

The Sacrament – An Easter Affair

Below is an article of the late Professor Kurt Marquart's, written for *The Lutheran*, published 18 June, 1984.

Why did Luther carry on such a vigorous battle for what is in the Sacrament? I draw only one or two themes from the rich New Testament presentation. For instance, think of the Sacrament as the New Testament Passover, where Paul writes in the Easter Epistle, 1 Corinthians 5:7 – **'Christ, our paschal lamb, is sacrificed'**. This has deep connections with the resurrection, because the New Testament never divides the cross and the resurrection. These are seen as one complete unit. Lutherans, too, need to see that the Sacrament is not basically a Maundy Thursday or Good Friday affair – which it also is. With the Early Church we need to see that the Sacrament is primarily a resurrection, Easter affair. This is why, as Dr. Sasse Points out, the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection, was never complete without the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Word in his Church. These great things belong together. The Early Church made this connection between the Sacrament and the resurrection.

The Resurrection Banquet

In his interesting book, *Early Christian Worship*, Oscar Cullmann points out that the symbol of the fish was a symbol not merely for Jesus Christ generally. We all know that the Greek word for *fish* is made up of the first letters of the words *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour*. Cullmann points out that the symbolism goes deeper than that. It goes back to the time when the resurrected Saviour comes to the disciples and feeds them with broiled fish. All the resurrection appearances – except the one with the women at the tomb, where it simply wouldn't be practical – occur in connection with mealtimes in connection with food. A most important, and probably the true variant reading in Acts 1, where it talks about the Lord being with the disciples for 40 days, the Syriac version, says that he took salt with them, that is, he ate with them for 40 days. The point is that the resurrection appearances take place in connection with mealtimes. Remember the Emmaus road! At the breaking of bread, their eyes were opened and they recognized the Resurrected One. The Sacrament now came to be regarded as the continuation of the resurrection appearances of the Lord. That's very important. As we have it in John 20, on the first resurrection night, the disciples being assembled, the Lord stood among them and said, **'Peace be with you'**. That was at mealtime. They were gathered for dinner. On the following week, the next Lord's Day, he appears again. This time Thomas is there and he confirms his faith. The point is that there is an unbroken chain of Lord's Days going right back to that first one, which was not interrupted by the Lord's Ascension into heaven, and which didn't take him further away, but made him closer to us. He now rules and effectively controls the universe for the benefit of his Church. The Sacrament means specifically the resurrection banquet, where the Resurrected One himself is among us as truly as he was with Thomas and the disciples, and says to us, 'Peace be with you'.

Joy and Celebration

It is important that we see the Sacrament as a reality of joy and celebration, not simply or primarily a doleful, penitential thing. One dear lady once said, 'O pastor, we can't have the Sacrament at Easter, surely. Easter is a time of joy!' She thought that the Sacrament is basically long-faced, grim-faced, and the organists have to drag and sound funereal. But if we see, with the Ancient Church, that the Sacrament is a feast of the Resurrected One, we shall come, yes, penitently, yes, in sackcloth and ashes for our sins, but also and above all, rejoicing in the great salvation and in the Resurrected One, because we receive into these bodies which are subject to death (St. Paul: **'Wretched man that I am!**

Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ – full of death in every way) the living flesh of him who, by his resurrection, has overcome death. By giving his resurrected body, over which death has no more dominion, by giving to our bodies this very flesh that has overcome Satan, death and hell, we have a guarantee that this body, too, will live, despite all appearances to the contrary.

No Shadowy Contact

There is one more dimension to that. It’s always very sad that Christians, in time of crisis, can fall prey to the attractions of cultists and occultists of various descriptions, who seem to offer them some kind of strange warmth, weird illumination, and a sense of emotional fulfilment. Why is it, for example, at the time of bereavement, many Christians who are perhaps not too established in the faith, are actually tempted to go to spiritists? You can imagine how tempting it could be if you have just lost your life-long partner. Afterwards, you think, I should have said that; we should have cleared this up, and there was no chance to do it. How comforting, then, it could be if some dear old soul appears and says, ‘I know somebody who can make contact. It’s not too late. You can still pass your message on to your dear departed one. He or she can speak to you.’ This can be very tempting to people in their loneliness, to make this sort of shadowy contact, and thus make themselves playthings of demonic forces which take advantage of their sensibilities in this way.

