

SACRIFICE AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

[Note: See John Stevenson's book of the Lord's Supper for ways in which "sacrifice" can be used appropriately in the context of the Lord's Supper]

One of the greatest traps for the Christian church is deciding how things should be on the basis of practices that develop over time instead of reviewing all practices in the light of God's Word. The Book of Hebrews says clearly that Christ did not offer Himself often. He has been sacrificed once. He did not have to suffer often (Hb 9:26-28; 7:27; 10:10). Paul wrote, "The death that He died, He died to sin once for all" (Rm 6:10). How did it happen, then, that the literature of the Middle Ages became full of the paradox, "He offered Himself once: we offer Him daily"?

In the early church it became the custom for communicants to fetch with them to the church some bread and a flask of wine to be used in the Lord's Supper. At one point in the service, called the "offertory", there was a procession, in which people brought their loaves to the altar, and poured their wine into a receptacle. The minister then set aside some of the bread to consecrate. Unconsecrated bread that was not used was distributed to the poor, and this was used in church's social welfare, and this charity became a source of tremendous credibility for the church in the pagan world, even during times of persecution.

It can be argued that the canon of the Roman Mass is a confused series of offertory prayers. However, the idea that the people were offering, or giving up their bread and wine, somehow became confused with what the priest was doing when he conducted the consecration. It came to be said that he was offering Christ. Roman theology holds that the priest offers an unbloody sacrifice, which is repeated in each mass, for the sins of the living and the dead.

The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* made a very important distinction, between sacrifices that take away sin, and sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. Christians' contrite hearts, prayers, praises, and cheerful giving are examples of their spiritual sacrifices. However, there is only one sacrifice that takes away sin, that of Christ on the cross. It cannot be repeated in any form. Because of the awful confusion between human works and Christ's gift, Luther's revision of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper stripped away all references to sacrifice. Our confidence before God does not depend on what we do, but on what Christ has done for us, once for all. We do well to continue to avoid such ambiguous words as "our offering" when we talk about the Lord's Supper.

The basic problem is that, when people think of sacrifice, they think of giving up something, something that they do. Since the Lord's Supper is entirely about what Jesus Christ has done for us, there dare be no confusion between the two.

One of the most withering pieces of writing in the Lutheran Confessions comes early in the *Smalcald Articles*, where Luther wrote about the Sacrifice of the Mass (Part II, Article II). The article began, "The Mass in the papacy must be regarded as the greatest and most horrible abomination." The reason was that it ran into direct and violent conflict with the fundamental article about Christ and faith (Part II, Article I). When Luther wrote that it could be omitted without sin, he did not mean that the Lord's Supper could be omitted, but he meant the whole idea of sacrifice or work in the mass that purported to deliver people from their sins, both in this life and in purgatory (#1). He pointed out that unspeakable abuses had arisen from it, including the buying and selling of Masses (#6). He wrote, "Besides, this dragon's tail — that is, the Mass — has brought forth a brood of vermin and the poison of manifold idolatries. The first is purgatory. They were so occupied with requiem Masses, with vigils, with the weekly, monthly, and yearly celebrations of requiems, with the common week, with All Souls' Day, and with soul-baths, that the Mass was used almost exclusively for the dead, although Christ instituted the sacrament for the living alone" (#12). Private masses were full of this. The following paragraphs mentions further abuses connected with the sacrifice of the Mass, vigils, pilgrimages and alms as though they benefited the spirits of the departed, fraternities that sold masses for the benefit of the living and the dead, relics, and indulgences (#16-24). However, the chief objection was that it turned the Lord's Supper into a human work, by which people tried to reconcile themselves and others to God (#7).

When Luther wrote these articles for the meeting at Smalcald, there was talk about the possible calling of a General Council by the Pope to arrange for needed reforms. It is significant that Luther wrote, "This article concerning the Mass will be the decisive issue in the council" (#10). It is also significant that it is in this article that we find the sentence, "This means that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel."

None of the New Testament language about the Lord's Supper supports any view that an action of sacrificing Christ happens now when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. It cannot be found in "Do this", because there is word for "this" to refer to that means "sacrifice." Certainly Jesus understood His coming death as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. The words "given" and "shed" (poured out) mean no less. However, when we celebrate the Sacrament, the words "given" and "shed" can refer only to the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice in the past. We remember it. The word "consecrate" does not mean sacrifice. We consecrate or bless things by the Word of God and prayer, thanking God for them (1 Tm 4:4-5). Jesus consecrated by giving thanks, as His powerful words caused what He said to happen.

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul contrasted the pagan eating of sacrificed victims in their temples with the Lord's Supper. If Paul had wanted to write about the Lord's Supper as repetition of Christ's sacrifice, here would have been his big chance. However, his silence is deafening on such a subject.

In the Old Testament one who brought an offering such as a peace offering ate part of it after the priest had offered it. The eating expressed his involvement in it. In the Passover there was also the eating of a sacrificed lamb. Eating is reception. Sacrificing is human action. The Passover meal was not itself the sacrifice.

Admittedly, some of the earliest writers after the time of the New Testament referred to the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice. People who had come from Jewish or from pagan backgrounds could not think of worship of God apart from sacrifices that they were making. If they had restricted their references to sacrifices of thanksgiving, there would have been no objection. However, by the mid-third century we find references to the priest's sacrificing Christ, and by the mid-fourth century that "sacrifice" is said to take away sins.

In itself, there was nothing wrong for Christians in the second century to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the anniversary of a martyr's death. However, the idea that the Lord's Supper could be offered for the safety of sailors in a storm and to benefit the dead, whether they had faith or not, was seriously wrong. The idea that the mere performance of consecrating the Lord's Supper brought benefits without reference to faith in the recipient, and who were not present to eat and to drink in faith, brought fully warranted condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions.

Perhaps one of the problems was the wrong idea that, to receive the benefits of what Christ did two thousand years ago we have to go back to Calvary to get them, or somehow repeat what Jesus did now. Casel followed this line by trying to interpret the Lord's Supper in the line of mystery religions, making an event present again. We cannot go back to Calvary, except in faith, and we do that when we remember His death in the Supper. We cannot, repeat what He alone could do, and dare not try to do that. All such talk is unnecessary, because of the real presence. Here, in the Lord's Supper, we receive the very body and blood that He gave and shed in sacrifice at Calvary. It is His pure gift. That fully bridges the gap in time between then and now.