



A Communion That Is Holy: A Gospel Economy

DIRK G. LANGE

The desire of many churches, especially larger ones, to be seeker friendly has resulted in some odd yet, dare I say, understandable compromises. Perhaps the most understandable compromise is the minimization, if not complete elimination, of symbols and rites that are usually associated with communities calling themselves Christian. Why understandable? Because, whether megachurch communities recognize it or not, the symbols and rites that they have sidelined are, quite frankly, dangerous ones! The rite of Holy Communion, when taught and celebrated faithfully, invites participants into an entirely different form of life. As some perceptive students have noted, “If we teach *that*, no one will come to church!”

The “that” of Holy Communion is the subject of this reflection. I will consider the rite of this sacrament both ritually and theologically. Much has already been written on the relationship between Eucharist and economy. Working out of symbolic, phenomenological, sociological, historical, and biblical frameworks, the theological implications of this sacrament have been well discussed, especially in Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff’s recent book, *The Eucharist*,¹ and in Gordon

¹Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

The sacrament of Holy Communion trains us in a gospel economy. Receiving from God, we are taught to give. Freed from an obsessive attraction to temporal things, but also from a pious repulsion of them, we are drawn into a holy communion with God, neighbor, and material goods.

Lathrop's *Holy Ground*.² As they note, Eucharist brings an alternative economic and ecological agenda. Acknowledging their insights, I will reflect on this relationship from a slightly different angle. No matter how denominationally varied our understanding of Christ's presence in the sacrament might be, we share a general assumption that there is a link between this meal and the forgiveness of sins (that this link has not always been well enacted is another matter that I will address briefly in a moment). Building on this critical link, I begin by exploring the role of ritual in proclamation; then broaden, with the help of Luther, an understanding of the forgiveness of sins as it is given in the sacrament; and finally ponder what this exploration and broadening suggests about the way we live in the world. Ritually, the sacrament of Holy Communion holds within it the possibility to form a community of faith in a spirituality of justification by faith alone or in a spirituality of forgiveness. This formation through the sacrament impacts our life in the world—our relationship to the neighbor and, therefore, also to temporal goods. In other words, the forgiveness of sins invites us into a radical gospel economy.

RITUAL AND PROCLAMATION

Too often, Holy Communion is experienced as simply ritualistic. "Ritual" is here understood negatively: rote repetition without any significance; something that is simply done every so often and that lengthens the service and even means, at times, lesser attendance on a Sunday morning. But even in parishes that celebrate the sacrament every Sunday—parishes that have it truly incorporated into the rhythm of their worship life—it can quickly become merely a formal rite, "repetitive, prescribed, rigid, stereotyped and so on."³ It is no wonder that Holy Communion is eliminated as incomprehensible (and therefore esoteric) and unattractive for seekers!

Ritual is dismissed because it is poorly enacted. But there is more. Ritual is also dismissed because certain currents in Christian thought, stemming primarily from the Reformation, consider ritual dangerously close to magic. Ritual must be avoided because it too powerfully detracts from the word. Ritual cannot shake the impression that it is our work, attempting to appease or reach God.

It was, in fact, against an oversymbolized, an overritualized approach to worship that the Reformers reacted. Their call for a return to the word of God—to hearing the word again and having the church and its worship based again in the word—was a call to redirect worship. Worship was not to be a work performed by human beings to satisfy God but was the place where God's word came to the participant (the "hearer" to be precise) through preaching.

The reaction against ritualization took on different forms among the families

²Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). See especially ch. 5, "Eucharist and Earth Care."

³Mark Searle, "Ritual," in *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, ed. Paul Bradshaw (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 11.

issuing from the Reformation. Whether in the extreme case of Zwingli or the more moderate approach of Calvin, we witness a predominant emphasis given to the word over ritual as if the two were opposed to one another. The word alone was all that was needed. It eliminated all forms of ritualization. Hearing the word preached was the most important aspect of worship. Of course, what grows out of such an approach is the total preponderance of an intellectualized, cerebral form of worship. Mind was superior to matter, to the body.

