

# The Means of Grace in the Life of Our Evangelical Lutheran Congregations

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By Mark F. Bartling

American Lutheranism, in this last decade of the second millennium, finds itself in a great state of confusion, doubt, and unbelief. One sees the situation on all sides. Congregational life is dominated by the issues of the Church Growth Movement,<sup>i</sup> ecumenicalism, and social concerns. Countless numbers of videotapes are offered on how to have a flourishing stewardship program, a thriving evangelism committee, and successful counseling methods. Congregations grapple with questions on the role of women, while others debate the issue of women ordination,—and now even a bishop. And the theological issues of past decades still trouble us.<sup>ii</sup> The old description of the Episcopalians can also be applied to American Lutheranism—high and crazy, low and lazy, and broad and hazy.

But recently, John Pless gave a much more appropriate characterization.<sup>iii</sup> Although he was writing about Missouri Synod Lutherans, his four classes of Lutherans can easily be applied to all of Lutheranism. He refers to the unreconstructed moderates (the old liberals); the politically correct Lutherans, equipped with the latest in synodically-approved programs and agreeing with the Synod's position whatever that might be at the time; the bronze age Lutherans, who find Franz Pieper to be the epitome of theology and women voting in congregational meetings a sure sign of heresy; and the confessional Lutherans, who have a strong confessional theology coupled with a respectable liturgical life.

Today, the major problem confronting American Lutheranism seems to be in the area of emphasis. The ELCA is more occupied with its quotas and political pronouncements than with doctrine and practice.<sup>iv</sup> The Missouri Synod continues to struggle with internal problems and the Church Growth Movement, so that confessional principles are being given minor consideration.<sup>v</sup> In the Wisconsin Synod methods of fund raising and changing the synodical school structure are taking center stage.<sup>vi</sup> All three major denominations seem to be overly involved with the Church Growth Movement, statistics, and financial programs.<sup>vii</sup>

## Confessional Lutheranism

What does it mean to be a Lutheran?<sup>viii</sup> Dr. Walther defines the Lutheran church as that church which has the marks of pure Gospel preaching and the unadulterated administration of the holy Sacraments.<sup>ix</sup>

Do we emphasize these marks of the church in our congregational life today? Doctrinal differences among church bodies can often be traced to what is emphasized. And what is emphasized often becomes a matter of doctrine.

By way of example: It is not wrong to teach the doctrine of God's sovereignty, that God is in control and that God rules. The problems arise when this doctrine is made into the very material, central, principle of one's theology. The result is Calvinism, and false doctrines of unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

What do we emphasize today? Is it the Gospel in Word and Sacrament or is it counseling, church growth, evangelism, and stewardship programs.

Kurt Koeplin makes a very intriguing observation:

It is precisely in the area of this concern that our "nervous needle" jumps off the meter. What on earth is happening within our WELS? Some seem to be "talking funny" and regional accents have nothing to do with it. Our once common theological language is undergoing a metamorphosis so that either we yearn for parenthetical explanation or a translator, or both, to explain what is meant when these "foreign-to-WELS words are used. What manner of language is being used? For want of a better descriptive term, we'll call it: "CG-speak." Kindly permit a few examples: a) Apparently we are not to shepherd God's

flock any longer, we are to “minister” to them. b) Apparently it’s somewhat passe to teach our people “whatsoever I have commanded you,” we “disciple” them. c) Instead of “leading people into the pleasant pastures of the word and giving them to drink of the Living Water,” we now are to “nurture” them. d) People are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The biblical quote is less seen than the words “discipling” and “nurturing.” e) Although we’ve been “saved to serve,” now we should think of a variety of “ministries,” such as “the ministry of leaf raking,” “the ministry of snow shoveling” and “the ministry of greeting.” Not to be overlooked is the wonderful fun ministry, “the ministry of valet parking!” f) Care should be taken that our services, in addition to being the usual edifying, should also be “user friendly,” Additional care should be taken to avoid the name, Lutheran, since it is “well known”(?) that the name Lutheran is a “turn off” (in sharp contrast to being “turned on” by “entertainment evangelism” and that marvelous “user friendly” service.) ... Is it unseemly even to ask the question; that there has been a subtle shift from a “Theology of the Cross” (its proclamation) to a “Theology of Glory” (“results”)??<sup>x</sup>

Writing on “Revitalizing Parish Ministry,” Paul Kelm reports that “there’s even wider diversity that we imagined. The pluralism America has affected the Wisconsin Synod. We don’t all think the same way or do ministry the same way.”<sup>xi</sup> Lawrence Olson adds “there’s diversity in ministry, but the underlying theological position is the same.”<sup>xii</sup>

But the question must be asked: if there is diversity in ministry, how long will the theological position remain the same?

Wayne Miller makes this interesting observation:

We do have a problem. In our own fellowship we struggle on local and synodical levels to maintain ministry at status quo. The problems of broken families frustrate the work of our Christian schools and place a heavy burden on the parish pastor’s time. We lose members to immorality and indifference faster than we can baptize and confirm new ones. The lifestyle of many of the members of our churches is indistinguishable from the pattern of life among the unbelieving. We cannot recruit and train enough men and women to meet all the demands and challenges of ministry, and we wrestle to provide materially for the ones we have trained. We program evangelism so that we might have at least a semblance of what came naturally to the early Christian. We program stewardship to stimulate thankfulness and appreciation among the most richly materially blessed people in the world. We program recruitment for our Christian schools so that their self-evident advantages might at least receive consideration over against secular, humanistic education. And then we program spiritual renewal so that we will not weary of all our other spiritual programs.<sup>xiii</sup>

Confessional Lutheranism rejects the Calvinistic principle that only those things directly commanded in the Bible may be practiced in the church. The Lutheran principle is that all things can be permitted and used in the church, unless directly forbidden in the Bible.

