



Between Baptism and Ministry: The Eucharistic Link

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In *A Statement on Communion Practices*, adopted by both the Lutheran Church in America and The American Lutheran Church in 1978, Lutheran congregations are encouraged to move toward the goal of celebrating the Eucharist on every Sunday and festival “because the complete service of Holy Communion embodies the fullness of the Means of Grace, because it provides an excellent focus for the whole Christian life and mission, and because it witnesses to our confessional and ecumenical heritage.”¹ It is clear, of course, how the complete service of Holy Communion does indeed embody the fullness of Word and Sacrament. It should likewise be clear how the weekly celebration of the Eucharist witnesses to our confessional and ecumenical heritage.² What, however, may not be so clear—especially to those unfamiliar with frequent (i.e., weekly) celebration—is this centrality of the Eucharist in providing “an excellent focus for the whole Christian life and mission.” How does the Eucharist do this? Or, in other words, taking the title of the Lima Document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (hereafter *BEM*) as reflecting a theological order itself, how does the Eucharist provide the connecting link between baptism and ministry?

In this essay I shall answer this question in a three-fold manner. First of all, I shall discuss the Eucharist as ministry *to* the baptized community itself. Second, I shall discuss the Eucharist as formative of the ministering community of the baptized. And, third, I shall discuss the way in which the Eucharist as ministry and as formative of community gives the focus to and provides the source for the community’s ministry in the world.

¹*A Statement on Communion Practices*, II, B, 2. The text is available in several publications, including *Minutes: Ninth Biennial Convention of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1987) 209-14. The quotation is from p. 213.

²See *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 14.1. The text is published in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 97-285.

I. EUCHARIST AS MINISTRY TO THE BAPTIZED COMMUNITY

Lutherans need to be reminded that the Eucharist is at the heart and center of the proclamation of the gospel. This was certainly the case for Luther. The Words of Institution, the *Verba Christi*, Christ’s last will and testament to the church were for him “the sum total of the whole Gospel.”³ They were indeed the gospel in a “nutshell.” Even the preaching of the gospel was for him to be nothing other than the explication of these eucharistic words. He writes:

For the preaching ought to be nothing but an explanation of the words of Christ,

when he instituted the mass and said, “This is my body, this is my blood,” etc. What is the whole gospel but an explanation of this testament? Christ has gathered up the whole gospel in a short summary with the words of this testament or sacrament. For the gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God’s grace and of the forgiveness of all sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ, as St. Paul proves in Romans 10 and as Christ says in Luke 24 [:46-47]. And this same thing, as we have seen, is contained in the words of this testament.⁴

BEM also clearly brings out this close relationship between preaching and the Eucharist by saying that “since the *anamnesis* of Christ is the very content of the preached Word as it is of the eucharistic meal, each reinforces the other. The celebration of the eucharist properly includes the proclamation of the Word.”⁵ And, similarly, Gordon Lathrop has recently written of the importance of viewing the Liturgy of the Word in its necessary relationship to the Liturgy of the Meal. He writes:

...every Sunday at the Lord’s Supper we replicate the pattern of the gospels themselves, their use of the skein of signs or stories leading to the cross. We read a text from the gospel, not in order to recapture the time when independent tradition units circulated in the Christian communities, but in order to set the pericope we read next to the passion and resurrection of Christ held forth now in the Supper. Hence reading the individual pericopes and then celebrating the Supper presents us with a skein of images reinterpreting images which is the very pattern of the gospel books themselves. The Sunday texts are not then understood aright unless they are understood as leading to that Supper.⁶

³Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 36.56. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

⁴Martin Luther, *A Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass*, *LW* 35.106.

⁵*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), “Eucharist,” II, B (p. 12). Hereafter cited as *BEM*.

⁶Gordon Lathrop, “A Rebirth of Images: On the Use of the Bible in Liturgy,” *Worship* 58 (1984) 296. On the relationship between preaching and Eucharist note also the following comments by James F. White: “Preaching is at its best within the context of the eucharist. No longer does the preacher and his or her message have to carry the main weight of the service, making it all too often a personality event....Having the eucharist each week to plunge us into the heart of the Christian mystery leaves preachers free to explore those portions of God’s word that have been neglected. They can now preach Moses and Jeremiah and Acts and Revelation, because the eucharist always preaches Christ.” *Sacraments as God’s Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 64.