Perhaps no one has better analyzed this phenomenon than Edward Schillebeeckx. He distinguishes between two very ancient terms: the patristic term *legomenon* (verbal expressions of the mystery—a “unique word”) and the equally ancient term *dromenon* (a thing done). Under *dromenon*, he includes the many “festive, even dramatic enactments forming an expressive whole of gestures, postures, rhythmic movements, ‘doing something’ with substances like water, oil or incense in an ambience of music, hymns and moments of silence, light and space.” Unfortunately, he notes, the *dromenon*, which the early church kept in balance with the *legomenon*, has been “kept subdued, sometimes eclipsed by treating these things as inessential extras.”⁴

Luther is keenly aware of the important role of ritual in shaping not only the way people think but also how they act. Proclamation is never just an auditory event; it is also a tactile, sensory experience.

They certainly were not “inessential extras” for Martin Luther (though Lutherans have not been exempt from this overemphasis on the mind and a person’s intellectual participation in worship). Luther is too keenly aware of the important role of ritual in shaping not only the way people think but also how they act.

The word alone for Luther is a word preached and distributed. Proclamation is never just an auditory event; it is also a tactile, sensory experience. At the beginning of his treatise on baptism, for example, Luther calls first of all for a retrieval of the symbol—that is, actually dunking someone in water, completely immersing them, so that baptism is “a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies.”⁵ This visual and tactile enactment teaches us what baptism is all about (drowning and being raised to life by God). It is not just our words that teach but the actions, the gestures, the images, the things we use that incorporate us, embed us in the reality that they are conveying. Luther could not have said it more pointedly than he did in the Large Catechism:

⁴Edward Schillebeeckx, “Towards a Rediscovery of Christian Sacraments: Ritualizing Religious Elements in Daily Life,” in *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table*, ed. Dirk G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2005) 6.

⁵Martin Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 35:29. *Luther’s Works* are hereafter cited as *LW*.

This is the reason why these two things are done in baptism; the body has water poured over it, because all it can receive is the water, and in addition the Word is spoken so that the soul may receive it. Because the water and the Word together constitute one baptism, both body and soul shall be saved and live forever: the soul through the Word in which it believes, the body because it is united with the soul and apprehends baptism in the only way it can.⁶

Our bodies are part of worship. Our bodies apprehend the gospel, as well, in their own way. Luther understood that as people of flesh and blood, we need to “cling” to something—we need to cling to the water, the bread, the wine. The word needs to be tangible for us.

Translated to a pedagogical level, we can say that Luther’s insight is simply the recognition that human beings learn not just through the use of their minds but through their heart and through their bodies. Melancthon picks up the incarnational component of the sacraments in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* on “The Number and Use of the Sacraments”: “God moves our hearts through the word and the rite at the same time so that they believe and receive faith just as Paul says [Rom. 10:17], ‘So faith comes from what is heard.’ For just as the Word enters through the ear in order to strike the heart, so also the rite enters through the eye in order to move the heart. The word and the rite have the same effect.”⁷ The sacraments as rites enter through the body to strike the heart.

For Luther, word does not replace ritual. Rather, ritual needs to be continually renewed in such a way that it becomes, itself, a proclamation of the gospel. This requires teaching. Rituals are not self-evident conveyors of information or meaning. They can be perceived and appropriated on many levels. The same rite can give rise to various meanings depending on locality and persons. Yes, rituals are dangerous in this regard. We cannot simply take what was done once, in the past, and impose it on our present-day situation and expect it to work. Yet, brashly rejecting the symbolic/ritual enactment of the sacraments as *dépassé* incurs another danger: rejecting the confrontation that the bodily revelation of God implies. Rejecting this bodily revelation can quickly lead to a self-centered, individualized, self-proclamation rather than to the gospel.