A Blessed Reality – Heaven is Wide Open

What Satan offers in dreadful distortion and caricature as a shadowy thing in dark corners, **that** the Church celebrates in broad daylight as a blessed reality, because in the Sacrament, we receive the Resurrected One. Wherever he is, there is heaven. Heaven for us is not a place far away. How many light years would it take a rocket to get to heaven? It’s not a question of light years. Luther points out that Stephen, when he was being killed, saw heaven open. It was right there – without any telescopes. So heaven is right here. It is in a different dimension. God breaks through to us in his Word and Sacrament. Heaven is very close. Heaven is right there, where God makes an opening. As Luther points out, in Baptism heaven was rent. It was torn and it stays torn, wherever the Gospel is. Heaven is wide open. Wherever Christ is, there are all our dear ones who have gone before.

One at the Altar

I can never understand why some people, after bereavement, feel they can’t come to church. They miss out on so much comfort and consolation. That is the very place to which we should run in time of bereavement. There we are in touch with Jesus, and with all those who have gone before us with the sign of faith. The older we grow, the more dear ones we ourselves have in heaven, the more real and concrete the places becomes for us. As we confess in the liturgy: ‘Therefore with angels and arch-angels and with all the company of heaven...’ In Christ, they are all there. When St. Augustine lost his mother and his eight-year-old son in his deep agony he made this beautiful statement: ‘He alone loses no dear one in whom all are dear in him who cannot be lost’. Jesus, who is God, and who defeated death for us, cannot be lost. The gates of hell shall not prevail against him. It is he who is here. He is in touch with his Church. The Church is one. In him all are there. He binds the Church together. This is the true consolation of Christians, whether we are separated by death or by continents. At the altar we are still one. Because the Church is one body, be it in heaven or be it one earth, we are together. What we now believe, we shall then see.

Worship Services Must Reflect Faith

There are very deep dimensions here. Our worship services ought to reflect that this is what we believe. It reminds me of Solzhenitsyn. He said that when he as only a young child, he was taken to a

church service – a Russian Orthodox service. The beauty of the singing, the obvious other-worldly emphasis on the heavenly reality of the resurrection, made such a deep impression on him, that no amount of personal suffering or intellectual argument later was able to wipe it out. I wonder how many of our children receive those impressions. They should! We are here dealing with the very realities of God. Our services ought to be a witness to this. This is a piece of heaven on earth.

Roman Catholics and the Sacrament

Today many conservative Roman Catholics are very distressed with liturgical reforms emanating from Vatican II. One incisive observer said, ‘There are more ways than one of changing doctrine. You can change doctrine just by what you practise, without ever changing the words.’ And that’s what he alleged has happened since Vatican II with the Roman doctrine of the Real Presence. They have had trouble with liberals who, for example, in Holland have denied the Real Presence of Christ. A leading Roman theologian wished to substitute for the word *transubstantiation*, the word *transsignification*. It prompted the sad joke some years ago about Holland, where liberal theologians were denying all sorts of things, including the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation: ‘In Holland everything changes, except bread and wine!’ There is also a lot of Zwingliism creeping in in Rome. One of our Roman Catholic friends in Fort Wayne, remember what an atmosphere of awe it was, some years ago, when her sick father received the Sacrament. The priest came with candles and this tremendous mystery was transacted and brought to the sick. There was a public testimony. They believed this to be the true body of Christ. Later, her mother was in the hospital and a female social worker came along and chit-chatted about this and that. After her visit, she asked, ‘Would you like Communion?’ She had a consecrated wafer in her handbag which she was prepared to hand out. This devout woman said, ‘No, thank you!’ She could not regard that as a Sacrament. There are many more ways of changing doctrine than one. **How we behave with regard to the mysteries of God is a public confession of how important we think they are.**

