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Lord's Supper

THE LORD'S SUPPER
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

by Prof. D. Hermann Sasse
Mequon, Wisconsin

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

What holds true of the reality of the Church holds true of all realities of our faith: they are able to be grasped by a child, and yet no adult has ever completely learned them. "Thank God", Luther says in the Smalcald Articles, "a child of seven knows what the Church is, namely the holy believers and the sheep who hear the Shepherd's voice." And still even the longest Christian life is not long enough to understand the full depth of this confession, not even if it be a life so full of the experiences of faith as that of a Luther. Perhaps Christendom will really understand what she has been confessing with the words: "I believe one holy, universal Church" only after looking back on the experiences of all centuries of Church History.

We ponder the divine miracle of the Church when we speak of the Lord's Supper. For the Church and the Sacrament of the Altar belong together in a very special way. According to the teaching of our confessions there are three characterizing marks by which the Church is known: the Gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Everything else besides these things that the Church possesses could, if necessary, conceivably be missing. But these three things must be where the Church of Christ is to be. The Gospel must be preached; people must be baptized in the name of the Triune God; the Supper of our Lord must be celebrated. And these three means of grace exist only in the Church. In our world there are many religious messages which are able to touch men's hearts and arouse their spirits, but there is only one Gospel. For the Gospel is the gracious message of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake! The glory of Jesus Christ and the essence of His office as Redeemer of the world is this: that forgiveness of sins exists solely with Him, for His sake, and nowhere else on earth. "For God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," -- that is the Gospel and nothing else. It is with this Gospel that the Church comes to the nations of the whole earth. But imagine for a moment if she were to come solely with this message and without the sacraments, as for example the Christian society of the so-called Quakers does. Couldn't the Church call people and nations solely with the word of the Gospel? The answer is: No. Without the sacraments the call of the Gospel would be swallowed up and disappear like a voice in a wind. Perhaps there would be a brief echo, but that would be all. Therefore the sacrament must accompany the preached word, even as in the New Testament account of Pentecost the first Mission-baptism follows directly upon the first Mission-sermon of an apostle. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2,41). This is the way a congregation arises; this is the way the Church grows in the world. If on the mission fields we were to preach only, and not to baptize, then at no time would a Christian congregation arise; rather there would arise perhaps societies for the nurture and propagation of a new Weltanschauung. If a congregation of baptized Christians were to decide to dispense with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, soon it would no longer understand Baptism and become a religious society in no way different from other human societies.

How is this significance of the sacraments to be understood? We Christians of the twentieth century must again accustom ourselves to the

1-110

thought which was self-evident to the people of the Scriptures and also to our reformers, that we belong to God with body and soul, that Christ is the redeemer not only of our soul, but the savior" who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body according to the working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil 3,21). "Mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24,19), that was the impression which Jesus made on the people who believed in Him. The miracles which Jesus did are not, as it seemd to modern rationalism, more or less superfluous, not to say questionable illustrations of His words, but a necessary, essential side of His activity as Savior. "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed; and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up; and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." (Matth 11,5). This is the dawn of God's kingdom. Jesus' miracles are the morning-red which heralds the full rising of the sun. In them is already visible that Redemption which will be completed when the dead arise and God creates a new heaven and a new earth. As the Church's preaching of the Word, if it be the preaching of the pure simple Gospel, is nothing else but the continuation of Jesus' preaching, so His saving activity also continues in the right administration of the sacraments. In every baptism and at every celebration of His Supper Christ performs the miracles which are an anticipation of what will one day happen to us -- "until it be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 22,16). For that reason preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments belong together and in the Sacrament in turn the Word and the outward sign are inseparably connected. It is in this sense that Luther says in the Large Catechism concerning Baptism "That is the reason why these two things are done in Baptism, namely that the body which can apprehend nothing but the water, is sprinkled, and in addition, the word is spoken for the soul to apprehend. Now, since both, the water and the Word, are one Baptism, therefore body and soul must be saved and live forever: the soul through the Word which it believes, but the body because it is united with the soul and also apprehends Baptism as it is able to apprehend it. We have, therefore, no greater jewel in body and soul, for by it we are made holy and are saved, which no other kind of life, no work upon earth, can attain." (Trig. 743) These are truths which our fathers in the Reformation knew and which we must today learn anew. Perhaps many of the false teachings concerning ^{the} human body which have spread abroad in the last centuries are a result of the fact that modern Christendom has forgotten several essential Biblical thoughts. Not only our soul, but also our body should be redeemed. We belong to Christ not only in soul, but also in body. "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own" (1 Cor 6,18). "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?" (6,15). The Christian does not only belong to the Church in soul, but also in body. And the Church is not only a "spiritual" fellowship like a philosophical school, a fellowship for the nurture of a certain way of looking at the world, or what is today called a "spiritual movement" (Glaubensbewegung), but the Church is a spiritual-bodily ~~gemeinschaft~~ (eine geist-leibliche Gemeinschaft) fellowship. And because she is that, the church does not hover high above human life as the schools of Plato and Hegel, but penetrates deeply into the actual life of men and nations. In order that she might be such a spiritual-bodily fellowship (eine solche geist-leiblich; translator's note: cf. psycho-somatic, the modern medical term), a fellowship that has to do with and comprehends the whole person, for that reason Christ the Lord gave her the sacraments. These sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are not only parables and symbols of what God does to us and in us, but God deals with us in and through them. They are also not only illustrations of the Gospel, the visible Word of Christ and the guarantee of His promise, but they are special modes of God's working, in which His Word uses earthly elements in order to present redemption to our whole person, body and soul. These sacraments must be entirely incomprehensible to the world, as

