



# The Lord's Supper as the Testament of Jesus

GERHARD O. FORDE

*Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

## I. THE FOUNDATION

THE CLAIM THAT GODLESS SINNERS ARE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ALONE WITHOUT THE deeds of the law entails also the claim that the Lord's supper is properly understood and used only when it is administered and received as gospel—as sheer, unmerited gift. It is a *beneficium* not a *sacrificium*. What happens in the supper, that is, is simply, *the gospel*. What our Lord did at supper “on the night in which he was betrayed” must therefore be conceptualized, taught, and proclaimed as pure gospel if we are to approach what might be called a “Lutheran” understanding of that supper. The absolute basis for such understanding and practice is first, last, and always, that it is gospel promise.

## II. THE CONTEXT

From time immemorial theologians have argued about the context from which to extract keys to interpret the supper. Is it or is it not a passover meal? Is it the last of the eschatologically charged meals of Jesus with his disciples? Is it a covenant meal of some sort? A Todah thankoffering? All such contexts are no doubt important. But it appears that something very obvious has usually been

GERHARD O. FORDE is professor of systematic theology.

*Understanding the Lord's supper for what it is—the last will and testament of Jesus—rather than for what it remembers, represents, previews, or portends will help us properly to use and treasure the supper as sheer, unmerited gift.*

missed. Missing is the simple fact that the texts of the supper themselves set forth the essential context within which it is to be understood. That is the fact that it took place *on the night in which he was betrayed*. Any reading of the texts demonstrates that the accounts are laced through and through with the fact of the betrayal. Argument about whether or not it occurred on the night of the passover meal is rendered more or less irrelevant. What occurred is indelibly stamped by the fact that it took place in the context of the betrayal.

What occurred in the supper is therefore first and foremost encompassed and comprehended within its own concrete and particular story. Jesus was not symbolically or ritually previewing or acting out something that would “really” happen at some other place or time. Disregard for what the texts actually say is largely responsible for the fruitless searches for a context that will supply the supper with some “sacramental” meaning not immediately apparent. All of that is far overshadowed, if not simply cancelled, by the fact that it took place in the context of his betrayal. Think on it! He, just when his very body and blood are being “handed over,” “surrendered up,” to the “authorities” of this age, both religious and civil, takes bread and cup and in contradiction and defiance of the betrayal says, “This is my body given for you, this cup is the New Testament in my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” And along with it the eschatological promise: I shall not drink of this cup again until I drink it new with you in the kingdom. It is a new testament.

In other words, his body is handed over and his blood shed by the authorities of this age, but he remains sovereign and with the bread and the wine as his testament bequeaths his body and blood to his disciples. One calls to mind Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John: “No one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own accord.” On the night in which he was betrayed Jesus gives his body and blood to his own.

### III. THE CONCEPTUALITY

As Luther rightly perceived, the conceptuality at work here is that of testament, as in “last will and testament.”<sup>1</sup> The conceptuality of testament clearly sets forth and insists upon the gospel character of what occurred. Jesus, in the face of his betrayal, makes his last will and testament and designates his heirs. “This cup is the New Testament in my blood shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.” The point here is that what happens on the night of the betrayal is not simply to be conflated with and interpreted by what happens on the day of crucifixion. When that is done, what happened in the upper room necessarily gets subsumed under one’s interpretation of Golgotha. It becomes a symbolic anticipation of what happened on the cross.

<sup>1</sup>Reinhard Schwarz has demonstrated how Luther saw this conceptuality as exegetically necessary from the very beginning of his career. See Reinhard Schwarz, “The Last Supper: The Testament of Jesus,” translated by Gerhard O. Forde, *The Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995) 391-403. Also Reinhard Schwarz, “Der hermeneutische Angelpunkt in Luthers Messreform,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992) 340-364.

To be sure, the testament is inextricably related to what happens on Golgotha. Most obviously, of course, the testament does not go into effect until the death of the testator. But the conceptuality of testament should not simply be subsumed under one's theory about the atoning significance of the death. In the history of the tradition that has meant overwhelmingly that the supper is understood in sacrificial terms: a sacramental and ritual reenactment, representation, or remembrance of the vicarious satisfaction by Jesus of what humans owe God. The "sacrifice of the mass" in Roman Catholicism and the sacrificial character of the eucharistic prayers in Lutheran and protestant rites are the liturgical offspring of this (mis-)understanding. Reinhard Schwarz puts the matter quite clearly.

The underlying test for every conception of the Supper is that of the manner in which it can align itself with the situation of Jesus "in the night in which he was betrayed"....In the late medieval doctrine of the Supper, the act of consecration, the central part of the sacrifice of the mass, was expressly connected with the last meal of Jesus with his disciples. In that meal celebration, therefore, Jesus had ostensibly acted out a sacramental rite of sacrifice, in a sense a previewing of his own sacrificial death. He was thereby supposed to have transferred to his disciples themselves the priestly duty of redoing retrospectively a sacramental representation of his sacrificial death. In a sense, the sacrificial rite at the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples therefore relates to the church's sacrifice of the mass in mirror-image-like fashion. The symmetrical axis lies, so viewed, in the sacrificial death of Christ whose sacramental representation once previewed by Jesus is now again retrospectively celebrated. The sacramental activity of Jesus among his disciples therefore finds its meaning in the supposition that Jesus intended to institute the churchly celebration of the sacrifice of the mass.<sup>2</sup>

But this draws the supper into an entirely different hermeneutical scheme.<sup>3</sup> It becomes a symbolic event, a ritual repetition of something that happened long ago, or a liturgical "re-presentation" or "memorial" of the "sacrifice" on Golgotha. The result is that direction is reversed. The body and blood are offered first and foremost to God and returned to the people only in the form of "sacramental grace"—with all its attendant problems. One is no longer justified by faith alone in the promise and testament, but by "*gratia gratum faciens*" ("grace that makes one graceful") or other appropriate internal motions and modifications. The effect of the sacrament becomes internalized in a way that can do real damage. The gospel character of the supper is lost.

