



Luther's Catechisms and the Lord's Supper

TIMOTHY J. WENGERT

*The Lutheran Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

IN 1528, IN THE ABSENCE OF WITTENBERG'S HEAD PASTOR, JOHN BUGENHAGEN, Luther had to take over the regular catechetical preaching. In 1529 he molded those sermons into the *Large* and *Small Catechisms*. In them Luther provided his congregation and the wider public with his mature reflections on the Lord's supper.¹ Criticisms of opponents are pointed, to be sure, but driven not by a need to win debating points but by a commitment to provide comfort and certainty to his flock concerning the Lord's supper. Luther concentrates here on the pastoral side of the evangelical message contained in the supper. For these reasons, Luther's catechisms still provide insight and critique for our teaching and practice today.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the year 1520 the Lord's supper, in its late-medieval incarnation as the mass, had become a feast for the eyes. The words of institution were whispered

¹The material in the *Large Catechism* [henceforth LC] is based upon Luther's Holy Week sermons of 1529.

TIMOTHY J. WENGERT, associate professor of church history, is volume co-editor with Robert Kolb of a new translation of the *Book of Concord*, to be published by Augsburg Fortress.

Luther's catechetical explanation of the Lord's supper is not for the sake of doctrinal purity but to make believers and to comfort them with the presence and forgiveness of Christ. This pastoral approach still has significant consequence, even, for example, in the question of how to respond to inactive members.

sotto voce by a richly attired, distant priest. The worshipers were often fenced off from the officiant by means of ornately carved rood screens. The buildings themselves not only contained imposing tabernacles for the consecrated host but were themselves often designed as ostentatious markers for the miracle of God's coming to earth in the unbloody sacrifice of the mass. Chronicles even recorded Sunday-morning stampedes from one church to another, as the faithful rushed to catch a glimpse of the central act of elevation, when the priest's offering was consummated. And every day thousands upon thousands of masses were recited privately for dead souls languishing in purgatory.

In 1520, however, an Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, changed all that for many in the church. In his tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther insisted that the mass—far from being a visual feast—was a real feast, meant to be eaten and drunk while hearing the word of Christ. This word revealed that, far from being empty symbols or spiritual magic, the supper was the promise of its dying Lord: a last testament in which all that Christ's death accomplished is offered to the communicants and received by faith in that word alone.

A few years later a preacher in Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli, judged these same late-medieval practices in the light of a "newly discovered" second commandment not to make graven images. From the perspective of a theology that insisted on a radical polarization of the material and the spiritual, Zwingli argued that the mass pulled people away from the Spirit into the world of flesh. The supper was supposed to be a sign (another visual image!) of the communicants' faith, not a means of grace or the locus of Christ's presence on earth. "The flesh profits nothing; the spirit makes alive. Christ has ascended into heaven." These words became the battle-cry for Zwingli and his supporters.

Against this equally visual construal of the Lord's supper Luther also entered the lists, again insisting on the priority of Christ's word, this time not against the work of the mass but against the workings of reason, which could not imagine how the whole Christ could be present in the bread and wine. Here, too, Luther suspected the presence of a *Werkteufel* (works-devil) and the absence of faith in the word and promise of Christ.

II. LUTHER'S CATECHETICAL RESPONSE

In his catechetical sermons and in the *Large Catechism* Luther places the Lord's supper between these two camps that opposed him. On the one hand, with the papal party, Luther agreed wholeheartedly that Christ is present. On the other hand, with Zwingli and other reformers from the south, he insisted that faith was the goal and effect of the sacrament. Where both sides went wrong was in their denigration of the actual words and promises of Christ. To those who denied Christ was present in and with the bread and wine, he pointed to Christ's simple words, "This is my body." To those who had made the sacrament into a sacrifice effective by its mere performance, he hammered away at the promise, "Given for you...shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," and the faith that promise engenders.