Addressing the first danger (blindly repeating the rituals as if they were eternal), the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* warns: “They [the papists] wish to retain rites taken from the apostles, but they do not wish to retain the teaching of the apostles.”⁸ In other words, it is not simply in copying the pattern that we have worship, or we find justification, or we are saved. The mere performance of the rite will not help us. What we are challenged to discover and understand is the teaching—the gospel—that undergirds the pattern, the symbols, the sacraments as rites

⁶Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, “Concerning Baptism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 462. Hereafter cited as *BC*.

⁷*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 8:5, in *BC*, 219. Hereafter cited as *Ap* in *BC*.

⁸*Ap* 7 and 8:38, in *BC*, 181.

and then pass on this teaching (catechesis) through faithful celebration. This celebration as proclamation opens ears and eyes, body and heart to the Holy Spirit, who alone forms our lives and our communities into a gospel witness. This proclamation through both word and sacrament introduces us to nothing less than the work of the Holy Spirit who makes us holy.⁹ I can speak of a spirituality of justification by faith alone precisely because it is the work of the Holy Spirit who conforms our life in and to the promise.

The challenge, I believe, is rediscovering the proclamatory possibility of a rite such as Holy Communion that deepens the sacrament's central message: the forgiveness of sins.

FORGIVENESS EMBODIED

This excursus into the role of ritual, and particularly the sacraments, in proclamation highlights the importance of the enacted rite. The word is proclaimed through words and the enactment of the rite. In what ways, then, does the sacrament of Holy Communion form us into the gospel it imparts, and what is this gospel with regards to the economic sphere of our lives?

*What does the forgiveness of sins have to do with the way
in which we relate to others and to material things?*

Some might ponder whether any link at all exists between the central gift of the sacrament and our relationship to temporal goods. What does the forgiveness of sins have to do with possessions, wealth management, buying, and selling? A connection becomes more quickly apparent when we ask the question this way: What does the forgiveness of sins have to do with the way in which we relate to others and to material things? What does the forgiveness of sins imply for us?

"This is the cup of the New Testament." Luther points out that God makes a testament, an eternal testament. What is this testament? What is bequeathed to us in it by Christ? "Truly a great, eternal, and unspeakable treasure, namely, the forgiveness of all sins, as the words plainly state, 'This is the cup of a new eternal testament in my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"¹⁰

Luther places great weight on the words of Christ. We must grasp these words "by which he performed and instituted the mass and commanded us to perform it. For therein lies the whole mass, its nature, work, profit and benefit. Without the words nothing is derived from the mass."¹¹ This might appear to be in contradiction to what I wrote earlier: the enactment of the rite is also proclamatory. But what

⁹*The Large Catechism*, "Third Article of the Creed," in *BC*, 435.

¹⁰Martin Luther, *A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass* (1520), in *LW* 35:85. Hereafter cited as *Testament*, *LW*.

¹¹*Testament*, *LW* 35:82.

is Luther's point? Namely, that the movement of the sacrament is from God toward us, the participant. The words of Christ are addressed *to us*. The action of the sacrament is *for us*. It is not from us to God. I want to argue that the elements, actions, and gestures of the sacrament help us grasp and ponder these words of Christ: that we receive the forgiveness of sins (along with "every grace of God," as Luther adds¹²).

Through the word, this radical forgiveness does not need a sign, yet this is what Christ has done in this testament, as he himself came in a body.

Christ has affixed to the words a powerful and most precious seal and sign: his own true flesh and blood under the bread and wine.

For we poor [human beings], living as we do in our five senses, must always have along with the words at least one outward sign to which we may cling and around which we may gather—in such a way, however, that this sign may be a sacrament, that is, that it may be external and yet contain and signify something spiritual; in order that through the external we may be drawn into the spiritual, comprehending the external with the eyes of the body and the spiritual or inward with the eyes of the heart.¹³