incomprehensible as is the Church to whose essential marks they belong. As incomprehensible as Jesus Christ and the miracles which are reported as His. But we who believe in Christ cannot strive too earnestly to understand them in faith. And perhaps the correct understanding of the sacraments is a matter of life and death for our church in a way that most Evangelical Christians today do not any more understand.

We clarify this for ourselves, if we ask what the Lord's Supper means for the life of the Church. A look into the New Testament reveals the noteworthy fact to us that the writers of the Biblical writings only rarely spoke of the Lord's Supper as such, but that everywhere it is in the background of the historical narratives and of the apostolic letters. The Acts of the Apostles, for example, witnesses to the great significance which the "breaking of bread" had for the very early church, but what the celebration actually consisted in, how it proceeded, is not told to the readers. The Christian readers knew that and outsiders didn't need to know it. If Paul had not been forced once by the controversies and abuses in the congregation at Corinth to go into the matter specifically, we would have no report as to whether or how the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the Pauline congregation and what the Apostle taught concerning it. The older text of Luke's Gospel -- which, like Acts, was directed to heathen readers -- only hinted lightly at the words of institution in the account of the Last Supper; and in John's Gospel even the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper is missing, and that, despite the fact that the Lord's last hours are treated with special detail. In the very early church people considered the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper a mystery, which should not be advertised to the world. The words of institution, the progress of its celebration-ritual, the oldest communion liturgy (many parts of which, for that matter, are preserved in the New Testament, e.g. at the end of 1 Corinthians) -- these things were not told to non-Christians. Why not? One of the reasons was that it would have been misunderstood. For whatever of it became public actually was misunderstood. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6, 53f). Is it surprising that such words, when they reached heathen ears, gave "substantiation" to the gossip that in Christian services held secretly behind locked doors human flesh was eaten and human blood drunk? This stiff-necked report which played such a great role in the legal trials of the Christians is not an unimportant witness to the fact that the very early church must have had a very realistic understanding of the Lord's Supper. How could people have been offended at just this period in a world which was full of seasons for sacrificial feasting and communions celebrations, if it had been only a memorial meal or an entirely spiritual communion? But how should the church have explained the Lord's Supper to such who didn't believe in Jesus Christ. She knew what the Sacrament meant because she believed in the Son of God Who became flesh; because she understood His death as the death of God's sacrificial Lamb, which taketh away the sin of the world; because she knew that He had risen bodily from the dead as the very First to rise of all who sleep the sleep of death; and that He, exalted to His Father's right hand, participates in His omnipresence and omnipotence; because she knew that His now-hidden glory must become visible to all men on the day of His coming in glory. After all it is only on the basis of these presuppositions that the Lord's Supper is to be understood. So the first church, and together with her the true church of all times, knew that Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed not only held an impressive farewell-celebration with His disciples and commanded them to repeat this celebration in remembrance of Him. She knew also that He therewith anticipated that meal which He will one day hold with His redeemed in the Kingdom of God. As certainly as both these things (recollection of the past; anticipation of the future) also belong to the Lord's Supper, so certain is it that therewith the essence of this sacrament has not been ^{exhaustively described}

