-invented centers that impede communion.

The eucharist confronts us with a new language about the world, with a new order or law for life. Like the bread of life, we are broken and distributed; we share in the sufferings and the pain of Christ and in the sufferings and pain of the neighbor. The common chest set next to the eucharistic celebration is not duty or obligation, not discipline or self-mastery but witnesses to our own suffering reality. The eucharist defines life as a continual involvement in the dying and rising of Christ that has no end until our bodily death and resurrection.

This confrontation with dying and rising in the sacrament is not merely an emotional or psychological drama. It has become far too easy to equate “awesome” religious emotion with a sense that we have “died,” that is, that we have given something up for God. The dying of which Luther speaks is a concrete participation in the death of Christ, in the suffering of ourselves and others. This participation in Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me” is not simply an inward act of the heart but an outward and public remembering.²¹ The believer is sent into the world: “Go in peace. Serve the Lord!”

¹⁹ LW 35:57.

²⁰ Peter Brunner, “Divine Service in the Church” in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 209.

²¹ Psalm 111 Interpreted (1530), in LW 13:365-366.