The Eucharist itself thus *is* ministry to the baptized Christian community because the Eucharist is nothing other than the whole gospel. It is the audible, visible, enacted, and incarnated proclamation of Christ crucified and risen. The celebration of the Eucharist in the Christian community is the proclamation of the Good News to that community in proclaimed Word and sacramental action. The sins, weaknesses, needs, sufferings, and hopes of the community are herein juxtaposed to the paschal mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising. The Eucharist, thus holds and proclaims his death and resurrection (1 Cor 11:26) always before the eyes and ears of the

gathered community.

To be concerned about ministry *to* the baptized community is to be concerned about the place of the Eucharist within that community. For nowhere is the grace of God more clearly proclaimed, nowhere is justification by grace for Christ's sake more clearly announced, and nowhere is the death and resurrection of Christ more obviously and simply declared than in the celebration of this sacramental meal. By its very definition as "gospel" the Eucharist belongs with preaching at the heart and center of Sunday (and festival) liturgy. Robert Jenson has recently stated that "in all parts of the church in which the Supper is no longer the dominating service, Christ has in fact come to be thought of as a disembodied spirit and, insofar as this conception then controls preaching and teaching, the gospel is not heard."⁷ Perhaps this is overstating the case. Perhaps it is not. Yet the fact remains that if the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen is to be proclaimed, then it is *this* gospel of his "body given and blood shed" that must be proclaimed. That is the gospel of the Eucharist. There is in fact no other. And because the Eucharist *is* the gospel, the Eucharist *is* ministry to the baptized community *par excellence*. Indeed, congregations which do not regularly experience the Sunday Eucharist are cheated (albeit sometimes by their own choice) out of the incarnational fullness of the gospel's proclamation.

II. EUCHARIST AS FORMATIVE OF THE MINISTERING COMMUNITY

Because the Eucharist is ministry to the baptized community, it is also formative of the ministering community. Lutherans need to bring this community building dimension of the Eucharist back to the forefront of their sacramental theology because much of current Lutheran sacramental praxis in fact mitigates this central emphasis. Too often for Lutherans the Eucharist is little more than a dramatic bestowal of individual absolution. This understanding is reinforced by a number of questionable liturgical practices. Such practices include: the use of individual pre-filled glasses and pre-packaged wafers, individual "table-blessings," a service of communion attached to the end of the "main service" after those not desiring to commune have been dismissed, and the continued practice in some congregations of the ordained pastor as the only liturgical leader. Even the continuance in some places of retaining the altar against the wall rather than viewing it free-standing as the banquet table around which the community gathers can also tend to make the Eucharist less than a cor-

⁷Robert W. Jenson, "The Sacraments," *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2.349.

porate/communal celebration. Such a practice tends to reduce the gathered community to a collection of passive onlooking individuals for whom the liturgical action of praising and thanking God over bread and cup has no visible corporate dimension or importance.⁸ For better or worse, liturgical practices shape our liturgical/sacramental theology.

The German rationalist Ludwig Feuerbach is commonly credited with the saying, *Der Mensch ist was er isst* ("we are what we eat"), but such a saying has been basic to eucharistic theology from the very beginning. In 1 Corinthians St. Paul says the same thing writing: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10: 16-17). It was St. Augustine

of Hippo who gave classic expression to this Pauline eucharistic focus. To those newly baptized at the Easter Vigil he said:

He who suffered for us entrusted to us in His Sacrament His own body and blood, and this too He makes us also; for we are become His body, and we are that which we receive through His mercy....and there you are on the table, there you are in the chalice.⁹

In another context he declares:

If therefore you are the body of Christ and members, your divine mystery is set on the table of the Lord; you receive your mystery. To that which you are, you answer Amen, and by so answering give your assent. For thou hearest, the Body of Christ, that thy Amen may be true....Be what you see and receive what you are.... Brethren, remember from what the wine is made. Many grapes hang on the vine, but the juice of the grapes is mingled into a unity. Thus also has Christ the Lord designated us. He willed that we should belong to Him, and consecrated the mystery of our peace and of our unity on His table.¹⁰

Similarly Luther, undoubtedly reflecting his Augustinian heritage, also speaks of the relationship between Eucharist and community. In one of his early writings, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods" (1519) he says:

For there is no more intimate, deep, and indivisible union than the union of the food with him who is fed. For the food enters into and is assimilated by his very nature, and becomes one substance with the person who is fed.... Thus in the sacrament we too become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts in our behalf.... For just as the bread is changed into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all the saints and by this sacrament put into possession of all the virtues and mercies of Christ and his saints.¹¹

⁸Cf. Martin Luther, *The German Mass and Order of Service*, LW 53.69.

