

The Lord's Supper: Consecration And Moment

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The questions at issue in the present controversy concerning the Lord's Supper, as every other doctrinal question, must be resolved finally only on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel." This is the clear and simple rule to which every "true and committed Lutheran" subscribes with all his heart (SA II, ii, 15; Triglotta p. 467). That principle, enunciated by Luther in the Smalcald Articles, is repeated emphatically in different words in the introduction to the Formula of Concord, which says that the Holy Scriptures are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged."

Even the confessions are not *norma normans*. By the Lutheran confessions we can determine who deserves to be called a Lutheran, and simple honesty demands that anyone who deviates from the Lutheran Confessions should leave or be expelled from the Lutheran fellowship. But articles of faith are not established by the Confessions. Even the Confessions are subsumed under the principle enunciated by Luther: "It will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the fathers."

We say this not to downgrade the Confessions in any way. For every true Lutheran they are normative in a very basic, even if secondary sense. But one of the characteristics of the present controversy is the attempt to establish the significance of the consecration and the moment of the real presence with little reference to the scriptural proof passages. Even so careful a scholar as Herman Sasse makes inordinately much of the example of the aged Reformer licking the consecrated wine from the chancel floor. But, as Luther himself said so clearly in the confession with which he intended to stand before God's final judgment, "it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works and words of the fathers."

We are here dealing not with a historical but with a doctrinal question. Even if one could prove beyond question that Luther or Chemnitz held to a certain conception of the consecration or the moment of the real presence, this would not establish such a view as an article of faith.

This, too, should not be understood as an attempt to downgrade Luther. But we emphasize this point at this time especially because there are statements in the Confessions and in Luther that can be made to harmonize with certain theories that have been expressed in regard to the consecration and the moment. Whether this fact indicates that Luther and the framers of the Formula of Concord actually held such views or whether their phrases were not formulated consciously to exclude such views is not always easy to determine. Perhaps this point requires some clarification. For example, the scriptural injunction that the bishop should be the husband of one wife has been understood in some circles as forbidding a second marriage on the part of the clergy. The early editions of the RSV even translated "married only once." Such an interpretation is perfectly compatible with the words, but it is by no means certain and even if we had no wider context that clearly demonstrates that Paul was espousing monogamy it would still not be possible to insist that Paul's words could be used to demand that clergymen be married only once, since, while the words standing by themselves allow this interpretation, they do not demand it.

In the same way one ought not to allow statements of Luther or the confessions that could be interpreted as being in harmony with a certain view of the consecration or the moment to be used as proof which establishes that view as a doctrine of the church or of Scripture. This is particularly important since Luther seems nowhere to discuss directly the significance or the effect of the consecration, and, except for the letter which he addressed to Pastor Wolferinus, there seems to be no passage in Luther's voluminous writings where he expressly deals with the question of the moment. It should not be necessary to say these things, and yet the complete disregard of the words of institution as the *sedes doctrinae* of the Lord's Supper, which characterizes

Dr. Tom Hardt in the controversy that has arisen on these points, makes it necessary to repeat what ought to be obvious to every Lutheran theologian.

Just what is the significance of the consecration? It should be noted that the term consecration is not a Biblical term. The Formula of Concord appears to take note of this when it says that “the consecration, or the words of institution should not be omitted.”

Some have attempted to base the need for the consecration or the reading of the words of institution on the statement of Scripture that Christ blessed the bread and the wine in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. It should be noted that the words of institution nowhere say that Jesus blessed the bread and the cup. Luke and Paul do not use the word *eulogein* at all, but instead use only the word *eucharisteo*. Matthew and Mark use both words, the first in connection with the bread and the second before the distribution of the cup. The words are evidently synonymous in this context.

It is very doubtful that the translation, “Jesus took bread and blessed *it* (Matt. 26:26; cp. Mark 14:22) gives the correct impression of what Jesus did. It might be better to translate instead, “Jesus took bread, and having pronounced a blessing, He broke it,” etc.

There is another important point to be considered here. Just exactly what Jesus said when He spoke the blessing we do not know, but it is very likely that He spoke the ordinary blessing that was spoken over the bread and wine at the Passover. The one thing that we can be sure of is that He did not say, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread,” etc. The words of institution clearly indicate that Jesus spoke the words, “This is my body,” and “This is my blood” at the time He was distributing the elements. Luther emphasizes the present tense of the participle “saying” (*dicens*).

The only passage that would suggest that the elements were blessed is I Corinthians 10:16, where Paul says, “The cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?” Even this passage could be translated, “The cup of blessing, in respect to which we speak the blessing, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” It may be noted here that the term “the cup of blessing” is not a new term for St. Paul, but it was the standard name for the third Passover cup.