Nevertheless, Lutheran theology has always emphasized the Means of Grace at the very center of congregational life. Other programs may find their place, but only as supplementary to the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

How do we do ministry today? Are the Means of Grace at the very center and heart of all that we teach and preach? Theories and practices of the Church Growth Movement, stewardship programs, evangelism methods, fundraiser activities are not all wrong and can have their purpose and use. They are like a bathroom in a house; it maybe very useful on occasions, but you don’t want to spend the whole day there.

Consider, for example, this mission statement of a Lutheran church.

It is our mission to promote a faithful Christian family that believes in and lives by the inerrant and infallible Word of God. We will accomplish that by utilizing the gifts of our current active members to reach out and touch our non-active members and the non-churched people of our community. We will concentrate on meeting the spiritual and social needs of our congregation. We will reach out with the gospel of Jesus Christ both home and abroad through our church. We will encourage regular attendance at worship services and Bible studies and regular reception of Holy Communion. We will strive to provide our children with the best spiritual and academic education that is possible at our school. By doing the above, our congregation will grow furthering the need for more spiritual guidance. We will meet that need by adding church and school staff as needed. The number of active members will increase every year which means more people are living by the inerrant Word of God. This is our mission under the guidance and blessing of the Triune God.

There is nothing theologically wrong here. But what is being emphasized? And, even more important, what is omitted? The statement could well be the statement of any Protestant church. Are the sacraments emphasized? There is no reference to Baptism, and only a vague reference to the Lord's Supper? There is not one word said about absolution. And the proof of faithfulness seems to be an increase in active members.<sup>xiv</sup>

The *Augsburg Confession* teaches:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.<sup>xv</sup>

Or, consider this statement found on the back cover of a bulletin welcoming visitors to a Lutheran church. "We believe and teach that the Bible is entirely God's own written Word of truth, verbally inspired and therefore inerrant and authoritative."

Is that really what we want to tell visitors as we welcome them to our church? Would we not want to emphasize that we believe in Christ Jesus, true God and true man, who has redeemed us lost and condemned creatures. God deals with us today through the external Means of Grace—His Gospel in Baptism, preaching, absolution, and Holy Communion.

Most of our churches have a statement in the bulletin on communion Sunday stating that we follow the biblical and Lutheran practice of joining in the Sacrament of the Altar only within our own confessional fellowship.

Would it not be better to also state what we believe about the Sacrament? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the forms of bread and wine. In this Sacrament we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

The rise of the modern Church Growth Movement, Evangelicalism, a resurgence of fundamentalism, and the Charismatic Movement challenges Lutherans to reexamine our understanding of the role of the Means of Grace in the life of our congregations. The Means of Grace must be at the very center of our congregational life. What we teach and preach must center around these mysteries.

### **Liturgy and the Means of Grace**

Our Confessions teach that:

Churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in the doctrine and all its articles

and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known axiom. Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith.<sup>xvi</sup>

However, we have given more attention to the teaching in the *Formula* that “church ceremonies and liturgical rites are adiaphora and in and of themselves no worship of God or even a part of it.”<sup>xvii</sup> But we have failed to give equal importance to what the *Augsburg Confession* teaches “that nothing contributes so much to the maintenance of dignity in public worship and the cultivation of reverence and devotion among the people as the proper observance of ceremonies in the churches.”<sup>xviii</sup>

The important thing is that the Means of Grace are emphasized. The service centers around these mysteries. All that we do, whether fewer or more liturgical rites, should emphasize the Means of Grace.

John Brug suggests using the liturgical procession as a way of emphasizing the Means of Grace. He writes:

Correctly understood and practice, the liturgical procession does not focus attention on those individuals who participate in it, but on the Means of Grace. Indeed, if the congregation stands during the procession, the individuals in the procession are barely visible. What is visible is the cross and the gospel book held above the crowd. As these visible symbols pass through the assembled worshipers they pull the eyes and attention of the worshipers along with them to the sanctuary from which the Means of Grace will be delivered to us and where the officiants will lead us in worship of God.<sup>xix</sup>

In a desire to make worship more interesting and attractive to prospects and young people, some Lutheran churches have sought to make the service less liturgical and adapt worship forms from the Evangelicals. Today’s trend is toward an evangelical style of informal and non-traditional worship forms. But what kind of worship forms? Often it is Revivalism and Arminian forms. What is forgotten is that our Lutheran liturgy of Word and Sacrament is the primary means by which the church hands down its biblical and confessional faith from generation to generation. This changing and revitalizing of the historic Lutheran liturgy threatens and will destroy everything that it means to be Lutheran.<sup>xx</sup>

John Brug observes:

The character of good liturgy, on the other hand, is that it deemphasizes individuals and unites worshipers in corporate praise of a majestic God. God is our truest friend, he is not our “buddy.” He is a holy God, who is to be feared. Good worship forms, therefore, preserve a balance between contrasting pairs; God’s nearness and God’s farness, law and gospel, the Means of Grace and prayer, listening and confessing, receiving and thanking. ... Is an exchange of “Good mornings” really an improvement over the exchange that has marked the entry into worship for centuries: “The Lord be with you.” “And also with you.”<sup>xxi</sup>

