

# Holy Communion: *Terms and Practices*

As Lutheran Church–Canada looks at questions and issues surrounding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, a number of terms need to be examined to determine the boundaries of Christian freedom that exist in the celebration of the Supper and some of the terms that the Lutheran Church has used.

As we study the issue, particular resources which will be helpful include the following:

*The Holy Bible*  
*Luther’s Small Catechism*  
*The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH)  
*Lutheran Worship* (LW)

The Bible, of course, is the written Word of God, and is the only source and norm for our faith and practice. Everything we do must properly reflect what the Bible teaches. Particularly, it must clearly proclaim salvation as a free, unconditional gift given to us by God because of the work of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we only do what the Bible tells us to do. It does mean that whatever we do, whether specifically commanded in Scripture or done in Christian freedom, dare not contradict the Gospel or lead the people of God away from the Gospel.

*The Small Catechism*, written by Martin Luther, summarizes clearly and simply what the Scriptures teach regarding the Ten Commandments, the God which the Creeds confess, the Lord’s Prayer and the Sacraments. We go to the catechism for a summary of the Word. It is not something we use to give us more information than the Word does, but to hear the Word beautifully explained and see how it applies to each of us.

The hymnals of the Church also reflect the teachings of Scripture. Our worship must be God-pleasing in that it is to bring us clearly God’s word of grace and to enable us to speak back to God that same word that He gives to us. The words of the liturgy, for the most part taken directly from the Scriptures themselves, present what we are (sinners) and what God is (gracious, for the sake of Christ). The hymns, though not direct quotations of Scripture, reflect the truth of Scripture and lead us, corporately and individually, to understand and confess the faith and to extol God’s gifts.

Let’s now use the resources at hand to see how we can come to terms with some of the worship issues that are confronting the Church.

This study was prepared for the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) at the request of the 1996 Lutheran Church–Canada convention. Dr. Edward Kettner serves as chairman of the commission.

## The Lord's Supper

- 1) What does the Small Catechism say is the nature of the Lord's Supper?

Let us look in the Scriptures to see if this is so.

- 2) What does Jesus tell His disciples He is giving them in Matt. 26:26-28? In Mark 14:22-24? In Luke 22:19-20; in 1 Cor. 11:24-25?
- 3) What benefits does the catechism say that the Supper gives? What do the accounts of the institution of the Supper say about these?

Now check the hymnal to see how we confess this in the service.

- 4) See TLH p. 27, 29 for the Words of Institution and the Words of Distribution. Is there anything there which is different from what the Scriptures say? See pages 150-152, and pages 171-172 in LW for the same. Is there anything different here?

These words all show what we mean by Real Presence.

- 5) Can we understand how this Body and Blood are present? Do the words tell us how God performs this great miracle? Do they tell us what we receive? Do they tell us what benefits we receive when we eat and drink this Body and Blood?
- 6) How in our teaching can we speak to make sure that this great truth is preserved?

The Lutheran Church uses the term "Real Presence" to refer to the Scriptural declaration that with the bread and wine the communicant also receives the Body and Blood of Christ. How the Body and Blood are present remains a mystery. However, there are three points that must be noted which safeguard the proper understanding of the Real Presence:

- i) that the Body and Blood which are present are the very Body and Blood given for the forgiveness of our sins: the Body which hung on the cross and the Blood which was shed on the cross;
- ii) that the communicant receives this Body and Blood with the mouth, albeit in a supernatural manner;
- iii) that all communicants, whether believers or not, receive this Body and Blood.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Visitation Articles of 1592, which were an early test of Lutheran orthodoxy, state in Article I, "That it [what is tendered and received] is the true natural body of Christ which hung on the cross, and the true natural blood which flowed from the side of Christ." *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 1151. These words have also been stated from time to time in the catechisms of the Missouri Synod. Points two and three are also clearly stated in this article. C. F. W. Walther considered these Visitation Articles so important that he saw to it that they became a part of the constitution of Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Louis.

## Notes...

## Notes...

7) Look again at the Words of Institution, and see how Christ's words indicate all three of these points are true. Though the words of Jesus do not explicitly state this, any other understanding reduces the words to merely a symbolic presence, and denies what the words themselves actually say. Look up hymn 249 in *Lutheran Worship* (hymn 310 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*) and note how important the Real Presence is, and how clearly it is stated in stanzas 3 and 4.

8) Where and when are the Body and Blood of Christ present? Back to the Words Christ used! He says "This do." What did He do? What, then, is His church invited to do? Who serves as Christ's representative when the church follows Christ's invitation?

The Words of Institution say that Christ did three things. Look at the words and see what they are:

1. He blessed the elements (consecration).
2. He gave them to His disciples (distribution).
3. He told them to eat and drink them (reception).