An interesting parallel, linguistically speaking, is found in the miracles of the loaves and fishes. In the feeding of the 5000, Matthew writes, “Taking the five loaves and the two fish, looking up to heaven, he pronounced a blessing, and having broken, he gave the loaves to his disciples, but the disciples (gave) to the people.” Mark has almost the identical wording, also with no object for the verb “bless” (Mark 6:41). Only Luke says that He blessed the loaves, although the Codex Bezae reads, “He spoke a blessing over them” (Luke 9:16). John uses the word “gave thanks” where the Synoptics have “blessed” (John 6:11). This is again an indication that the two words are used interchangeably. In the miracle of the feeding of the 4000, which is recorded only by Matthew and Mark, both evangelists use the word “gave thanks” (Matt. 15:36; Mark 8:6), although Mark says in regard to the fish that Jesus blessed them.

In all of these passages, too, the context gives us no clue to what was actually said during the “blessing.” But again we can assume that it was the regular table prayer, which began with the words, “Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God,” etc.

There are passages in the New Testament in which the word *eulogein* cannot be a synonym for *eucharistein*. When Elizabeth says that Mary is “blessed among women” (Luke 1:42) or when we are told that Simeon blessed Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus (Luke 2:34), it is obvious that there is no hint of thanksgiving involved. The same can be said of the directive in the sermon on the mount that calls upon us to bless those who curse us (Luke 6:28) and Paul’s echo of this in Romans (12:14).

We may therefore be moved to ask why the evangelists in the account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper and in the feeding of the 5000 and of the 4000 seem to treat the two words *eulogein* and *eucharistein* as synonyms. We may note first of all that in each of these cases we are dealing with food and drink, which are viewed as gifts of God. The blessings spoken at such times had God as their object, but they recognize God as the Giver of what men are about to receive. Blessing God in those circumstances certainly includes the concept of thanksgiving for His gifts.

It should be obvious that “the consecration, or the words of institution” are not to be spoken because we are to do what Jesus did when He spoke the blessing prior to the distribution. When we read the words of institution we are not actually doing what Jesus did that night.

It might be of some significance to pinpoint what is meant by the words of institution. In a rather loose way, we have come to think of the words of institution as the wording of the account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper as it was formulated by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 11.23-25. Strictly speaking, however, the words of institution are the words of Christ, “Take, eat, this is my body.... Drink of it, all of you; this is my blood... This do in remembrance of me.” This is what Jesus told His disciples to do, and this is what He still tells us to do. It might be noted also that the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that the words of institution need not be spoken in one set stereotyped form. The evangelists and St. Paul differ considerably in the wording of their report of the first Lord’s Supper, although the thoughts expressed are identical to all the reports.

One other thing apparently needs to be said. When the confessions say that it will not do to frame articles of faith from the words and deeds of the fathers, we must include in those words and deeds also the liturgical practices which we have inherited from them.

When we perform a Baptism according to our commonly used liturgy, we do and say many things that are not an essential part of the Baptism itself. What is essential to a proper baptism is illustrated by the form for emergency Baptism. It reduces the rite to the application of the water and the words of institution, and even allows for the omission of the Lord’s Prayer. It might be noted that we vary the words of institution slightly, because of the context in which the words are used. Jesus said, “Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” and we say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

In the Baptismal liturgy, furthermore, we use the words of institution twice, once in the opening words, and then again when the actual rite is performed, In a loose sense we may say that in the first reading the water is consecrated for the sacred use to which it is to be put. We might say that it has now become evident to all that this water in the font is baptismal water, and yet there is no Baptism until the water is actually applied.

If we now look at the Communion liturgy and compare what we do there with what Jesus and His disciples did in the night in which He was betrayed, we must realize that much of what we say and do when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper is not an essential part of this sacred meal. We would be doing what was done that night if we would take bread, speak a blessing over it (the wording of which is not prescribed), distribute it and say the words that Jesus said during the distribution. Because of the context, we cannot say, “This is my body,” but we would be expressing the divine thought if we said, “Jesus said, This is my body” or “This is the body of Christ.” The consecration, or the words of institution, clearly and definitely set aside this bread for the sacred use to which it is put when it is distributed and received, and the words, because they are true divine words, actually tell us what is being eaten and drunk. In this sense it is a “real consecration.”

While the institution of Christ would be fully observed in such a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we have in our Communion liturgy, just as in our baptism liturgy, regularly used the words of institution twice, once before the distribution and once during the distribution itself. When those words are read for the first time it has been expressly demonstrated that this bread and this wine has been set aside for the sacred use to which it is about to be put. It has become Communion bread and Communion wine in the strictest sense of those words. More than this surely cannot be said when one is asked to answer the question, “What is the function of the consecration?” The Bible does not answer that question and the Confessions do not answer it either.