⁹Augustine, *Serm.* CCIX.

¹⁰Augustine, *Serm.* CCLXXII.

¹¹Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, LW 35.59.

We are what we eat! The community gathered at the Eucharist is constituted by Word and meal to be the body of Christ, the church. In other words, the Eucharist continually calls the church back to its baptismal origins and renews and re-forms it over and over again as community. The Eucharist forms the church to be, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, "Christ existing as community,"¹² and the presence of such a divine and human community in the world is itself

ministry to the world.

The fact that the Eucharist constitutes the church as a ministering community is expressed by means of the liturgical rubrics followed in the liturgical assembly. The *Lutheran Book of Worship*—with its designations of Presiding Minister and Assistant Minister, as well as its emphasis upon the use of cantors, lectors, communion ministers, and other lay members of the congregation—underscores and gives communal expression to the church’s liturgy. Liturgy is to be a corporate act of the gathered community which by expressing the gifts and talents of the community members further emphasizes the ministry of the community outside the liturgical context. What happens in the community’s liturgy is the ground and expression of what is to be happening in the daily ministry (the daily liturgy) of the community as the body of Christ ministering in and to the world in various ways by means of various gifts and talents. Attention to the rubrics and designations in contemporary worship books such as *LBW* means attention will be paid to the corporate dimension of Christian liturgy.

It is important to note in this context also that the celebration of the Eucharist provides a liturgical answer to the question of ordained ministry within the community. No matter how we might discuss the various roles and functions of ordained ministry, the fact remains that in the liturgical assembly the ordained minister (as designated by *LBW*) *presides*, i.e., acts as *president* of the community exercising a unique liturgical role of leadership in Word and table. Does this not imply simultaneously a role of “presidency” in the total life and mission of the congregation? Geoffrey Wainwright states: “As a matter of historical fact, it is likely that, from the earliest days of the Church, regular presidency of the worshipping assembly helped to reinforce the leading role of the minister in the whole life of the congregation, just as leadership in the general life of the congregation will have made such persons the ‘natural’ presidents of the worshipping assembly.”¹³ Presidency at the Lord’s table and in community life are mutually reciprocal. Therefore, paying attention to the various roles within the liturgical assembly itself could save us a number of constitutional headaches over attempting to define the exact nature and function of ordained ministers.

III. EUCHARIST AS FOCUS AND SOURCE FOR THE COMMUNITY’S MINISTRY

The community formed as body of Christ at the eucharistic table is a special kind of community in the world. At the Eucharist the church is constituted to be the

¹²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 59-61.

¹³Geoffrey Wainwright, “Reconciliation in Ministry,” *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, ed. Max Thurian (Faith and Order Paper 116; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983) 131.

eschatological community, the community of the new age of salvation. Gathered around bread, cup, and Word in the liturgical assembly the church already begins to eat and drink the elements of the present yet coming kingdom of God. Indeed, the church already begins to share the “bread of tomorrow today.”¹⁴ With *LBW*—especially in the use of such texts as “Worthy is Christ,” “Let the vineyards be fruitful...,” “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus,” and the language of the new eucharistic prayers—Lutherans now have available a liturgical source with a clear eschatological orientation. The liturgical texts for the eucharistic celebration in *LBW* remind us that to do Eucharist, to do Jesus’ *anamnesis* by the ritual use of bread and cup, is to commemorate not only God’s past

historical saving action in him but, because it is a commemoration of the total Christ event, also to celebrate, “remember,” and invoke the future reality that has appeared in him already and will appear at the *eschaton*.¹⁵ Between the “now” of salvation as an accomplished event and the “not yet” of its fullness to come, the pilgrim church celebrates the Eucharist not only as a meal of *anamnesis* but of anticipation (*prolepsis*) of the parousia of Christ, the creation of a new heaven and earth, and the final victory when all things are subjected to God who then becomes “everything to everyone” (1 Cor 15:28).