The Lutheran church has often succumbed to the temptation of reducing Luther's statements on the Lord's supper to doctrine: timeless truths to be memorized by unsuspecting, impressionable eighth-graders. However, the *Large Catechism* reveals that Luther aims to use God's word and promise in the sacrament to make believers and comfort believers with the presence and forgiveness of Christ. Far from giving an esoteric exercise in right doctrine or practice, Luther speaks as a pastor, even in his most polemical moments. To reap the benefits of his catechetical instruction today is to hear anew that pastoral voice.

In dealing with the first catechetical question,² the essence of the sacrament, he writes:

With this Word ["This is My Body"] you can strengthen your conscience and declare: "Let a hundred thousand devils, with all the fanatics, rush forward and say, 'How can bread and wine be Christ's body and blood?' Still I know that all the spirits and scholars put together have less wisdom than the divine Majesty has in his little finger. Here we have Christ's word....We have it from the lips of Christ, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive."³

Luther insists on God's word in order to strengthen the conscience and destroy all attempts to turn the sacrament's unconditional promise into something that depends on us.

Christ does not say, "If you believe, or if you are worthy, you receive my body and blood," but, "Take, eat and drink, this is my body and blood." ...This is as much as to say, "No matter whether you are unworthy or worthy, you here have Christ's body and blood..." (17-18)

For Luther, that the unworthy receive Christ's body was first and foremost a pastoral issue. Everyone, even those who feel unworthy when they approach the supper, can be certain that Christ does not abandon them at the altar.

When he turns his attention to the sacrifice of the mass, Luther's answer in the *Catechism* also centered on the word. Here his very name for the Lord's supper changes from "sacrament" to treasure.⁴ Using two additional catechetical questions—what is the Lord's supper's power and benefit, and who receives these gifts—Luther stresses the treasure of the sacrament and the faith that receives that treasure and is strengthened by it. Thus he can write: "The Lord's supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle [against our old skin and the devil] but grow continually stronger" (24). Luther speaks here as a pastor: "This treasure is conveyed and communicated to us in no other way than through the words" (29). The whole gospel is "embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word" (32).

²The three catechetical questions discussed here are reiterated in the *Small Catechism*. The fourth question (how to prepare for the sacrament) is subsumed under the third in the *LC*.

³*LC* 5:12-14. Cited according to *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore E. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959). Further references to this section on the "Lord's Supper" will be placed in the text in parentheses, using paragraph numbers only.

⁴It occurs ten times in *LC* 5:20-37.

Some, including Zwingli, misconstrued this single-minded emphasis on the word for a return to a late-medieval insistence on the sacrament's effectiveness by the mere performance of the rite or, in this case, the saying of the words. However, in the *Catechism* Luther is the pastor, not the magician. Thus, the third question, who receives this power and benefit, takes on special significance. "It is [the one] who believes what the words say and what they give, for they are not spoken or preached to stone and wood but to those who hear them, those to whom Christ says, 'Take and eat' etc." (33). The word itself drives us to faith. "Since this treasure is fully offered in the words, it can be grasped and appropriated only by the heart" (36).

In today's American Lutheran churches practice varies widely: from restricting the table to members or believers, to offering it to everyone and anyone; from quarterly communion to weekly communion; from using the bare words of institution to reinserting them within any of a number of eucharistic prayers; from indoctrinating our children and adults about the supper to assuming they will "get it" if they just listen and participate. In all this confusion, Luther's approach offers a breath of fresh air. In the catechisms he cuts through our most reasonable and most ritualistic approaches to this sacrament and refocuses the discussion on what matters: the word of Christ, this treasure, and our faith in that word. When we lose that focus, we always turn in upon what we can offer: either what we bring to the altar or what we do at the altar. Either way, we bury the treasure and lose the very comfort it conveys.