When, then, are the Body and Blood of Christ present? When else but when what Christ has commanded is being done? But by whose power? The Church's? No, not the Church's but the word and promise of Christ. Thus, we note that when bread and wine are blessed with Christ's words, distributed, and eaten, all in accord with Christ's invitation, we know that we receive His Body and Blood.

9) What happens if the invitation is not heeded? What if a church publicly declares that they are just performing a symbolic act, as the Reformed do? What if the elements are blessed, but the people just want to stand in awe of them, and do not eat and drink them, as happened with Roman Catholicism in the Middle Ages? Is this then truly the *Lord's Supper*?

10) How often is the Sacrament to be celebrated? What do the Words of Institution say about the frequency of celebration? There are indications of frequent celebration in the New Testament. See Acts 2:42, in which the "breaking of the bread" is most likely the celebration of the Lord's Supper, since the Scripture uses that term particularly when the meal is one in which Christ is the host.

Historically, Christians celebrated the meal weekly. The Reformation continued the practice. Only the churches which denied the Real Presence, who treated the presence symbolically or who saw the meal merely as a memorial meal to Christ's suffering and death abandoned weekly celebration at the time of the Reformation. It was only when Pietism (the emphasis of experience as the centre of the Christian life rather than the forgiveness of sins) arose within the Lutheran Church that some Lutherans abandoned the weekly celebration of the Sacrament. In North America the fact that many isolated areas did not have pastors available for weekly celebration led to more infrequent celebrations as well.

So how best to deal with the question, “How often is often enough?” There is no question but that frequent, indeed weekly, celebrations are truly Lutheran. This does not, however, mean that a change without first studying the issue is necessarily called for. Congregational traditions which celebrate less often (monthly or twice a month) must be treated with respect. Only after study and deliberation and with the congregation’s desire for more frequent celebration should the change be made.

The true Sacrament is celebrated when the elements are consecrated, distributed and received. But can other things be added which confess clearly what is going on, as long as those things do not contradict the Gospel, as long as the true Sacrament is being celebrated? Can we at times use language other than the Scripture’s language to describe the same truth? Christian freedom indicates that we can when these things emphasize the truths present in the Sacrament and do not change the content of the teaching.

Let’s look at some places where the Church from time to time has done this.

### **“Change” language**

Can we say that the bread and wine are “changed” into the Body and Blood of Christ? Roman Catholics do, talking about “transubstantiation” (the bread and wine changing into the Body and Blood) and so do the Eastern Orthodox. Lutherans normally have not used the term *change*, but have approvingly quoted those who use the term.<sup>2</sup> But can the term be considered wrong? In the Supper is something present which was not there before? What?

So, a change does take place. Bread and wine are not changed into something else. Something else, however, is now present, as the bread and wine become the vehicles for the Body and Blood which Christ gives us.

<sup>2</sup> Apol. X.2, citing “Vulgarius” (the eleventh century theologian Theophylact), who notes that the bread “is truly changed into flesh.” Martin Chemnitz, one of the authors of the Formula of Concord and ardent defender of the Real Presence, demonstrates how the term, if used, must be understood. He studiously avoids the term when contrasting the Lutheran view with Rome’s view, while at the same time noting the Christ gives us something that was not there before: “Therefore it is not a man, the minister, who by his consecration and blessing makes bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, but Christ Himself, by means of His Word, is present in this action, and by means of the Word of His institution, which is spoken through the mouth of the minister, He brings it about that the bread is His body and the cup His blood . . .” Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* Part II, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 229. However, later, as he contrasts the ancient Church’s understanding with the Roman understanding, he notes (and accepts) the concept, saying “The ancients make mention simply of mutation and conversion of the elements in the Lord’s Supper. This they understand and explain this way, that after consecration it is no longer common bread and ordinary wine but is the Eucharist, which is made up of two things, an earthly [bread and wine] and a heavenly [Christ’s body and blood], a visible and an invisible . . .” (254). To use the word “change” with that understanding is certainly permissible.

## Elevation

This is the practice of raising the consecrated elements to indicate that what is present is in fact the true Body and Blood of the Son of God. It is often accompanied by genuflection (the bending of the knee). The Lutheran reformers clearly rejected the Roman Catholic practice of worshipping the consecrated host (bread) without receiving it, thinking that the consecration alone gained some benefit for those present.

- 1) Are there other instances when people honoured the presence of Christ's glorified body, indeed worshipped it? See John 20:28, Rev. 1:10-17. Is that same Body and Blood present in the celebration of the Sacrament?