James Tiefel, therefore, advises WELS clergy:

The issue which had led to a virtual war in the LC/MS has hardly caused a skirmish in the WELS. However, we suggest that WELS worship leaders do their homework before they quickly and cavalierly exchange historic Lutheran forms for popular Evangelical forms. There is more to lose in that tradeoff than historic style. In fact, it may be Lutheran substance which is lost. ... What ought to be the emphasis of our corporate worship: the emphasis which traditionally has been that of the Lutheran liturgy—“This is the fact of your salvation”—or the emphasis which comes from Pietism/revivalism/evangelicalism—“What is your feeling about salvation?”<sup>xxii</sup>

Dr. Hermann Sasse has stated it quite clearly:

One of the reasons why our conservative churches have not been able to revive orthodox theology in our times more powerfully is certainly the failure to realize the liturgical and sacramental character of Christian doctrine.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Sasse believes that what is needed is to recognize the close bond between sermon and sacrament. He writes:

The Sacrament was in every respect the life of the Church. It was never to be separated from the Gospel. The Church of the first centuries was the Church of the Eucharist. A Sunday, a Lord's Day, was unthinkable without the Lord's Supper. But if ever the Church was a preaching Church, the Church of the apostles and the Church Fathers was. The same is true of all great periods of the Church. The sacrament and the sermon belong together, and it is always a sign of the decay of the Church if one is emphasized at the expense of the other.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **The Wittenberg Theology**

In the late 70s I led some tours to the Luther Lands of East Germany for my good friend Dr. John Montgomery. On these tours we had a wide range of theological opinions—high, low, and broad, from charismatics to Iowa farmers. At meal times, and on the bus, there were always lively discussions on what it means to be a Christian. Now a tour leader cannot get too involved in such debates. His job is to get the people from point A to B, and keep them in an enjoyable, friendly mood.

But when we came to Wittenberg and went into the City Church, St. Mary's of Wittenberg, I would ask the people to sit down in front of Cranach's altar painting. Now, I would say, let me tell you about my church, and what it means to be a Lutheran. It is all about the Means of Grace. And that is what we see here.

This masterpiece of art by the elder Cranach was presented to the Wittenberg parish on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1547. The day of dedication was the very day of the battle of Muhlberg where the cause of the Reformation suffered a serious blow by the defeat of the elector of Saxony.

But the strength and power of the Lutheran Church is not in earthly weapons. It is in the strength and power of the Means of Grace. As the Cranach painting has remained undamaged by wars, fire, breaking of images, theological debates, and tourist flash cameras; so the true treasures of the Lutheran Church—Word and Sacrament—will stand even against the very gates of hell.

In the foundation picture we see the cross of Jesus Christ. If Christ and Him crucified is removed, the sacraments, represented in the three pictures above it, would have no base. Everything rests upon the crucified Lord. St. Paul said that, "I was determined to know only Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (I Cor. 2:2 NET)

The waving ends of the loin cloth may be interpreted as a sign that the crucified Lord is also the risen Lord. Luther's, *vivit*, "He lives," is illustrated here. The Church exists where the Word of the crucified and risen Savior is preached in the sermon, and heard and believed by the congregation.

In the painting Luther is preaching. With his right hand, he points to the Cross. And with his left hand, he points to the written words of the Bible. We know about Jesus Christ and him crucified from the text of the Bible.

Luther describes the purpose of a divine service as "that when our Lord himself speaks to us through His holy Word and that we speak to him through our prayers and hymns."<sup>xxv</sup>

This foundation picture of Christ crucified supports the three symbols of the Church of the Reformation. These three sacraments are given and received as visible tokens of God's love and forgiveness.

Holy Baptism is the foundation of Christian life. By the word preached with the water of Baptism, we partake of Christ's death and resurrection. St. Paul says, Romans chapter 6, "all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Now when we were baptized into His death, we were buried with

Him so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too will live a new life.” (Rom. 6:3,4, NET)

The baptismal font in the painting is deep enough to allow immersion. The Word of God is pictured by the open Bible. The Bible says, “Baptism now saves us.” ( I Peter 3:” 21 NET)

In the painting, Cranach puts Philip Melanchthon as the one baptizing. Perhaps this was because of the analogy of names with the biblical Philip who baptized the Ethiopian.

Exactly above Christ crucified, there is the picture of the Lord’s Supper, invisibly bearing the words: “Given for you, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Central to the Lutheran Church, and at the center of the painting, is this celebration of Holy Communion.

Cranach paints the apostles as sitting around the table with the Lord. Among them he puts Martin Luther, painted as Knight George. Luther is receiving the communion cup from the hand of the younger Cranach. The artist wanted to illustrate the restitution of the communion cup to the congregation. The painting also teaches that the celebration of communion last to the present time. The Lord says, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Each Lord’s Day we also are invited to sit down with the risen Christ at His table. The right tablet pictures confession and absolution. The Lord’s words to Peter apply to the ministry of the Church. Jesus said, “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you set free on earth will be set free in heaven.” (Matt. 16:19, NET)

Cranach has made use of the symbolism of the keys to give a realistic view of confession as being the word of absolution. The word of forgiveness, of absolution, in the name and by authority of the Lord, gives healing to the penitent sinners within the congregation.