III. LUTHER'S ADVICE ON DEALING WITH INACTIVE MEMBERS

In Luther's approach to the Lord's supper in the *Large Catechism*, he first emphasizes Christ's presence in the sacrament. Then, he stresses the "treasure" of forgiveness and our faith in that promise. Finally, he concludes with a lengthy entreaty on the use of "so great a treasure." To overlook this third part would be to miss the most pastoral part of all.

In the church in which Luther grew up, yearly confession and communion were required to remain a member of the church. When Luther insisted that anything so important to faith could not be coerced, some people exercised their newly-given freedom by not going to the Lord's supper at all. Others, still burdened by the notion that unworthy sinners had no place at the table, stayed away because of scruples of conscience. In this new world of Christian freedom, Luther and other reformers traveled in uncharted waters, certain that they did not wish to return to the "slaughter of souls" under papal obligations, but equally convinced that our "old skin" had to be restrained.

To this highly complex theological and pastoral problem Luther turned his energy in several of the 1529 Holy Week sermons on the Lord's supper and in the resultant *Large Catechism*.⁵ He left us a small but powerful manual on how to deal

⁵Ibid, 39-87. The "Brief Exhortation to Confession" that follows was based upon the sermon delivered on Palm Sunday 1529.

with inactive members from an evangelical perspective. Since so many current approaches are filled with legalism and judgmentalism, perhaps the greatest benefit Luther still has to offer our parishes is his own “law-gospel” approach to this vexing problem.

When faced with the problem of inactive, sleeping Christians, the old creature in us is only too happy to moralize or equivocate. Either we want to “get tough” or “take it easy.” Either way God’s word is lost, and we are left to our own devices. Luther, on the contrary, uses the law and the gospel to sort matters out. He uses law not to moralize, but to “tell it like it is.” “We see that [people] are becoming listless and lazy...as if they were such strong Christians that they have no need of [the Lord’s supper]” (40). The temptation (present even in the model constitutions of some modern churches) is to lay down the law. But Luther knows firsthand the danger of that response. “Now it is true, we repeat, that no one should under any circumstances be coerced or compelled, lest we institute a new slaughter of souls.” At the same time he does not flinch from the fact that people who “abstain and absent themselves from the sacrament over a long period of time are not to be considered Christians” (42). Luther eliminates the old creature’s favorite uses of the law and gospel: moralistic slaughter of others and well intentioned (but antinomian) permissiveness.

Instead, Luther takes another approach altogether. As in his opposition to Zwingli and the Roman party, he lets the word speak for itself. At the same time, however, he understands, like any good pastor, that the word is addressed to different people in different ways depending upon their situations. Thus, he distinguishes true Christians (“who cherish and honor the sacrament”) from the weak (“who would like to be Christians”—43). Even among the weak there are three types: “the cold and indifferent,” those who feel they are unworthy, and those who feel no need at all for the sacrament. Each group receives special treatment from their pastor.⁶

To the first group, Luther preaches the law—not *his* law, but Christ’s command to “DO THIS in remembrance of me” (45).⁷ These words are addressed to Christ’s disciples, Luther states. Therefore, “whoever would be one of them, let him [or her] faithfully hold to this sacrament, not from compulsion, coerced by [human beings], but to obey and please the Lord Christ” (45). The focus for Luther is not on rules for cleaning the rolls but on the invitation and command of Christ. Here we have no Christian liberty to despise the sacrament. “You may just as well take the further liberty not to be a Christian; then you need not believe or pray, for the one is just as much Christ’s commandment as the other” (49).

Here, too, the pastor dare not inject his or her own personality, despite the temptation to say: “Come to church to make me happy.” Luther concludes instead,

⁶He deals with each group, respectively, in LC 5:45-54; 55-74; and 75-84.

⁷He capitalizes the words in the original. In the introduction to the *Small Catechism* he writes: “For Christ did not say, ‘Omit this,’ or ‘Despise this,’ but instead, ‘Do this as often as you drink it...’” See *A Contemporary Translation of Luther’s Small Catechism*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994) 76.