Since the practice of elevation testifies to the Real Presence and does not deny the Gospel, it cannot of itself be considered wrong.<sup>3</sup>

However, if the practice is introduced, it must be done with careful explanation so that offence is not given. It must also be noted that, though the practice may be proper and reverent, it is not necessary for a valid celebration of the Sacrament.

## The term "Mass"

There is much confusion about this term. When they hear the term, most modern Lutherans think of the Roman Catholic service, which includes elements which directly deny the Gospel. Therefore, they are suspicious of Lutherans who like to use the term. *Mass* technically refers to the structure of the traditional service, which Luther and Lutherans retained, having first removed the elements which deny or obscure the Gospel. Luther called His revised Latin service the Formula Missae (Formula of the Mass), and his German service the Deutsche Messe (German Mass). The structure was thus retained, and even praised, but the Roman Mass with its abuses was condemned. Given its ancient history, we should say with the confessors that we celebrate the Mass and do it right. Yet again, if the term is reintroduced, it must be done with care, so that no offence is given. Other terms, such as Divine Service, or Service of Holy Communion, are just as proper.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, Luther considered abandoning the practice of elevation early on in the Reformation because of Roman abuses, but when the radical reformer Carlstadt, and later the Reformed (the followers of the teachings of Swiss Reformers John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli) began to deny the Real Presence, he retained the practice. In the end, although he notes what whether one elevates or not is entirely a matter of Christian freedom, he expresses a preference in favour of the practice. For Luther's discussion on the practice, see his "Brief Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" of 1544 in the American Edition of Luther's Works, 38:313-317.

## Notes...

## The Commemoration of Saints

We might also look at one other area of concern which some fear might be reintroducing practices that contradict the Gospel. That is the question of the commemoration of saints. It is true that the Roman practice of invoking the saints and praying to the saints must be condemned, as our Confessions do. But what about remembering them?

- 1) Take a look at Heb. 11:4-40, and how the Old Testament Saints were remembered there.
- 2) Now look at the calendar of the church year in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (p.3) and *Lutheran Worship* (pp.8-9). In both you can see that the Lutheran Church has always had a place for the commemoration of the saints. But is this invoking them or praying to them?
- 3) Take a look at the propers for the day of St. Andrew (November 30). In *The Lutheran Hymnal* they are on pages 87 and 94. In *Lutheran Worship* they are on pages 94-95. Do you see anything there in the Introits which exalts St. Andrew? Do the collects for the day give glory to Andrew?

All the propers for the day give glory to God and praise Him for what He has done through the apostle, and ask God to grant grace to His people to follow after his example. If you look at any of the other days commemorating apostles, you will see exactly the same thing.

- 4) See also the various hymns in the hymnal used for such days, and see how all the glory goes to God.

In *The Lutheran Hymnal*: 463, 468, 475, 476, 478, 656  
In *Lutheran Worship*: 191, 192, 193, 194, 195

One more term needs to be examined, one that seems to generate more heat than light.

## Romanizing

This term can refer to the reintroduction of specific Roman Catholic teachings concerning the Lord's Supper and the attendant abuses which are contrary to the Gospel. This includes transubstantiation, (the declaration that the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, or that the body and blood of Christ in the elements are to be worshipped apart from the context of eating and drinking. It may be used wrongly to refer to practices which Rome uses, but which Lutherans have historically used at certain times in history (the use of the sign of the cross by individual Christians, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, chanting, elevation of the consecrated elements, remembering specific saints on particular days of the year, the use of the term "Mass," referring to Holy Absolution as a sacrament, etc.) and which do not contradict the Gospel. The use of the term is counterproductive because it cuts off communication in what is legitimate theological discussion.

## Notes...

We need to remember that respect for the tradition of the Church has a part in the life of the Church today. This is not just the tradition in terms of the way we, the Missouri Synod and Lutheran Church–Canada have “always done it” (though that, too, is to be respected); it includes the tradition of the Church down through the ages. If the Gospel of Christ is the tie which binds His church even throughout all generations, it must also be the driving force behind pastoral practice and church reforms. The freedom inherent in the Gospel allows the church to maintain the wholesome traditions of the past while adopting and evaluating contemporary trends. It empowers us today to stay the course while the world yawns and moves on to more relevant “realities” and “felt needs.” Inspired by the Gospel, we push on to the heavenward goal with the confidence to daily reform the faith which was once delivered to the saints.

A word of reminder is certainly appropriate to pastors as they ponder reinstating practices that have fallen by the wayside. Any practice to be introduced or reintroduced must be done in the context of patient and gentle teaching, since the goal is always to build up the body of Christ. Christ is served when His sheep are cared for, properly fed, and led home.

It is hoped that this guide through Scripture, catechism, and hymnal will serve the people of God as they discuss these issues of concern in the church today.

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