Cranach deliberately chose John Bugenhagen, pastor of the church, for representation of the ministry of the keys. The pastor of the congregation is to exercise the ministry of absolution.

In front of Bugenhagen, still seated in the confessional, is a man kneeling who takes in earnest contrition and repentance, and trusting in God’s grace awaits the absolving word. As a symbol of absolution, Bugenhagen holds the key-bit against his head. To him is spoken the words, “Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.”

Thus this altar painting tells us what it means to be a Lutheran Church. The painting here portrays the foundation and essence of the Lutheran Church. The *Augsburg Confession* gives the definition of the church as the assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Wittenberg Theology is set forth by this Cranach painting. It is a sermon in pictures about how the Church becomes real and actual on earth. Namely, in the congregation the Word of God is preached and the three sacraments are given and received as visible tokens of God’s love and forgiveness.

### **The Visible Gospel**

St. John in his first letter to the church tells us about Jesus Christ. John writes, “This is the testimony of God: He has given us everlasting life and this life is in His Son. (I John 5:11 NET)

How do we know about Jesus Christ? Earlier in the chapter John had written, “This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ—not by water only, but by water and by blood. (I John 5:6 NET)

John had stood at the Cross on Good Friday. He saw the Roman soldier stick his sword into the side of Christ. He saw water and blood come out. John never forgot that day. And now, years later, he writes to the church. He writes about Jesus. He remembers the day he saw water and blood come from His Savior’s side. He uses this picture to tell us about Jesus. The water is Jesus’ baptism. The blood is Jesus’ death. John teaches that the same Jesus who was baptized also died.

And John goes on. He says, “there are three who testify.” Note the change in tense. “This is he who *came*.” Now, “there *are* three.” These are the “spirit,” “the water,” “the blood.” The Spirit is the word of God. Jesus said, “My words are Spirit and truth.” The water is baptism. The blood is the Lord’s Supper.

Strictly speaking there is only one Means of Grace. It is the Gospel. However, this Gospel does not come to us in some mystical or magical way, but always through external means. These we call the Means of

Grace, or visible Gospel. They are: Baptism, preaching, absolution, and Eucharist.<sup>xxvii</sup> What role do these play in our congregational life?

### **Baptism**

The little catechism gives the best and most precise definition of Baptism: It is not just plain water, but it is water used by God's command and connected with God's Word.

In the *Large Catechism* Luther goes on to teach that: "In Baptism every Christian has enough to learn and to exercise all his life long."<sup>xxviii</sup> "And a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism begun at a particular point in time to be exercised always."<sup>xxix</sup>

David Scaer writes:

Evangelism takes place in baptism. Infant baptism probably has gained more souls, even accounting for losses, than decisions for Christ.<sup>xxx</sup>

We are to teach our people the power of baptism. Encourage them to think of Baptism each and every day. We begin each worship service with the words, "Name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." These were the very words that made us Christians. Do we emphasize and teach that to our people?

How do we motivate our people? One of the sad commentaries of modern Lutheranism is that even after 8 or 12 years of Lutheran teaching we still are motivated by the law, and fear of punishment. When and how often do we hear about the motivating power of baptism, as Paul teaches in Romans chapter 6?

Later today we will be talking about confirmation? Confirmation is not a sacrament. Nevertheless, it is vitally connected with the sacraments. At confirmation the Catechumens are invited to confess their baptismal faith. They are invited to partake of Holy Communion.

The New Testament miracle for us today is Baptism. It is even greater than the miracle of raising Lazarus to life. For in Baptism we have eternal life. Raising Lazarus only gave him back his earthly life, and even that for only a time.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### **Preaching**

Good Gospel preaching is the most important part of the Pastoral office. The preparation and preaching of the sermon is the most important duty of a pastor.

President Panning makes this observation.

I would confess that I have for some time been concerned about the tremendous upsurge in counseling that has come to mark the parish ministry as we see it today. I have heard pastors tell me that they spend upwards of 20-30 hours per week in counseling. I have not had the courage to ask them, with their many other duties, how much time that leaves for weekly sermon preparation.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The greatest evangelism tool is good Law and Gospel preaching. Most of our counseling should take place from the pulpit. This dare never be forgotten, especially in the church which confesses:

The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel. In our churches all sermons deal with topics like these: penitence, the fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, prayer and our assurance that it is efficacious and is heard, the cross, respect for rulers and for all civil ordinances, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, and all the works of love.

Practical and clear sermons hold an audience, but neither the people nor the clergy have ever understood our opponents' teachings. The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Kurt Marquart encourages Lutheran pastors:

Good sound, solid preaching is by far the most important and the most demanding task of the ministerial office. It is in fact the apostolic work *par excellence* (Acts 6:2,4; II Cor. 3: I Tim. 5:17). Pastoral competence, however, requires spiritual and theological exercise, growth, and progress. Proper pastors' conferences are vital in this process and growth in the quality of preaching ought to have top priority on the agenda.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **Absolution**

The office of the ministry is not that of some counselor. The office of the ministry is that of a pastor, a shepherd. And at no better place is that seen than in the confessional. Let us not turn the confessional booth into some counseling couch.

