



Lesson 8

Lord's Supper

Worship

Psalm 119:89-94 (spoken responsively by half-verse)

Your word, LORD, is eternal;

it stands firm in the heavens.

Your faithfulness continues through all generations;

you established the earth, and it endures.

Your laws endure to this day,

for all things serve you.

If your law had not been my delight,

I would have perished in my affliction.

I will never forget your precepts,

for by them you have preserved my life.

Save me, for I am yours;

I have sought out your precepts.

Prayer: Lord God, you come to us by the promise of your Word to declare us not guilty by your grace. This is indeed our delight. Continue to look on us with your mercy, and help us cling to your promises of forgiveness. You come to us in your Supper to assure us in a very real way that your body and blood were given for our salvation. What blessed fellowship we have—with you and with one another—as we share in the blessings of your gracious gospel. Amen.



Introduction

A proper understanding of the Lord's Supper was at the core of Luther's Reformation teaching. Roman Catholicism had allowed the Mass (the name commonly used by Roman Catholics to refer to the Lord's Supper, also called the Eucharist) to become a meritorious work by which the participant received a measure of God's favor merely by participating in the sacrament. The mass became the central feature of Catholic worship practice—Masses were “said” in both public and private ceremonies. Catholic theologians referred to the Supper as a “sacrifice.” They also taught that in the sacrament the bread and wine turned into the actual body of Christ (known as transubstantiation). Such language led to a distortion of the Bible's teaching. Catholic doctrine tended to emphasize participation (the “work” itself) at the expense of faith (trust in God's promises of grace). Truthfully, the entire Roman Catholic sacramental system (which also included Baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, and last rites) emphasized the merit of participation.

Luther was not the first theologian to point out errors and inconsistencies in the Roman Catholic practice of the Lord's Supper. Others (John Huss, for example, who taught in Prague and was executed as a heretic about one hundred years before Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses) had warned about work-righteousness and had condemned the practice of giving worshipers only the bread when they received the Supper. Luther called for a return to the biblical interpretation and historical practice. He underscored that the plain words of Scripture involved a “mystery” that was grasped by faith.

Some reformers at Luther's time did not agree with his perspective. They wanted to create distance from Roman Catholicism by heading in an opposite direction. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss theologian, taught that Christ was present at the Lord's Supper only in a spiritual, not bodily, sense. For Luther this explanation failed to correspond with the Bible's teaching. Zwingli and Luther famously disputed about this doctrine when they met personally at a castle in Marburg, Germany, in October of 1529. Regarding the Lord's Supper, then, Luther battled on two fronts during his life: against Roman Catholic abuses on the one hand and against the teachings of other reformers on the other. Luther put the focus back on what God was giving through the Sacrament. He used explanation and illustration to make things clearer, but he instructed that the blessings and benefits were a product of faith.

The Power of the Word in the Early Church

1 Corinthians 10:16,17 & 1 Corinthians 11:23-29

^{10:16} Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

^{11:23} For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

1. On your own, write down at least three blessings we receive from God through the Lord's Supper. We'll hear a sampling.

2. A nine-year-old child sees you take the Lord's Supper and wonders what you are receiving in the front of church. In your own words, give an answer to this young person. Include what is and what isn't received in this sacrament. To help answer, recall how Luther explained this in the Small Catechism.

3. In a discussion about Communion your friend says, "Communion is just between me and God." How would you respond?

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4. How would you explain the relationship between “preparation” (see St. Paul’s words “examine” and “unworthy manner”) and our church’s Communion practice?

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The Power of the Word in the Reformation

Below are excerpts from Luther’s writings—taken from the book *What Luther Says*.

(Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006].)

- A. We poor sinners are certainly not so mad as to believe that Christ’s body is in the bread in a manner as crude and visible as bread is in a basket or wine in a cup. This view the enthusiasts [Zwingli and other Protestants who opposed Luther] are eager to impute to us in order to amuse themselves with our folly. We do, however, unhesitatingly believe that His body *is there*, as His words “This is My body” say and indicate. When the fathers—and we at times—say: Christ’s body is in the bread, we simply speak in this way in order to confess our faith in the actual presence of Christ’s body. Aside from this we are well satisfied to have people say: Christ is in the bread, He is the Bread, He is where the bread is, or however they please to express the Real Presence. About words we have no desire to argue, if only the meaning is retained that what we eat in the Lord’s Supper is not bread alone but the body of Christ. (*What Luther Says*, 2475)
- B. I must give a crude illustration. The sun is shining on a large sea or pond. Naturally, no more than one picture of the sun can be in the water, because there is only one sun. How is it, then, that if hundreds of people stood around the sea, everyone would have a picture of the sun before him at his place and not at the other person’s place? And if he walked around the sea, the picture would travel with him and would be wherever he goes; and if a thousand eyes looked into the sea, everyone would see the picture before him and not before another person.