It is thus the Eucharist, especially in its eschatological orientation, which provides the source and focus for the ministry of the baptized community in the world. In the words of *BEM*:

The eucharist opens up the vision of the divine rule which has been promised as the final renewal of creation, and is a foretaste of it. Signs of this renewal are present in the world wherever the grace of God is manifest and human beings work for justice, love and peace. The eucharist is the feast at which the Church gives thanks to God for these signs and joyfully celebrates and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom of Christ (1 Cor 11:26; Matt 26:29).¹⁶

As the eschatological community constituted at the Eucharist the church is called and sent out from the table to live in and view the present with the eyes of God’s future as revealed in Jesus Christ. The church lives from this future perspective, sacramentally foretasting and being caught up in the joy and shalom of the age to come. Having tasted this age to come the church, as the present sign of this coming age, is empowered and challenged to participate in the building of a better world here and now, challenged to do the will of God “on earth as it is in heaven,” and to live in the present, as Dermot A. Lane says, from the “pull of the future”¹⁷ where Christ already reigns in glory ahead of us. As the community of the kingdom the church is called always to judge this present age in the light of God’s future, to remind the world critically of its transitoriness and lack of finality in view of the ultimate reality to come, and to reject consciously any identification of its own life with that of the coming kingdom.

¹⁴See Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 99.

¹⁵See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Oxford University, 1971) 67.

¹⁶*BEM*, “Eucharist,” II, E, 22 (p. 14).

¹⁷Dermot A. Lane, “The Paschal Mystery” *The Furrow* (May, 1979) 290.

Ite, Missa est. “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.” If there is a eucharistic model today both for ecclesiology and ministry, it is clearly the model of Servant, the model of the table servant, the *diakonos*.¹⁸ *Missa* leads to *missio*, the Mass leads to a mission of servanthood. What is celebrated and modelled at the eucharistic table where Christ serves us calls the church to a life-style of servanthood as the community formed to serve others. As Bonhoeffer said: “The church is the church only when it exists for others.”¹⁹ When the church as the body of Christ, as the eschatological community of the kingdom, functions like its Lord as a servant people proclaiming in Word and discipleship the gospel in a variety of human contexts and needs, it is then doing ministry. Where “through Christ, people are enabled to turn in praise to God and in service to their neighbours,”²⁰ ministry happens. Where the members of the church “identify with

the joys and sufferings of all people as they seek to witness in caring love” and where “the members of Christ’s body...struggle with the oppressed towards that freedom and dignity promised with the coming of the Kingdom,”²¹ then ministry is taking place. And all of this is focused and finds its source in the Eucharist, in the gathering of the ministering community around the great banquet of the kingdom where rich and poor, young and old, slave and free, male and female, black and white sit together in baptismal solidarity at table. In the words of the late Alexander Schmemmann:

The Church is set in the world with a mission, and it is precisely to this mission “to proclaim the Lord’s death and confess His resurrection” that the Sacrament of the Church bears witness. This Sacrament “consecrates” Christians to this mission, and it is within the Church that this mission is actualized as the manifestation of the new aeon, the new life in the *parousia* of the Lord. “This world” will pass away, the Lord will reign in glory. The Church is expecting this fulfillment of time, is directed toward this ultimate victory. But this expectation is not a passive state, it is responsible service—it is to “be as He was in this world.”²²

To “be as He was in this world,” to be a community of servants for others is the ministry of the baptized in a nutshell. And nowhere is this ministry more clearly focused than in the Eucharist where Christ gives himself to and for us that we may in fact be what our baptism has declared and made us to be and thereby give ourselves (i.e., *our* body and blood) for others.

A Statement on Communion Practices encourages Lutheran congregations to move toward the goal of every Sunday and festival Eucharist in part “because it provides an excellent focus for the whole Christian life and mission.”

In this essay I have demonstrated that this is clearly the case. As ministry *to* the community, formative of the ministering community, and as source for

¹⁸See Gordon Lathrop, “Liturgy: Pattern and Image for Ministry,” *Liturgy* (November, 1977) 28.

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 382.

²⁰*BEM*, “Ministry,” I, 2 (p. 20).

²¹*Ibid.*, I, 4 (p. 20).

²²Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1966) 59.

and focus of the community’s ministry the Eucharist is central to the life of the church in all its aspects and functions, truly providing the connecting link between baptism and ministry. For the Christian life and mission, in the final analysis, is really nothing else than living out in faith the reality celebrated and identity formed at the eucharistic table. Or, in other words, the Christian life and mission (i.e., ministry) is living the Eucharist of Christ crucified and risen for us as we daily renew our baptismal plunge in him. This, in fact, is nothing other than what is meant by “eucharistic sacrifice,” the “sacrifice of the Mass,” the offering of self in service to the world in union with Christ’s “once-for-all” offering of himself for us. And this offering of self—symbolized and focused especially in *LBW*’s Offertory rite (i.e., the offering of money, *bread* and

wine), the intercessory prayers, and the dismissal—is the “living sacrifice” of the church (Romans 12:1), the church’s offering of itself, in its ministry of witness and service “through Christ, with him, and in him.”