The *Augsburg Confession* teaches:

Confession has not been abolished by the preachers in our churches, for it is not customary to administer the body of Christ except to those who have previously been examined and absolved. Our people are taught to esteem absolution highly because it is the voice of God and is pronounced by God's command. Confession is retained among us on account of the great benefit of absolution and because it is otherwise useful to consciences.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Our Lutheran Confessions also state:

The genuine sacraments, therefore, are Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (which is the sacrament of penitence), for these rites have the commandment of God and the promise of grace, which is the heart of the New Testament. When we are baptized, when we eat the Lord's body, when we are absolved, our hearts should firmly believe that God really forgives us for Christ's sake.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In an essay on the Means of Grace, C.F.W. Walther says, "Absolution also belongs here, which is nothing else than the preaching of the Gospel to an individual sinner."<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Luther in his 1531 edition of the *Small Catechism* inserted between Baptism and the Lord's Supper a section entitled "Confession and Absolution, How plain people are to be taught to confess."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In the Lutheran Confessions the term "confession" includes both confession of sin and absolution.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Lutheran churches retained confession for the sake of private or individual absolution. To administer absolution or the Keys publicly on behalf of the church of Christ, we have those in the public ministry who act in Christ's stead and do not represent their own persons, according to the Word, "he who hears you hears me."<sup>xl</sup>

Walther uses this illustration concerning absolution. A pastor in the confessional is like a letter carrier. A letter carrier only brings the letter which he is to deliver, and that is all. The content of the letter may be what it will; that is immaterial to the bearer. He is concerned only, if he is an upright man, with handing the letter into the proper hands. Pastors must be precisely such upright letter carriers. For they bring God's letter which proclaims grace to us, and consequently they should be concerned only that we receive that letter properly, that is, that we accept the grace in faith.<sup>xli</sup>

### **Lord's Supper**

Lutherans believe that the Lord's Supper is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink. This doctrine of the Lord's Supper has separated Lutheranism from the other Christian denominations. But, also deep divisions among Lutherans have been



caused concerning its place and practice in the life of the congregation. Debates have arisen on the frequency of its celebration, the moment of the Real Presence, and theological customs and terminology.

We may well call the more or less frequent use of the Lord's Supper one of the thermometers of the spiritual life of a congregation. Now Scripture does not specifically state on what occasions and how often the Lord's Supper is to be received. The Bible only teaches that we are to use it diligently, often, and in remembrance of Christ.

Here we may use the comparison of how often we are to preach the Word. Again the New Testament does not specifically state that we are to have Church services every Sunday. It only says, "continue steadfastly" (Acts 2:42) and "Do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together," (Heb. 10:25) We also have examples recorded in the Bible that the Christians in remembrance of the Lord's Resurrection worship on the first day of the week (Sunday).

In the New Testament there are two places recorded where a Christian service is described in some detail. In both cases the Lord's Supper is celebrated. In Acts 20:7 (this is the first Christian service held on a Sunday recorded in the book of Acts) we read: "Now on the first day of the week, we came together to break bread, Paul preached..." (to break bread meant the Lord's Supper, cf. Acts 2:42 and I Cor. 10:16 )

In I Cor. 11 Paul talks about a Church service. Here also it is described in connection with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In Acts 2, one of the four things New Testament Christians "are to continue steadfastly in" is the Lord's Supper. Here we read of fellowship, doctrine, prayer, and breaking of bread.

In the New Testament, as also in the Lutheran Confessions, the Lord's Supper is not treated as an occasional or monthly extra, but is the vital and central part of Christian worship. In the Lutheran Confessions the terms, "Word and Sacrament" are often used, and never separated.

The celebration of Holy Communion on Christmas Day can be most edifying and meaningful. God who became flesh, comes now to us today in the swaddling clothes of bread and wine and gives to us his very body and blood. And on Easter, as the Lord was made known to the Emmaus disciples in the breaking of bread, so he is also made known to us in the Sacrament. One can wonder what kind of practical Christology you have when the Lord's Supper is celebrated on Good Friday, but not on Easter Sunday. What are we saying? What are we teaching? On Good Friday, God died. On Easter the Lord is risen, He lives!

Today, there is the debate among Lutherans on the moment of the Real Presence. We believe that it must be viewed as the entire act of consecration, distribution, and reception. And to separate any part would be the ending of the Sacrament. The *Formula* teaches:

But this blessing or recitation of Christ's words of institution by itself, if the entire action of the Lord's Supper as Christ ordained it is not observed (if, for instance, the blessed bread is not distributed, received, and eaten but is locked up, offered up, or carried about), does not make a sacrament. But the command of Christ, "Do this," which comprehends, the whole action or administration of this sacrament (namely, that in a Christian assembly we take bread and wine, consecrate it, distribute it, receive it, eat and drink it, and therewith proclaim the Lord's death), must be kept integrally and inviolately, just as St. Paul sets the whole action of the breaking of bread, or of the distribution and reception, before our eyes in I Cor. 10:16.<sup>xliii</sup>

We can see problems in trying to establish the moment of the Real Presence. Dr. Becker states:

To say therefore that the body of Christ lies on the altar is to say more than the Scriptures say. And we will be mindful of the prophet's words, "Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." (Pr. X0:6) On the other hand, the Scriptures also do not make it possible for us to assert dogmatically that the body and blood of Christ are not present prior to the reception. This, too, goes beyond the words, and those who insist that the body and blood are not present until the elements

actually touch the lips also raise profitless and presumptuous questions which have no place in the holy sacrament.<sup>xliii</sup>

However, the problems have come not only from those who would set the moment of the Real Presence at the time of consecration. In the first edition of the WELS current catechism, one of the illustration charts (P 255), teaches that in a natural way our pastor gives us bread and wine and by a miracle Christ gives us his body and blood. Fortunately, this was corrected in later editions to read “in a natural way we receive bread and wine,” and “by a miracle we receive Christ’s body and blood.”