No, the essence of the Lord's Supper, as the church of the New Testament understood it, lies not in remembrance and not in hope. The Lord of the Lord's Supper is not only He with Whom His disciples once ate and drank, not only He at Whose table we are one day to sit. He is the-One-Who-is-Present-Now (der Gegenwaertige). With the institution of Holy Communion He gave His church something which should span and bridge over the centuries and millenia between His earthly days and His Coming Again in glory. Every attentive Bible reader knows what a deep disappointment it was for the Christians of the first generations that the day of His Return made them wait so long: "Where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they are from the beginning of the creation. (2 Peter 3,4); thus people began to ask and we must be clear as to how serious this question is for a church which has had to hear it now for almost 2,000 years. Where else in the world is there a hope which remains unchanged, even though one century after another passes without its fulfilment becoming visible? After 19 centuries the Church prays that prayer which already at the time of Saul belonged to the Communion Liturgy and which stands at the end of the New Testament: "Marana tha! Come, Lord Jesus!" How could she have done that, without halting in weariness, literally, "without ceasing"? She was able to do that solely because it goes into fulfilment at every Lord's Supper; because at every celebration of the Lord's Supper that is held in accordance with His institution Jesus Christ is really present. That is why the Benedictus is sung: "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord." That is why already in the Communion-Liturgy of the first century people sang the Sacntus, the "Holy, Holy, holy is the Lord" of the heavenly divine service of the Cherubim according to Isaiah 6. We read in a letter which the congregation at Rome wrote to Corinth about the year 96 A.D.: "Let us be aware of how the entire throng of His angels stands by Him and serves His will. For the Scripture saith: 'Ten thousand times ten thousand stood at His side and a thousand times a thousand served Him and called: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Sabaoth. The whole creation is full of His glory.'" And we also of one mind, gathered in adoration, wish to emphatically call out with one voice..." Here we find the same thought which is foeshadowed by St. John's Revelation (Rev 4,10f; 8,5-14) that in every divine service, and at that time that meant in the Lord's-Supper-service, the Church's place of worship opens up wide and heaven and earth become one even as it is said in that Communion Prayer of our forefathers: "Thy Supper be my heaven on earth, till I enter heaven." Even as the Lord's Supper spans the very great difference of Time between this world's time and the Kingdom of God, so this Sacrament spans and over-bridges the gulf between heaven and earth. For that reason it is the cibus viatorum, the food of the wanderers who have here no abiding city, but who seek the coming city. As Israel found the Manna in the wilderness and the water from the rock, so the people of God under the New Testament in its pilgrimage-wanderings from the Egypt of this world to the promised land finds in the comfortless wilderness of this world the Lord's Table decked and set for it and it can then continue on its way like Elijah "in the strength of that meat". He is truly Heavenly Food, Bread from Heaven, as the Bible calls the Manna (Ps 78,24; 105,40) and the Food of the Lord's Supper (Joh 6), and that not only in a figurative sense. If heaven is there "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3,1), then the Lord's Supper is truly our heaven on earth until we enter heaven. For the presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar is surely a different presence than that which we believe to be everywhere where two or three are gathered in His name. The mystery of that presence the Church has from the beginning found expressed in the words which the Lord spoke over the bread and cup "This is My body", "This is My covenant-blood." The most profound essence of the Lord's Supper is not revealed in the command to repeat the celebration "in remembrance of Me" and not in the promise "until

his personal presence?