#### IV. SYSTEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS

We cannot here engage in an exhaustive treatment of the advantages of the conceptuality of testament for the more systematic problems always attending reflection on the supper. They are many. I shall only allude to some of them here. First and foremost, of course, the supper as testament firmly establishes the proper

<sup>2</sup>Schwarz, "The Last Supper," 396.

<sup>3</sup>See the article by James S. Preus, "Neglected Problems in the Eucharistic Dialogue," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 3 (1976) 279-287, for an enlightening account of the hermeneutical problems involved.

direction. The testament grants the inheritance from the testator Jesus to the heirs. This also should be insisted upon over against the covenantal language that has become so prevalent today.<sup>4</sup> If covenantal language is used it should be understood as a testament, not vice versa. As Luther observed, a testament differs from a covenant in that it goes into effect upon the death of the testator whereas a covenant depends upon the continued existence of the covenantor. Since, however, in this case Jesus is raised and lives forever, testament and covenant can be taken as equivalent.<sup>5</sup> That means that testament provides the interpretative key. The new testament is the new covenant, not vice versa. This guards against lapsing once again into sacrificial language.

Second, the language of testament does much better in what we might call the “reality check.” Lutheranism has always insisted on the reality of what transpires in the doing of the supper. It is not a representation, not a repetition, not a mere symbolic proceeding, but real. If it is not real it is not gospel. How can this reality be perceived? Where the supper is interpreted in terms of the sacrifice one always runs afoul of the time question. How can the present celebration be a real reoccurrence of an event that happened so long ago? An event, indeed, that was said to be “once for all”? If it is truly once for all why does it have to be made present again, and how is that possible? Various devices have to be constructed for the time gap between the ancient sacrifice and the present to be transcended. One must somehow be initiated, so to speak, into a special time warp so as to become contemporary with a sacrifice buried in the sands of time. How can this be done? The ritual is the answer. The sacrifice must be ritually “repeated,” or “remembered,” or in the preferred liturgical jargon of today, “re-presented” (made present again) by exact observation of prescribed ritual action, usually by priests who have the proper ontological qualification to do it. Such interpretations, of course, only pile more difficulties upon already existing ones.

No such difficulties arise if the supper is understood as Jesus’ last will and testament. What happens when Jesus’ followers meet to “do this in remembrance of me” is simply the same thing that happened in the night in which he was betrayed: the last will and testament is distributed to his heirs. What is “repeated” is not Golgotha but exactly the same thing that was done at the last supper. “Repeated” is even here a bad word. Rather, the will of Jesus is carried out, the supper *extended now through time* to include all Jesus’ heirs in accordance with the will itself. It is not a symbol wrapped up in a ritual time warp, not a repetition, not a representation, not merely a memory, but rather a real event in our time. It is what it says it is: the new testament.

To conclude here, thirdly, just a word is in order about the question of “real presence” that has so plagued the understanding of the supper. This question too can be more adequately handled through the conceptuality of testament. Jan

<sup>4</sup>The substitution of “covenant” for “testament” in recent liturgies of the supper (as in “This cup is the New Covenant...”) was *not* a happy development.

<sup>5</sup>Schwarz, “The Last Supper,” 394.

Lindhart has attempted this in intriguing fashion.<sup>6</sup> Briefly, the bread and the wine hold a place equivalent to the piece of paper called a person's "last will and testament." The piece of paper "really" is the last will and testament, just as are the bread and wine. They are not mere symbols, just as the piece of paper establishing the testament is not merely symbolic. Yet the piece of paper as such is not the entire inheritance, the estate and all its goods. Still, without the piece of paper, the inheritance would not be an inheritance. It would not exist as such. So it is with the last will and testament of Jesus. The bread and the wine really are the testament and they mediate the body and blood because without them there would be no body and blood. Thus the body and blood are given "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine. In Luther's terms, the literary figure at work here is *synecdoche*: the part in reality "stands in" for the whole, not merely in a symbolic or representational sense—in which case the body and blood would "really" exist somewhere else. The presence of our Lord's body and blood "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine is real because it is given to us as the inheritance he has bequeathed to us. It is the new testament.

Such is what a Lutheran understanding of the Lord's supper ought to look like. In a time when the pressure is on in ecumenical circles to adopt views of the supper, the liturgy, the ministry, ordination, and the church which quite obviously rest on presuppositions of an entirely different sort, we would do well to pay some heed to these roots. ⊕

<sup>6</sup>See the important discussion by Jan Lindhart, in *Martin Luther: Knowledge and Mediation in the Renaissance* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986) 193-203.