Whether it becomes the body and blood of Christ in that moment, no one can say for sure. What the Lord will do in His wisdom and power and when He will do it we can only decide by listening to His words. The words clearly indicate that what is distributed and received is the true body and blood of Christ. Beyond that we cannot go and dare not go in our teaching. How long before and how long after the distribution and reception the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ belong to those presumptuous questions which

are condemned in the Formula of Concord (VII, 127). They are questions neither raised nor answered in the Scriptures nor the confessions.

While these questions are not directly answered in the confessions it is significant that the Confessions sharply distinguish between our recitation and speaking and the original, first institution. The Formula of Concord refers to a “misunderstanding” and “dissension” which has arisen “among some teachers of the Augsburg Confession.” At least a part of the background referred to here is the Saliger controversy. In that connection it is emphasized that “not the word or work of any man produces the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper” and expressly mentioned is the “recitation” (German: “Sprechen”; Latin: “pronuntiatio”) of the minister (FC, S.D., VII, 74). In this context the “speaking” or the “recitation” of the minister can only refer to the reading of the words of institution. Obviously it is not his speaking of the proper preface or the Lord’s Prayer or any other part of the liturgy that is under discussion here, nor can it be his speaking outside the context of the Lord’s Supper. In the background of this remark must also be the Roman view, which ascribed particular efficacy just to the reading of the words by the ordained priest, who had in his ordination supposedly acquired the power to command the Son of God to come down and lie on the altar.

It is of the greatest significance also that the Formula distinguishes sharply in this connection between the words spoken by the minister and the words spoken by Christ at the first Supper. Those who ascribe a Romanizing power to the words of institution usually stress the fact that the Savior at every celebration is speaking through the mouth of His called and ordained servant. But while there is an element of truth in that assertion, yet it should be noted clearly how the Confessions here so clearly draw a contrast between the speaking of the pastor and the speaking of Christ.

This very point is emphasized again in the Formula by a quotation from Luther, who wrote, “It is not our work or speaking, but the command and ordination of Christ that makes the bread the body and the wine the blood, from the beginning of the first Supper even to the end of the world, and that through our service and office they are daily distributed (FC, S.D., VII, 77).”

The next words quoted from the Formula might conceivably be understood as favoring the view that the bread and wine become the body of Christ in the very moment of the consecration. Yet a careful reading will show that Luther guards against this view. He writes,

Wenn (quando) wir seiner Einsetzung und Heiszen nach im Abendmal sagen: “Dass ist mein Leib, so (tum) ist’s sein Leib? nicht unsers Sprechens oder Thetelworts halben, sondern seines Heiszens halben dasz er uns also zu sprechen und zu tun geheiszen hat und sein Heiszen und Tun an unser Sprechen gebunden hat (FC, S.D., VII, 75).

Even though Luther in part ridiculed Zwingli’s distinction between Heisselwort and Thetelwort, yet he used the terms here and the Latin version of the Formula makes rather clear what Luther meant by Thetelwort when it says that the bread is His body *non propter nostram pronuntiationem, aut quod haec verba pronuntiata hanc habeant efficaciam*, the last phrase being a translation of the one German word “Thetelwort.”

It is crystal clear in this quotation that when Luther and the Confessions speak of our speaking or recitation in the discussion of the Lord’s Supper, they had in mind just our speaking, of the words “This is my body.” When we speak these words, our words do not have a special efficacy, as is the case in Roman theology.

For this reason also the confessions stress that the words of institution should be read clearly and distinctly. Obviously they are combating the Roman practice of reading these words in a low tone of voice (FC, S.D., VII, 79).

However, it is also clear that the Confessions had more in mind than simply opposing Romanism. According to the Formula, the words are to be read or sung publicly before the congregation, so that the people can hear what is being said. The important factor here is not what is happening to the bread in that moment, but that we should do what Christ commanded us to do. The addition in the Latin text, “that therefore should not be omitted which Christ Himself did in the Holy Supper” is not a very fortunate addition to the official text and introduces a foreign note. The emphasis otherwise is not on what Christ did, but on what He told His disciples to do. The German has only the statement that Christ commanded, “This do.” A careful consideration of the

words make clear that Christ commands His disciples to do what they were doing that night. What were they doing? They were eating bread and drinking wine while Jesus was saying to them, “Take, eat; this is my body.” “Drink ye all of it; this is my blood.” And when we eat bread and drink wine in the Holy Supper in which we have heard the words of Christ read to us loudly and distinctly, or, to put it in another way, when we, in connection with these words, do what Christ commands His disciples to do, then He gives us in that Supper His true body and blood to eat and to drink.

