

## The Proper Balance between Word and Sacrament

Some people may know about a few older Lutheran churches in South Australia, where the pulpit was superimposed above the altar. The preacher had to ascend a long flight of steps, and seemed to be preaching to the people from up in the sky. The architecture reflected an assumption in a church that had come out of the periods of Pietism and then Rationalism, that the preached Word was all-important, and the Sacraments were far less important. The attitude can be seen in some churches when, at a wedding, the baptismal font is pushed away to one side, or even used as a flower stand. Even the way in which the *Lutheran Hymnal* was printed, with The Service with Communion and The Service without Communion as distinct alternates, suggested that the service without communion could be the regular norm, not just at lay-reading services, with the communion service used as an option, but even quite rarely.

Our fathers and grandfathers had several reasons for their practice of receiving the Lord's Supper only every three months or so. In the horse-and-buggy days the pastor could be present at one of his congregations only rarely. What made the practice accepted more easily was that, during the period of Pietism, the Sacraments were considered less important. What Pietists emphasised was feeling, a feeling of being sufficiently sorry for sin. The more a sermon addressed personal feelings, the more it was regarded highly. By contrast, the sacraments were considered as merely external acts.

Certainly, the Word of the Gospel is what is important in the Sacraments. "Baptism is not water only, but it is water used together with God's Word and by His command." The blessings imparted by the sacraments are the same blessings as the Gospel imparts: forgiveness, life, and salvation, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and renewed strength for the Christian life. There is now a necessary renewed awareness that, already at the time of the New Testament, Christians were celebrating the Lord's Supper not just occasionally, but every Sunday. Jesus' intention was "often" (1 Cor 11:20, 25-26; Acts 2:42; 20:7). When we talk about "balance" we are not talking about equal time for each, as if we were allowing time for things that are in opposition, or concerned that the one might gain the upper hand over the other. A church in which either the Word or the Sacrament appears to dominate the Divine Service to the exclusion of the other would not be confessing and using the Word and the Sacrament rightly.

By the close of the Middle Ages many Christians were receiving the Lord's Supper only about four times a year. The Lateran Council of 1215 AD tried to remedy this slackness by making it compulsory for every Christian to make confession and attend the Lord's Supper at least once a year, at Easter. The trouble is that, once people begin to specify how often, there is a tendency to make the lowest number the norm. In the preface to the *Small Catechism* Luther commented on the slackness that had existed in the church. "We should so preach that, of their own accord and without any law, the people will desire the sacrament and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer it to them. This can be done by telling them: 'It is to be feared that anyone who does not desire to receive the sacrament at least three or four times a year despises the sacrament and is no Christian, just as he is no Christian who does not hear and believe the Gospel. Christ did not say, 'Omit this,' or 'Despise this,' but He said, 'Do this, as often as you drink it,' etc. Surely He wishes that this be done and not that it be omitted and despised. 'Do this,' He said."

From a certain point of view, a definition of "sacrament" that embraces both Baptism and the Lord's Supper can mislead us into ignoring the differences between them. In both there is a physical element, which our gracious Lord uses, water, or bread and wine. He knows that human beings are attached to, and influenced by, physical elements, and He attaches the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to them. The Zwinglians wrongly thought that God could not convey a spiritual blessing through such material means as water, bread, and wine. They understood them as external symbols of what had already happened internally. Baptism is meant for people only at the beginning of their Christian lives. The Ethiopian was baptised on the very day when Philip brought the Gospel to him. Lydia and her family were baptised soon after receiving the Gospel. The jailer and his family were baptised at some time between an earthquake at midnight and the next morning. If we put off baptism because we require a prolonged period of instruction for an adult, we teach, by that practice, that baptism is not very important, and can wait for that prolonged period. The Lord's Supper is meant for those who are already Christian disciples, and have been instructed in the difference between ordinary food and drink and the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11:27-29). The Lord wants them to receive His body and blood worthily and often.

The proper balance ought to be sought also in devotional literature. Paul linked the new life of Christians to baptism, but some devotional literature hardly ever mentions the ongoing role of Baptism in the lives of believers. Even the readings used in the churches give an opportunity to preach about the Lord's Supper only on Maundy Thursday. People who do not attend services on Maundy Thursday may never hear a sermon about the relevance of the Lord's Supper to Christian life. The early church in Jerusalem, by contrast, "continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers" (Ac 2:42). The preaching of the Gospel should lead us to the Sacraments. Conversely, the Sacraments benefit us when we receive them with a faith that has been nourished by the Gospel that is preached to us.

The proper balance between the Word and Sacrament is connected to our understanding of the nature of the Church and its unity. The outward unity of the church is advocated these days by many churches that have a low regard for the sacraments, and that are willing to compromise the truth of the Gospel for the sake of outward unity. The *Augsburg Confession* is normative for Lutherans. "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered" (AC VII: 1). If we are asked, "Where should we look for the Church?" we ought to answer, "The Church is found where the pure Word and Sacraments are found. Where they are absent, we have no assurance of the presence of the Church because the means through which the church is created and sustained are absent." Luther wrote, in the *Smalcald Articles*, "For, thank God, today a child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, saints, believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (III, xii, 1-2). Faith is not making a decision for Christ by our own natural powers, but receiving the benefits of Christ, and these benefits are conveyed to us through the Gospel and the Sacraments, as instruments that the Holy Spirit uses. Through them God works faith when and where He pleases in those who hear the Gospel (AC V, 1-2). Outside the church there is neither Word nor Sacrament. The Kingdom of Christ exists only with the Word and Sacraments (*Apology of the AC*, IX, 52). Faith is created in us only through the Word and Sacraments.

At the time of the Reformation the proper regard for the Sacraments was restored. After the Reformation had been running for about thirteen years, Melancthon wrote, in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

"At the outset it is again necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to

partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things...

“The fact that we celebrate only the public or common Mass among us does not contradict the catholic church. For even today, Greek parishes do not hold private Masses. There is only a public Mass, and this only on Sundays and festivals. In their monasteries daily Mass is held, but only in public. These are remnants of the ancient custom. For nowhere do the ancient writers before Gregory mention the celebration of private Masses... Epiphanius writes that in Asia communion was celebrated three times a week and that there were no daily Masses. He says that this was the custom handed down from the apostles. ‘Assemblies for communion were appointed by the apostles to be held on the fourth day, on Sabbath eve, and on the Lord’s Day’ ...

“For we have shown in our Confession that we hold that the Lord’s Supper does not confer grace *ex opere operato*, [by the mere performance of the act] nor does it *ex opere operato* confer merit for others, living or dead, the forgiveness of sins, guilt or punishment. And this is the clear and firm proof of this position: It is impossible to receive the forgiveness of sins *ex opere operato* on account of our works. Instead, faith must conquer the terrors of sin and death, when we comfort our hearts with the knowledge of Christ and realize that we are forgiven on account of Christ and are given the merits and righteousness of Christ. ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace.’”

Whereas once the Lutherans had to explain celebrating the Sacrament only on Sundays and festival days, now, it would seem, some Lutherans must defend themselves for returning to their own confessional standard. Proper conservatism means clinging to what is truly important in the past.

Proper regard for both the Gospel and the Sacraments should influence the respect that Christians have for the office of the ministry. These constitute the chief task of pastors. People should expect to hear sermons that not only proclaim the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also remind them of the saving benefits of baptism and the truth that our incarnate Lord is not locked up in heaven, but truly present among, us, reminding us of His death through His body and blood, in communion with the bread and the cup, until He comes again (1 Cor 10:16; 11:26).