A Beautiful Communion Liturgy

I think that the liturgy you have since Union in Australia is the best Lutheran liturgy in the English-speaking world. The music and the words are so fitting and so beautiful. In America, what has become very influential is a form of liturgy going back to the Anglican, Gregory Dix. He has popularized certain notions which go back beyond him to some other scholars. According to him, the Sacrament is based on four actions: the Lord took bread, so since he took bread, we should have an offertory procession bringing bread to the altar. Secondly, he broke it, so there must be a breaking of bread. Third, he gave thanks. Fourth, he distributed to them. So that taking – the offertory procession, the giving of thanks, of blessing, the breaking of bread, and the distribution to the communicants – this four-action scheme was uncritically holus-bolus taken over into a newfangled Lutheran Order of Service. It was most unfortunate. One Synod finally broke with that and went its own way, retaining the historic Common Service. The new liturgy is a kind of fussy ceremonialism. How decisive for the Sacrament is it to have an offertory procession? Is that really vital? Or why should one insist that one must have a particular kind of Eucharistic prayer? Or that you must have an act of breaking? Calvinists have always insisted that you must have this breaking. One King of Prussia was fanatically determined to compel the Lutherans in his kingdom to break the communion bread – which they refused to do – because the Calvinists demanded it. He was going to force them to do so by baking pieces of iron into the bread, compelling them to break it, unless they wanted to choke on it!

Consecration-Distribution-Reception

If the people on the Commission had read the Lutheran Confessions, they would have found in the *Formula of Concord* that if we are going to divide things into basic parts, we should start with the

basic three in the *Formula of Concord*. There, the *Formula* goes to the heart of the matter: what is essential to the Sacrament, what determines the sacramental action, are three things: **consecration, distribution, reception**. That's biblical. These are realities.

Emphasis on the Consecration

Luther laid great stress on the consecration because this is where the Word comes, and the Word finally makes everything. Without the Word of God it is pure mumbo-jumbo. It was liturgically a very startling, radical innovation when, after hundreds of years, where the Words of Institution of Institution had been quietly mumbled at the altar so that nobody could hear, for the first time they were publicly chanted or spoken. There was a kind of bluntness or starkness about that. It was a public confession of what really is received in the Sacrament. Luther stressed the words of God which conveyed that.

Christ's Word Still Effective

The *Formula of Concord* says, 'This is what makes the Sacrament, when Christ's words which he once spoke, are still effective whenever they are repeated'. Christ, says Luther, has tied his action to our speaking. It's not anything we do. We could speak over bread for 1000 years and nothing would happen. But when Christ's Word is spoken, then it happens. The beautiful analogy of St. John Chrysostom is used. God said, '**Be fruitful and multiply!**' He said it only once, but that still works today in all the rich plant and animal life, including our life.

Christ once said, '**Do this in remembrance of me**'. Therefore, wherever this is done, these words are effective and produce what they say. Modern Lutherans are very dangerously forgetting the importance of the consecration. This is where the Word of Christ is attached to the element. That's what makes it a Sacrament. Then, of course, the rest has to follow. Luther would turn over in his grave if the Words of Institution were omitted, because for Luther the one thing that is necessary is the Word of Christ. That makes the Sacrament what it is.

Public Proclamation in the Sacrament

According to Article 24 of *The Apology*, which is a very rich statement concerning what we believe about the Sacrament, it is quite clear that one thing that is necessary is the public proclamation, so that you don't have a dumb rite going on – ritual without explanation. The sermon and the Sacrament belong together. Our forefathers, Luther and the Reformation theologians, always take the Pauline text, 1 Corinthians 11:26, '**As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes**', as an indication that the Sacrament is to be celebrated in the context of proclamation. God's Word is there to be announced and then to be acted out and received in the Sacrament.