The function of the reading of the words of institution is, according to the confessions,

- 1) to render obedience to the words of Christ: “This do,” (What is included here has been discussed above.)
- 2) to excite and strengthen the faith of the hearers, and
- 3) to consecrate or bless the bread and wine for this holy use (F.C. S.D., VII, 79-82).

In this connection it is to be noted also how closely the consecration is attached to the distribution when the Formula says, “Where His institution is observed and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received, because of the power and efficacy of the words which Christ spoke at the first Supper. For where His institution is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup, *and* (our emphasis) the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ Himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious *by virtue of the first institution* (emphasis in Triglot and also in the Latin of the Goettingen edition of the Confessions, but not in the original edition of the Book of Concord), through His word, which He wishes to be there repeated” (FC, S.D. VII, 75).

In that same connection a parallel is drawn between the words of Christ at the first institution and His words of blessing spoken over Adam and Eve at the time of creation: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.” Special stress is laid on the fact that both of these blessings were spoken once and are efficacious for all time (FC, S.D. VII, 76). A rather illogical argument that has been repeatedly used in this connection is also disposed of here. It is argued that the words of Christ would not be truly divine and omnipotent words if they did not immediately without a delay in time, produce that of which they speak. At the time of creation the Triune God said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Yet the earth was not instantaneously filled with people and it surely took a full term pregnancy before Cain was born. It took many more years before the earth was filled with people. Is it not possible, at least, that the presence of Christ’s body and blood is delayed until we do everything that Jesus commanded us to do in the Supper?

We do not wish to be drawn into controversy over the question of when the presence begins. This is a dead-end street that can only lead to confusion among God’s people. The words of institution and all the other passages of Scripture dealing with the Holy Supper give us no warrant for the conclusion that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ in the very moment that the words are spoken. We only know that the words of Christ spoken at the first Supper will be true and efficacious until the end of time. 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, “Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Pr 30:6).

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.

Nor do the words of institution in any way indicate that the consecrated elements continue to be the body and blood of Christ even after all have communed. To say, therefore, that the *religua must* be consumed before the liturgy is concluded is also an addition to the clear teaching of Scripture and is to be condemned. Even to say that they *should* be consumed because they *might* still be the body and blood of Christ is to raise doubts and disputes that can only trouble concerned consciences. Moreover, to recommend that they be consumed in order to emphasize the real presence implies that conviction regarding the real presence is not

worked only by the Holy Spirit through the Word but that somehow “the words and works of the fathers” help to establish articles of faith. So long as men believe that in the Supper the true body and blood of Christ are truly present and eaten and drunk with the mouth by both believers and unbelievers justice will have been done to the words of institution, and what more do we or any other Christian need to know and believe?

A CLOSING NOTE

While it is really extraneous to the discussion of the words of institution, it may serve to illumine this controversy to note that Tom Hardt has also criticized the Wisconsin Synod for its view of the absolution. It had been stated by a Wisconsin Synod spokesman that the pastor in pronouncing the absolution does not manufacture a new forgiveness but simply conveys through his spoken words the same forgiveness that had been pronounced by God over the whole world when He raised Jesus from the dead. This phraseology Dr. Hardt finds objectionable because it reduces, in his view the efficacy of the pastor’s absolution.

At this point some may object: But we pastors do more with a recitation of the words of institution than what has been said on pages 5 to 7. We speak a creative word. Those who enter this objection should realize that they are aspiring to something beyond what the Lord Jesus has granted in His Word. The same applies to those pastors who are not satisfied to be spokesmen and ambassadors for Christ in pronouncing His absolution, His assurance of forgiveness that is full and complete. We must emphasize strongly that there can be no middle ground between the Scriptural position that it is Christ’s original word of institution alone that brings about the Real Presence in the Sacrament and that His word of forgiveness is fully efficacious and is merely to be repeated by the minister, on the one hand, and on the other, the position that the pastor, by the words of Christ which he repeats, helps to effect the Real Presence, or by his speaking in the absolution, makes Christ’s forgiveness fully effective.

However, in speaking in this way about the absolution pronounced by the pastor, we do not mean to deny that forgiveness is not actually conveyed by the pastor’s words. The Lord Jesus Himself has guaranteed the efficacy of those words of the pastor by His promise, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted.” But the words of the pastor do not bring forgiveness into being. The forgiveness has been there in God’s heart long before the words are spoken by the pastor, which are a real absolution by virtue of the words spoken by Christ long ago.

In a similar way the words of the pastor in the Lord’s Supper are undergirded and guaranteed by the words of the Savior at the first Lord’s Supper. They also do not bring the real presence into existence, but every time we speak those words and do what He told us to do that night He keeps His promise to give us His body and His blood to eat and to drink. In that sense the words of institution read by the pastor are a real consecration, by which we declare to all the world that we are about to do what Jesus commanded in the Supper, with the firm conviction that He will also do what He has promised.