Confusion also continues to be caused by careless practices. For example, if one does run out of the Sacramental wine or bread, and wine or bread must be brought from the sacristy, do we insist that it be consecrated, before distribution. If we say it is not necessary, what are we teaching?<sup>xliv</sup>

Or, sometimes we fall into careless expression, and speak of “after having received the wine.” It would be better to say, “after having received the Sacrament.”

We would also do well to consider carefully how some practices might really Protestantized our Lutheran doctrine of the Real Presence.<sup>xlv</sup> How do we treat the elements, after the Sacrament; the use of grape juice, in place of wine;<sup>xlvi</sup> the use of throw away plastic, individual communion cups; and the validity of the Sacrament performed by a woman.<sup>xlvii</sup>

### Conclusion

In an age of mounting confusion, doubt, and indifference, there is a need for the clear proclamation of the Means of Grace. This is how God deals with us. God does not come to us in spectacular and sensational theologies of glory. But God continues to come to us in simple, humble things—water, word, and wine.

But the water is the water of Baptism which saves us. The words in the Book are the very power of God unto salvation. And the wine and the bread are the blood and body of Christ in the Sacrament, for the strengthening of faith and increasing our love and hope. Here are the true treasures of the Lutheran Church.

If we lack spiritual zeal, and we do; if we lack dedication and commitment, and we do; then we must realize that these blessing are given to us only through the Means of Grace. Only the Gospel, as it comes to us in Baptism, preaching, absolution, and Eucharist, can instill in us such fruits of the Spirit as commitment, dedication, evangelism, stewardship, spiritual renewal, and church growth. And so we shall continue to pray in the Easter hymn:

For the joy Thine advent gave me,  
For Thy holy, precious Word;  
For Thy Baptism, which doth save me,  
For Thy blest Communion board.  
For Thy death, the bitter scorn,  
For Thy resurrection morn,  
Lord, I thank Thee and extol Thee  
And in heaven I shall behold Thee. (TLH 207:6)

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<sup>i</sup> For an evaluation of the theology of the Church Growth Movement see David ,J. Valleskey, “The Church Growth Movement,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring, 1991 (Vol 88, No. 2). Valleskey states: “Reading Church Growth literature tends to leave one with the feeling that following a set of sociological principles produces growth, this in spite of the claim of McGavran that ‘men cannot make the Church grow—only God’s Holy Spirit can do that.’ Such a statement sounds good; but it does not go far enough in that it does not connect the Holy Spirit’s work with the means of grace, as do the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.” ( p. 103 ) Valleskey attempts to present a biblical, Lutheran theology of Church Growth in 25 theses at the end of the article. (p.117-119 ) Thesis 8 states “The church is to make disciples by using the means of grace.” See also Charles L. Cortright, “Church Growth Its Implications for the Use of the Means of Grace in a Confessional, Liturgical Church,” *The Confessional Lutheran Research Society Newsletter, Pentecost*. 1989, Letter No. 15 Cortright shows how the Church Growth Movement is rooted in Reformed theology and approach.

<sup>ii</sup> P. Leppien and J. Smith, *What’s Going on Among the Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992) This book presents a detail study of the current doctrinal differences among Lutherans. It has a wealth of documentation concerning what is being taught in the

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Lutheran Churches today. It presents both the conservative position taught by the WELS and ELS and the official position of the LCMS and the liberal position taught by the ELCA. Also see H. Senkbell, *Sanctification and Christ in Action* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1989) for a discussion of Evangelicalism and its challenge to Evangelical, Confessional Theology.

<sup>3</sup> John Pless, "Previewing Missouri's Convention," *Forum Letter*. June, 29, 1992 (Vol. 21, No.6), p. 5.

<sup>iv</sup> see *Lutheran Forum*. Nov, 1992 (Vol. 26, No. 4) This issue contains the papers presented on Quota Systems at Call to Faithfulness, II. Also see *Forum Letter*. "Quotas: "Coming Around Again."" Dec 25, 1992 (Vol. 21, No. 12).

<sup>v</sup> Waldo Werning, *Making The Missouri Synod Functional Again*. (Ft. Wayne: Biblical Renewal Publication, 1992 ). Werning presents a favorable view of Church Growth principles. He has a questionnaire (p.280) given to evangelical leaders at a national meeting. Werning contends that the answers given were 100 % opposite of what Senkbell and others write about Church Growth. The book also presents an evaluation of Missouri Synod's internal problems over the years. Werning calls the confessional movement in the Missouri Synod "Confessional Lutheran Gnosticism." For another point of view on these problems in the LCMS see Robert Preus essay in *Logia*, Oct. 1992 (Vol. 1, No. 1) and Robert Preus, "Confessional Lutheranism in Today's World," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, April/July 1990 ( Vol. 54, No. 2,3 ), p.99f Preus discusses four instances where bad and unsound practices undermine pure doctrine in Missouri Synod. They are Church Fellowship, Open Communion, Lay Ministry, Women Pastors. Also, Carter Lindberg, "Pietism and the Church Growth Movement in a Confessional Lutheran Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, April/July 1988 (Vol. 52, No. 2,3) p. 129f.