it be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God", but in the words concerning the Body and Blood of the Lord. They are no parable. If they were that, Jesus would Himself either have interpreted them or they would have had to reveal their meaning so clearly that no doubt or controversy concerning them were possible. The attempts to understand the words of institution as parabolic language and the institution of the sacrament as a parable in action like the symbolic actions of the prophets mentioned in the Bible, have, however, always led to contradictory solutions. Unless one wishes to imagine that Jesus here wanted to speak darkly in riddles --and no one can impute that to Him, especially not in that hour--, then the literal understanding is the only remaining alternative. But then also everything is clear. He, the eternal Son of God, Who for us took on flesh and blood, the compassionate High Priest, Who is at the same time the Lamb of God Which taketh away the sin of the world", sanctifies Himself (John 17,19) as the Sacrifice for the sin of the world. He celebrates the Passover with His disciples and is Himself the Passover Lamb. Jesus Christ Himself understood His death in this way. He, Who is "a priest forever" (Hebr 6,17) and at the same time "the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13,8) offers Himself up as the one, eternal, all-sufficient sacrifice. And even as Israel at its redemption from the bondage in Egypt ate the passover-lamb and ever again eats it in remembrance of God's wondrous deed, so the twelve ate the Passover of the New Testament as the representatives of the New Israel (Luke 22,30) and the Church repeats this celebration without ceasing "in remembrance of Me." As Israel ate the Passover Lamb, so the disciples and so the Church eat the body of Him Who was crucified. For the Passover Lamb must be eaten. Whoever is offended by that must also be offended by the sacrificial death of Christ. Just as it is a wondrous truth incomprehensible to our reason that we are redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1,19f), even so it was an incomprehensible miracle that we in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and the true blood of the Son of God Who was offered for us, the crucified body which is at the same time the glorified body. That is the teaching of the Holy Scripture, a teaching which presupposes that Redemption --like Creation-- has to do with the whole person, body and soul, that the Savior had to take on a true human nature and complete the work of redemption by the sacrifice of His body and blood and that the redeemed belong to Him body and soul and as members of the Church, "baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12,13) and partakers of the one consecrated bread and consecrated cup, which are the communion of Christ's body and blood, are members of His body.

From this vantage point the place of the Lord's Supper in the life of the New Testament church is to be understood. It stands at the center of the Divine Service, in fact, it is the real divine service. A Lord's day without the Lord's Supper was inconceivable for the early church, indeed, one must even add that even the old Lutheran church still in the seventeenth century could imagine a Sunday without the celebration of the Lord's Supper only with the greatest difficulty. It is out of the Lord's Supper that the liturgy grew. The beautiful old name "Eucharist" still reminds us of the fact that the Church's great prayer of thanksgiving and praise is a continuation of the prayer which Christ directed to His heavenly father, when He took bread, and, "when He had given thanks, brake it." It is also not just chance that the age of the great hymns of praise and thanksgiving was at the same time the age in which the Lord's Supper still stood in honor in the Church. It would lead too far afield, if we wanted to point out in detail how the most varied expressions of the Church's life, even as far as its diaconate and constitution or polity is concerned, at first were connected with and grew out of the Sacrament of the Altar.

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 If/is the deepest essence of the Church that it is the body of Christ, then this connection is conceivable and understandable. It is at the celebration of the Lord's Supper that the Church has in all ages come to an understanding of her true nature.

No theologian in the history of the church understood the connection between the Lord's Supper and the life of the Church more profoundly than Martin Luther. It is common knowledge that he took the question of the Sacrament of the Altar very seriously. This terrible earnestness which has often been judged as all-too-great stringency and which today is often no longer understood even in the Lutheran churches, is explained by Luther's deep insight into the inner connection of Gospel and Lord's Supper. Without the Gospel there is no Lord's Supper. Even if a church forgets or adulterates the Gospel, as has happened to a great extent in Catholicism, still a remnant of the Gospel remains in the words of institution "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." And without the Lord's Supper there is no Gospel. And when a church, as has happened so much in Protestantism, lets the Lord's Supper decline, preaching pales into a proclamation of human theories, and the Gospel about the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, dies. This explains Luther's mighty "war-on-two-fronts" for ~~the~~ keeping the Sacrament of the Altar pure against its adulteration in the Roman sacrifice of the mass and for the preservation of the Sacrament of the Altar against its destruction in a Protestantism which rejected not only the unbiblical teaching concerning the sacrifice of the mass and transubstantiation but also the Biblical teaching concerning the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ under the forms of bread and wine.