The rite draws us into the spiritual, but the spiritual is not some other realm. It is the daily realm of relationships to others and to things. It is the actualization of forgiveness. When we take the rite seriously—the elements, the actions, and the gestures of the sacrament ("bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten and drunk"¹⁴)—our hearts, minds, and bodies find themselves immersed in this forgiveness in new ways. The understanding of forgiveness is expansive. The elements of the rite teach us this broader view. In the treatise of 1520, the bread and the wine, "which we use from day to day"¹⁵ (in other words, real bread and real wine), are a sign and seal of the remission of all sins and eternal life.¹⁶ In the earlier treatise of 1519, the bread and the wine, which are eaten and drunk, are the "indication of the very union and fellowship which is in this sacrament. For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union than the union of the food with him who is fed."¹⁷ The bread signifies the real fellowship with Christ and all his saints: we have all things in common.¹⁸ The wine, as blood of Christ, signifies "his passion and martyrdom," which, too, "are all our own."¹⁹ These two, through the word, draw and change us "into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints, and by this sacrament put into possession of all the

¹²*Testament*, LW 35:109.

¹³*Testament*, LW 35:86.

¹⁴*Solid Declaration* VII:83–84, in *BC*, 607.

¹⁵*Testament*, LW 35:86–87.

¹⁶*Testament*, LW 35:87.

¹⁷Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), in *LW* 35:59. Hereafter cited as the *True Body of Christ*.

¹⁸*True Body of Christ*, LW 35:59.

¹⁹*True Body of Christ*, LW 35:60.

virtues and mercies of Christ and his saints.”²⁰ Bread and wine with the word added are a sign of Christ’s promise: the forgiveness of sins breaks down the barrier between God and us, the neighbor and us.

Through the forgiveness of sins, of which bread and wine are sign and seal, we are drawn into the spiritual body. Or, as Timothy Wengert puts it, “In this meal, as first in baptism, the believer experiences the intimate connection between the ‘Holy Christian Church’ and the ‘forgiveness of sins.’ In this meal, believers are ushered into the Holy Spirit’s workshop, where they encounter Christ for them, not against them, who reflects God’s glory and draws and entices into the Father’s heart.”²¹

A GOSPEL ECONOMY

The gift of the forgiveness of sins and every grace of God²² draws us into a relationship with one another. We have all things in common, merits and sins, joys and needs. The forgiveness of sins, accomplished for us in that happy exchange,²³ frees us into a fellowship, a community, and, therefore, into a different relationship to the neighbor and creation.

The word and this sacrament draw us into a relationship to the neighbor and creation that is marked by simplicity. The celebration of this sacrament, the continual enactment of this gift given to us, bread and wine from daily use, with God’s promise added to them, “train and accustom ourselves to let go of all visible love, help, and comfort, and to trust in the invisible love, help, and support of Christ and his saints.”²⁴ Living as people who are continually assured of the forgiveness of sins, we are “trained” through the sacrament, trained by its enactment, trained to let go more and more of our dependence on things of this world. Just as baptism is “practiced”²⁵ through daily dying and being raised to life, so the sacrament of the meal “exercises our faith,”²⁶ freeing us from our attachment to temporal things.

This is God’s work, the Holy Spirit’s “workshop.” This workshop forges in us a spirituality of justification by faith alone. Through the forgiveness of sins, individuals are freed of any need to justify themselves, freed of any need to romanticize, idolize, or demonize the neighbor, freed of the attraction and repulsion of temporal goods. This does not entail, of course, despising creation or neighbor. The baptized person is freed to fear, love, and trust God above all others.²⁷ She is now free to love the neighbor and creation, all things material and spiritual, without being subject to them.

²⁰*True Body of Christ*, LW 35:59.

²¹Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 147.

²²*Testament*, LW 35:109.

²³Christ takes all that is ours upon himself and gives all that is his to us.

²⁴*True Body of Christ*, LW 35:66.

²⁵*The Large Catechism*, “Concerning Baptism,” in *BC*, 461.

²⁶*Testament*, LW 35:88.

²⁷*The Small Catechism*, “The First Commandment,” in *BC*, 351.