Very well, the sun is a creature. Yet it can in some way be at all places in the sea. Who, then, will tell us to deny that God cannot far more readily know and find a way in which Christ's one body is also present everywhere or wherever He pleases? Here, I say, they must answer and prove that God's omnipotence is not able to do this. If people do not prove this, then the charge that it is a contradiction to say that Christ's body is in heaven and also in the Lord's Supper is a terrible sacrilege, because they cannot be certain of this, and, after all, the sure words of God stand there: "This is My body." (*What Luther Says*, 2498)

- C. To say that one takes and receives the forgiveness of sins in this Sacrament is not speaking incorrectly; for where Christ is, the forgiveness of sins is. Here are His body and blood according to His Word. He, then, who receives, eats, and drinks these elements and believes that the body of Christ was given for him and His blood was shed for the remission of sins—should he not have the remission of sins? This is a benefit; indeed, it is the greatest and best one. We derive it from this testament. (*What Luther Says*, 2504)

No greater shame and disgrace can be heaped on the most venerable Sacrament than merely to consider it a good work; for a good work is something I can do to another, and it must be an act I perform. But the Sacrament is not my work but God's work, with which I merely let myself be served and from which I receive a blessing. (*What Luther Says*, 2506)

- D. The mouth eats the body of Christ bodily, for it can neither grasp nor eat the words and does not know what it is eating. According to taste it is eating something that is different indeed from the body of Christ. The heart, however, grasps the words in faith and spiritually eats precisely that which the mouth eats bodily. For the heart clearly sees what the irrational mouth is eating bodily. How does it see it? Not by looking at the bread or at the eating of the mouth, but at the word which stands there: Eat, this is my body. Yet the same body of Christ is eaten by the mouth and the heart, each eating it in its own mode and manner. The heart cannot eat it bodily, the mouth, in turn, cannot eat it spiritually. Therefore God makes the two equal in this way that the mouth eats bodily for the heart and the heart eats spiritually for the mouth, and thus both are satisfied in and saved by one and the same food. For the irrational body also does not know that it is eating food by which it will live eternally. It feels no such eternal life, but dies and decays as though it had eaten some other food, like an irrational animal. The soul, however, sees and clearly understands that the body will live eternally because it has partaken of an eternal food, which will not let it remain in the grave or in the dust, rotted and decayed. (*What Luther Says*, 2537)

5. What is tricky about the statement “All Protestant churches teach the doctrine of the real presence”?

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6. From the Luther excerpts, what simple but clear argument does Luther use to counter the Roman Catholic teaching that participating in the Mass is a meritorious work? Those who worked with excerpt C may have some insight on this.

7. Read this quote from Luther about fellowship and the Lord’s Supper:

To symbolize this fellowship God has appointed such signs for this Sacrament as in every way serve the purpose and by their very form incite and move us to this fellowship. For bread is made out of many grains, ground and mixed together. Out of the many bodies of grain comes one loaf of bread. In it the individual grain loses its body and form and assumes the common body of bread. Likewise, the drops of wine lose their own form and become the body of one wine. Just so should and will it be with us if we use this Sacrament right. . . . Through the love of Christ we are to be changed and are to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own, take upon ourselves their form and needs, and let them have all the good we are able to give them that they may enjoy it. This is the real fellowship and the true significance of this Sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are brought into fellowship with one another by love. Without love no such transformation can take place. (*What Luther Says*, 2524)

List some ways Luther’s illustration about fellowship enriches our understanding of the Lord’s Supper?

The Power of the Word Today

The battles about the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper were not just about minor elements of language. The very gospel was at stake. It still is today. Lutheran theology preserves the wonder of the Word—that God comes to us to give us, in a very visible and tangible way, the assurance that our sins are forgiven. At the same time, this meal is a declaration of fellowship with one another. A clear understanding of what this sacrament gives and means is as important today as it was five hundred years ago.

8. Choose to respond to one of these two statements.
Take one minute to formulate your response.

A. The practice of close Communion is judgmental.

B. Luther’s explanation of real presence is hard to accept because I don’t feel like God is there.

9. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today’s study?

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Summary

In Luther’s day, Christian worship practice had devolved into a set of religious rites. People were satisfied with going through the motions, and the church reinforced such ideas. The sacraments became part of a work-righteous system. Luther’s emphasis on returning to the Word recovered the truth about sacramental grace and the forgiveness of sin.

At Home

Review at home the “Personal Preparation for Holy Communion” in the front part of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (p. 156). Make use of it before the next time Communion is offered.

Additional Reading

Luther's treatises on the Lord's Supper – *Luther's Works*, Vol. 37.

Closing Prayer

Hymn: “Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior” (CW 313:1,2,7)

1. Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior,
Turned away God's wrath forever;
By his bitter grief and woe
He saved us from the evil foe.
2. As his pledge of love undying,
He, this precious food supplying,
Gives his body with the bread
And with the wine the blood he shed.
7. Praise the Father, who from heaven
Unto us such food has given
And, to mend what we have done,
Gave into death his only Son