"But we [pastors] neither force nor compel anyone, nor need anyone partake of the sacrament to serve or please us. What should move and impel you is the fact that Christ desires it, and it pleases him." Our urging is not for our own sake (stewardship committees, take note!) "but for your own. He invites and incites you" (52).

Luther concludes this discussion with a revelation that contradicts most of our motives when dealing with this first group. Far from lording it over them with his superior Christian faith, Luther admits that he himself has experienced how easily absencing oneself from the Lord's supper results in coldness and callousness—"as I have found in my own experience" (53).⁸ The genius of Luther's pastoral care rests in his honest admission of solidarity with the person in trouble, under the law.

With the second group, those who feel they are unfit, Luther begins by confessing that "this is also my temptation" (55). At first blush, this group may seem quite small today—reduced to a few old, pious souls who still fret over whether they are worthy. Yet my own experience in the parish makes me suspect that many people disappear from our pews because of deep spiritual and personal crises. Shame, guilt, and despair are still powerful motivators of religious conviction or inactivity.⁹

To this group Luther preaches not just the law, but the gospel. After all, they know they must come, but they cannot. "People with such misgivings," he writes, "must learn that it is the highest wisdom to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness" (61). When overwhelmed with feelings of unworthiness the command of Christ frees us to come, not because we are worthy, "but on account of thy Word, because thou hast commanded it" (62). But then follows the promise, "which should most powerfully draw and impel us" (64). When we hear the words, "for you," Luther urges all to "include yourself personally in the 'you' so that [Christ] may not speak to you in vain" (65). In calling on such broken people in our ministries, perhaps it would not be such a bad idea to bring the Lord's supper to them and say to them what Luther wrote:

In this sacrament [Christ] offers us all the treasure he brought from heaven for us....We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. (66, 68)

Finally, there are those who feel no need. These are probably the most frustrating people a pastor will ever have to deal with. Again, instead of seducing such folk with moralistic or entertaining tricks, Luther runs to the word and to experience. They should, "put their hands to their bosom and ask whether they are made of flesh and blood." If that is the case, read what Paul says about the flesh in Galatians 5 (75-78). "Look about you and see whether you are also in the world. If

⁸This is also the reason he changes the pronouns in his explanations of the ten commandments from "thou shalt" to "we are to fear and love."

⁹This despite the oft-repeated nostrum of modern systematicians who contrast Luther's search for a merciful God to the modern search for God. Such a contrast shows an ignorance of both the modern dilemma and Luther's experience.

you do not know, ask your neighbors" (79). Again, scripture also bears witness to the mess the world is in. Finally, there is the devil, who "seduces the heart from God's Word and blinds it, making you unable to feel your needs or come to Christ" (81).

Here, all who so love to blame the human will for everything (and thus expect the human will to fix everything) will find in Luther a strong antidote to any "just try a little harder" approach. Inactivity is not simply a matter of bad upbringing or a failure of will. And its root causes will not be fixed with a more sophisticated computer program or more exciting worship or appeals. We are in battle against the devil, and the only effective tools are Christ's word and work, not our own.

If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are at every moment aimed at you, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as possible. The only reason we go about so securely and heedlessly is that we neither acknowledge nor believe that we are in the flesh, in this wicked world, or under the kingdom of the devil. (82)

What if this dose of reality bears no fruit? We might be tempted to cross the person off the mailing list, but Luther takes a much more evangelical and pastoral approach. "If even then you feel nothing, you have all the more need to lament both to God and to your brother [or sister]. Take others' advice and seek their prayers and never give up until the stone is removed from your heart" (83). The ones who feel nothing—and God knows this society and our church rolls have their share of such folk—are more miserable, more to be prayed for and pitied than anyone else. What a different way to view these people!

Luther's teaching on the supper opens up an entirely new way to care pastorally (that is, with law and gospel) for the inactives in our congregations. This wholly evangelical approach, so foreign to our old skin, places Christ right where he belongs: in the center of his supper, this treasure, where he gives himself for us. ⊕