Luther's vision of the gospel witness in the midst of a world curved in on itself is radical. Yes, the freeing of the person from all need of self-justification through works and, therefore, from judgment (the troubling practice of perpetual comparison) is well acknowledged. There is also, however, the freeing of the person from self-focused desire—a much less acknowledged benefit of forgiveness. The sacrament does not simply communicate an idea or channel grace. It enacts a reality. It teaches through the elements—the use of bread and wine from daily life—the acts of giving, of receiving into outstretched hands, of hearing, and of seeing the goodness of God in creation and through Christ Jesus. The sacrament teaches and trains us in a vision of creation and our place in creation. It trains us to praise God for all the good things given in creation;²⁸ it exercises us in receiving forgiveness, and, through the Holy Spirit, continues work to make us holy. Through this practice of forgiveness—or as Melancthon puts it in the *Apology*, this “exercise”²⁹—the Holy Spirit nourishes and helps us grow in a spirituality of justification, a deep reconciliation with God, neighbor, and material goods.

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Luther could not have outlined this more succinctly than he did in his treatise *Trade and Usury*.³⁰ Here he proposes three ways in which a believer relates to the neighbor and, therefore, how a believer lives with temporal goods. First, the most difficult way, is to let oneself be robbed of all goods! Surprising as this sounds, Luther's intent here is to highlight the detachment that the baptized are to have with regard to temporal goods. “[T]rue Christians observe it, for they know that their Father in heaven has assuredly promised in Matthew 6[:11] to give them this day their daily bread.”³¹ In this way, we are “trained to turn our hearts away from the false temporal goods of this world, letting them go in peace, and pinning our hopes on invisible and eternal goods.”³²

The second way consists in giving “freely and without return to anyone who needs our goods or asks for them. Of this, our Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 5[:42], ‘Give to him who begs from you.’”³³ Here again, Luther stresses the fact that the commandment is training the baptized to trust only in eternal things. A prob-

²⁸*The Small Catechism*, “The Creed: The First Article,” in *BC*, 354–355.

²⁹“The cross, therefore, is not a punishment but an exercise and preparation for renewal.” *Apology* XII:151, “Repentance,” in *BC*, 214.

³⁰Martin Luther, *Trade and Usury* (1524), in *LW* 45. Hereafter cited as *Trade*.

³¹*Trade*, *LW* 45:255.

³²*Trade*, *LW* 45:279.

³³*Trade*, *LW* 45:280.

lem arises, however, in that we want to believe in our eternal life and yet hold on to temporal goods. The promise of the forgiveness of sins and life eternal for Luther imply a fundamental detachment from temporal goods. We are trained in this commandment to give (Matt 5:42), just as bread and wine, body and blood, have been given to us. God did not hold back anything that was God's (Phil 2).

The third way follows the command of Jesus in Luke 6:35 (and the commandment already given in the Old Testament, Deut 15:7–8) to lend without expecting anything in return.³⁴ We, however, prefer to give to those who can return our goods in kind or even in greater quantity rather than giving to those who cannot give anything in return.

Luther draws a direct parallel to love of neighbor in this third way. Lenders who only give expecting something in return “love themselves alone and seek only their own; they do not love and look out for their neighbor with the same fidelity as they love and look out for themselves.”³⁵ Again, though Luther does not make a direct connection to the sacrament of Holy Communion, it is clear from what has been presented above, concerning the sacrament and the ritual enactment of the forgiveness of sins, that the sacrament teaches us what God has done for us: *giving* to sinners, giving to those who cannot return the favor. The sacrament trains us in this spirituality of justification. We arrive not in a different place, a “spiritual” place, but in a different relationship to this world. We grow in detachment from the things of this world and find ourselves more fully immersed, ardent in love for neighbor and justice, for the well-being of all.

The sacrament trains us in this gospel economy: freed from both an obsessive attraction and a pious repulsion of temporal things, we are drawn ever deeper into a communion that is holy. ⊕

DIRK G. LANGE is associate professor of worship at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He recently published Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology (Fortress, 2009).

³⁴*Trade, LW 45:289.*

³⁵*Trade, LW 45:292.*