<sup>vi</sup> See Kurt Koeplin letter, "Reflections, Concerns, and Questions About Our Beloved WELS—1992" and Nathan Pope, "Proposal for Synod-wide Referendum."

<sup>vii</sup> *Christian News*. Nov. 16, 1992, "WELS Joins LCMS and ELCA for Pan-Lutheran Evangelism." and *Christian News*, Sept. 16, 1991 for report on meeting of LCMS, ELCA, WELS in 1991. Also see President Mischke CP Update, Nov. 25, 1992, "WELS Participation in AAL's Church Membership Initiative Orlando, Florida," Feb. 1993.

<sup>viii</sup> Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1938). This is the classic answer to the question, "Was heisst lutherisch?"

<sup>ix</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church* (St. Louis:Concordia,1961) Thesis XII, p. 50f, cf also *Walther and the Church*. p. 122.

<sup>x</sup> Kurt Koeplin, opl cit.

<sup>xi</sup> *Northwestern Lutheran*. April 1, 1991

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Wayne Miller, "One Lord, One Church, One Ministry," Conference Paper, Western Wisconsin District Convention, June, 1988.

<sup>xiv</sup> See *Lutheran Forum*, Aug. 1990 (Vol. 24, No.3) for articles on "Evangelism and the Church Growth Movement." John Neuhaus, "The Lutheran Difference," writes, "The mission of the church, according to Luther, is the mission of Christ, and it finds its fulfillment in this: "...that I may be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." (p.19) also see David Scaer, "Evangelism—Not Evangelicalism!" He writes: "Any suggestion that membership acquisition, rather than Word and Sacraments, are the true and abiding marks of the church must be rejected. A growth theology contradicts the remnant theology of both the Old and New Testament, denies the hiddenness of the kingdom within a suffering church that confesses that salvation is present now but consummated only in glory, and repudiates that history which we honor as our own. Athanasius was exiled and the majority Arians held the field. A faithful Lutheran minority resisted the Prussian Union. The gospel is not a marketable product like potato chips. ... Any Lutheran theology of evangelism should be informed by Luther's oft quoted phrase that while he and Melanchthon drank beer, God spread the gospel. ... But foundational to any theology of evangelism is that like salvation, evangelism is an extension of grace 'without any merit or worthiness in us.' Evangelism comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may happen among us." p. 30,31.

<sup>xv</sup> *Augsburg burg Confession*. Art. V. Tappert p. 31.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Formula of Concord*. Art. X, Tappert, p. 616.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*. 612.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Augsburg Confession*. Art. XXII, Tappert, p. 49.

<sup>xix</sup> John Brug, "Approaching a Majestic God," *Parish Leadership*. Nov. 1992, (Vol. 1, No. 1) p. 25. Charles Cortright, *op.cit.*, writes, "The use of the means of grace is cradled in the liturgical worship of the church ....The church's corporate worship as defined by the liturgy focuses on God's gracious proclamation in Word and Sacrament."

<sup>xx</sup> see Arthur A. Just, *Issues In Christian Education*. Summer, 1989. Reprinted in *Focus on Worship*. Spring 1990. p. 14. James Tiefel in "The Way Lutherans Worship," says: "Liturgical worship revolves around the worship order that was firmly established in the Christian church by the fourth century. This Liturgy intends to focus the attention of Christian worshipers on Christ: with an every-Sunday review of Christ's salvation, with an every year review of Christ's life and work, with a regular Sunday offering of Christ's supper. Liturgical worship has several benefits: 1) It compels an emphasis on the Christ for us, the focus of the entire Scriptures. 2) It safeguards the church's confessional proclamation and response. 3) It assures that both God and his people will be active in public worship. 4) It confesses the historical and ecumenical unity of the Holy Christian Church. 5) It allows and encourages opportunities for necessary variety. 6) It offers a comforting changelessness in a changing world. 7) Its use follows the example of confessional Lutheran Churches."

<sup>xxi</sup> Brug, *op. cit*.

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<sup>xxii</sup> *Focus on Worship*, Summer 1990.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Sola Scriptura*. Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 15.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hermann Sasse, *This is my Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959) p2.

<sup>xxv</sup> Dedication of Torgau Church, Oct. 1544.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Augsburg Confession*. Art. VII, Tappert, p. 32.

<sup>xxvii</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "The Institution, Validity, Power, and Unchangeability of the Means of Grace," *Convention Essays* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981) p. 132f. see also Kurt Marquart. "Liturgical Commonplaces," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. Oct. 1978 (Vol. 42, No. 4) "Lutheran understanding of worship can still be aborted by means of a facile doctrinaire schematism which thinks abstractly of "Means of Grace" or "Word and Sacraments," rather than concretely of Baptism, preaching, absolution, and Eucharist. It is a Calvinistic doctrine that all sacraments must be alike. This idea is developed by the *Admonitio Neostadiensis*. for example, in its attempt to refute the Formula of Concord's confession of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Replying to this Calvinistic attack, the Lutherans Chemnitz, Silencer, and Kirchner point out with almost tedious repetitiousness in their *Apology or Defence of the Christian Book of Concord* that the unique nature of each Sacrament must be determined not by appealing to theoretical generalizations, but by paying attention to the actual biblical texts, particularly the respective words of institution. If the Means of Grace were mechanically interchangeable, rather than organically ordered, it would make sense to say: 'Today we have Baptism and therefore, we do not need Communion.' Such an argument, however, is quite impossible. It should be equally impossible to argue: 'As long as we have preaching regularly, and the Lord's Supper occasionally, the Means of Grace are in action, and all the rest is adiaphora. p. 334.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Large Catechism*. IV, 41 Tappert 441.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid*. IV 65 T 444.