This ~~same~~ view of Luther's concerning the inseparable connection between Gospel and Lord's Supper which was acknowledged as Scriptural in the confessions of our Reformation explains the dogged loyalty with which the old Evangelical church preserved the Sacrament of the Altar. One may say that in Germany the Lord's Supper was never celebrated with such profound faith, that it never had such significance for the life of men as in the church of the Lutheran Confession in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And at the same time no one can say that perhaps the sermon which is said to be the main part of the Evangelical divine service, came off too short. Those centuries were at the same time the great period of Evangelical preaching. At that time the Church well knew why she prayed with such devotion: "That pure we keep, till life is spent,
 Thy Holy Word and Sacrament." (LH 292)

It was first in the eighteenth century that that process began which one can hardly characterize otherwise than the dying of the Sacrament. This is most clearly seen by a survey of the eloquent numbers in Communion-Attendance statistics. At the beginning of the century communion attendance in Lutheran Germany was so frequent that we can hardly imagine it today. On one festival day, Reformation Day 1717 in Holy Cross Church in Dresden 1,000 were guests at the Lord's Table. In one single church in Breslau in 1701 there were 35,950 communicants. In 1800 there were but 9,500, because beginning with the middle of the eighteenth century a drop in the number of communions began; there was again a rise after 1830 in the regions touched by the Awakening; but in the great Relapse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the decline continued until into our own time. Naturally there are great differences in the individual territorial churches (Landeskirchen) and congregations. But in general the following numbers give an approximate picture of the development. Of 100 people in the Evangelical church in 1904 only 40 still communed. Since 1920 the number is under 30. The official numbers for the individual territorial churches in the year 1936 are: Bayern 54.88; Schaumburg-Lippe 53.50; Kurhessen-Waldeck 48.11; Baden 38.85; Wuerttemberg 35.17; Nassau-

Hessen 33.93; Hannover-luth. 33.50; Pfalz 32.55; Lippe 25.53; Sachsen 23.34; Altpreussen 20.45 (Grenzmark 43.20; Schlesien 31.37; Pommern 26.09; Westfalen 22.47; Ostpreussen 21.12; Brandenburg 21.03; Sachsen 17.79; Rheinprovinz 17.35; Berlin 9.84); Thüringen 10.90; Anhalt 16.38; Mecklenburg 14.70; Braunschweig 14.24; Hannover-ref. 13.42; Schleswig-Holstein 9.82; Luebeck 9.37; Oldenburg 8.93; Eutin 8.75; Bremen 6.92; Hamburg 6.68. The average for the entire field of the German Evangelical Church in 1936 was 24.31. The disturbing poverty of these figures becomes clear, if one recalls that in Germany for every 100 Catholics in the same year there were 1,396 communions (1931 even 1124). So while out of every 100 Evangelicals about 24 receive the Sacrament once a year, every German Catholic goes to communion about 14 times a year. Even though one gives due consideration and allowance to the fact that these figures cannot be simply compared with one another, nevertheless they do show one thing with incontrovertible clarity: the Evangelical churches of Germany are practically on the way toward losing the Lord's Supper, and the Sacrament of the Altar is about to become a peculiar possession of the Roman Catholic church. If in Hamburg among 912,000 Evangelicals still 60,933 are counted as communicants (in which number 14,608 confirmands are included together with their friends and relatives), one will not be able to assert that the Sacrament by which the Lord would uphold His Church on earth still means, practically speaking, anything for this territorial church. One dare ask what Luther would think of an Evangelical church which is about to lose the Lord's Supper. He probably would give a more stern judgment over it than he gave over the church that fostered the sacrifice of the mass. A church without the sacrament must die.

In this way the question concerning the Lord's Supper and its meaning for the life of the Church leads to the realization of the truly enormous trouble in which the Evangelical churches of Germany find themselves. What is needed is the courage to face up to the great trouble and to understand that it has not been external powers which have brought the church to this pass, but the delinquency, and backsliding of us all from the Gospel, from pure doctrine, from the full entire message of the Reformation. This realization, this painful realization of our own guilt is the prerequisite for a renewal of the church. For just as in the case of the individual Christian, so in the case of entire churches there is no other way for salvation than the way of repentance. But if we travel on this path with the deep realization born of faith of our own delinquency from God and His Word, then we may know: at the end of this path Christ the Lord is standing, forgiving, saving, blessing us; He Who makes His promise true to us that He would be also the physician of His Church, "the Savior of His Body."

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