<sup>xxx</sup> David Scaer, "Evangelism—Not Evangelicalism" op. cit.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Kurt Marquart, *The Church* (Ft. Wayne: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990) p. 20.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Dec. 1986.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Apology*, Tappert, p. 221 and p. 259.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Kurt Marquart, "Liturgical Commonplaces" M. cit., p.341.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Augsburg Confession*. Art. XXV. Tappert, p. 61.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Apology*, Art. XIII, Tappert p. 211 and p. 187. See also Gaylin Schmeling, "God's Gift to You: The Means of Grace," Essay for the 72<sup>nd</sup> convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. "Lutherans do not usually speak of Holy Absolution as a sacrament. Yet as a continuum of Holy Baptism, we hold it in high regard. 'You see that Baptism, both by its power and by its signification, comprehends also the third Sacrament, formerly called Penance, which is really nothing else than Baptism.' (Large Catechism, IV 74,p.445) Absolution continues the dying and rising with Christ in Baptism. In confession we drown our sins in the baptismal front and in absolution we receive Jesus' forgiveness flowing to us in the baptismal water. Absolution is the administration of the Keys, the dispensing of the Gospel of forgiveness, be that to many or to the individual. ... Public Absolution, Individual Absolution of our Danish Order, and especially Private Absolution are so important because here the forgiveness of Christ is personalized." p. 59,60.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> C.F.W. Walter, *Convention Essays*, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Tappert, p. 349.

<sup>xxxix</sup> see B. W. Teigen, *I Believe. A Study of the Smalcald Articles*. for a explanation of this point.

<sup>xl</sup> B. W. Teigen, *I Believe. A Study of the Small Catechism* p. 26.

<sup>xli</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Convention Essays*, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Formula of Concord*. Art. VII, p. 584.

<sup>xliii</sup> Siegbert Becker, "The Lord's Supper: Consecration and Moment," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, spring, 1986 (Vol. 83, No. 2). The St. Louis and Springfield Seminary faculties issued a joint statement on this matter in the 60s. "The Moment of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper." "1. Scripture is silent with reference to the "moment" of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper though I Cor. 10:16 relates the sacramental union to the consecration. The act of consecration involves an element of time. 2. According to the Formula of Concord the sacrament union takes place only in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, specifically, when the words of institution are recited and the directives included in Christ's command, "This do," are executed. 3. The Formula of Concord does not, however, fix the moment when the sacramental union takes place. It rather lashes out in severe language against speculative questions dealing with the "when" and "how" of the sacramental union (see *Bekennnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p. 1010, footnote 4. for a list of such questions which had appeared in *Kurtz Bekenntnis* 1571, a forerunner of the Formula of Concord. See also Hermann Sasse, *This is my Body*, p. 164-176. The condemnatory statement in the Formula reads: 'we reject and condemn also all presumptuous, frivolous, blasphemous questions and expressions which are presented in a gross, carnal, Capernaitic way regarding the supernatural, heavenly mysteries of this Supper.' Trig. p. 1015). 4. In view of the above considerations (silence of Scripture regarding the 'moment' of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper, and statements quoted from the Formula) Lutheran theologians, whether they be in the preaching or teaching ministry, will be careful not to ask or evoke speculative questions regarding the mystery of the 'moment' of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper, lest Christian consciences be disturbed and Satan be given an opportunity to sow the seed of discord in the church. Lutheran theologians need constantly to remember that the chief emphases in the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper are those succinctly expressed in the statement of the Small Catechism: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' Which words are, besides the bodily eating and drinking, as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he

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that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.” See also Arnold Koelpin, *The Sacramental Presence in the Theology of the Synodical Conference*, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Fall, 1986.

<sup>xliiv</sup> The *Formula* teaches: “In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation and are under no circumstances to be omitted.” Tappert, p. 584. see also John Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*. “If, however, there should be a shortage of either one of the two elements, the words of institution should be repeated in their entirety after a fresh supply has been secured, and thus that element will be consecrated which has been freshly supplied; over this only the sign of the cross though this is not essential.” p. 124.

<sup>xliv</sup> See David Scaer, “Lutheran Viewpoints on the Challenge of Fundamentalism,” *Concordia Journal* Jan. 1984 (Vol. 10, No. 1).

<sup>xlvi</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, p. 168. “The pastor must use every care that nothing but true wine is used in the Sacrament.” Also F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. III, p. 354. “As we do not venture to substitute some other fluid in Baptism, so neither in the Lord’s Supper do we dare to substitute anything for bread and wine. If something else is substituted, doubts must necessarily arise, whether our celebration is the supper instituted by Christ.” See also Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*. “Since the term used for the contents of the cup is ‘fruit of the vine,’ the use of unfermented grape juice in case of an emergency cannot be considered invalid. Nevertheless, the church will avoid all doubt on the part of its members by using fermented fruit of the vine and may at time do so also as a confessional action over against anyone who claims that the use of any alcoholic beverage is sin.” p. 92.

<sup>xlvii</sup> David Scaer, “The Validity of the Churchly Acts of Ordained Women,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Jan/April 1989 (Vol. 53. No. 1/2).