



What's in a Name? Eucharist or *Lord's Supper*

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In the confusion of the contemporary church it is essential to maintain a sense for the objectivity of the gifts of divine grace. It is of utmost importance to remember just who is giving and who is given in the sacraments. We are to eat and drink in remembrance of the Lord. Thus what we do should be called the Lord's Supper. That is the earliest biblical name (1 Cor 11:20) as well as the most apt and comprehensive designation for the sacrament. Other designations, particularly “the Eucharist,” are theologically misleading and deceptive.

We are indeed to give thanks (*eucharistein*) for God's gifts to us. But to turn the sacrament into our thanksgiving is to comport ourselves more in the fashion of the Pharisee than the publican. At least two things go wrong. First, there is a disastrous change of subject in the sacramental action. Second, since prayer can by analogy be understood as sacrifice, the way is left open to interpret the whole as our sacrifice to God rather than the Lord's gift to us. This is hopelessly to mix up and confuse what the Reformation tried so carefully to distinguish. It is to set in place once again exactly what was rejected. When the Augsburg confessors spoke about sacraments which are to be administered “according to the gospel” (CA VII), this is the sort of issue they had in mind.

We need to look at these two effects, the change in subject and the question of sacrifice, a bit more closely. When the Lord's Supper becomes the Eucharist, we become the acting subjects in the sacrament rather than the Lord. The way is then open to the bowdlerization and sentimentality evident in many quarters today, in which the Supper becomes the occasion for our communion with one another rather than with the Lord. So the Eucharist is done in small groups, in “caring community” programs, out on the trail, and goodness knows where. People are to participate, apparently, more on the basis of feelings and needs in relation to others than because of faith in the Lord. The Supper has become a means to promote our togetherness but not a partaking of the body and blood of the Lord.

There is little new under the sun. Already at the time of the Reformation Luther knew of this kind of development. When the Word promising the presence of the Lord was taken away, the Supper degenerated into just an occasion for human togetherness. It became, as Luther remarked, like a parish fair (*Luther's Works* 37.141). To that Luther insisted,

it is the Lord's Supper, in name and in reality, not the supper of Christians. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and gives it himself, and is himself cook, butler, food, and drink Christ does not say, in commanding and instituting

it, “Do this as your summons to mutual recognition and love,” but “Do this in remembrance of me.” (*LW* 37.142)

An age which has already reduced God pretty much to a meaningless cipher, a sentimentality characterized as “love in general,” cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that this sacrament is the Lord’s Supper, not ours. He gives it. He is the gift. We are indeed to give thanks for this unspeakable gift. But the thanksgiving must be quite distinct; it must not displace the gift itself. When the Lord’s Supper becomes the Eucharist everything is run together and confused and the sheer gift of the gospel is obscured, if not lost.

But the second problem is even more serious: the supper is interpreted as a sacrifice. What occurred on the night in which our Lord was betrayed is simply run together uncritically with what happened on the day he was crucified, and then the whole is interpreted by the very ambiguous and amorphous metaphor of sacrifice. The number of theological and systematic problems stirred up by such a move is legion. Once again, the Lord’s *Supper* as sheer gift—as our Lord’s last will and testament—gets lost, swallowed up by all the talk of our eucharistic sacrifice. The whole burden of the Reformation in this regard was to distinguish carefully between the sacrament—the gift—and whatever “sacrifice” of prayer and praise might surround it. All the recent attempts to rescue the idea of sacrifice, moving away from “repetition” to liturgical “representation” (the key concept in all modern discussion, including that of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*), have been only cosmetic. Calling the Supper the Eucharist simply paves the way for the return to an understanding of the whole in terms of the sacrificial scheme the Reformation rejected. This is the hidden root of all our troubles about ministry. Where sacrificial conceptuality takes over we have to reinstitute a priesthood to do the sacrifice.

What one finds in the church today is either the sacrament of our togetherness (the parish fair) or a return to sacrificial views which obscure and distort the gospel. What the church needs is not “the Eucharist,” but the Lord’s Supper!

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Picture yourself at a festival dinner at a country church. The minister stands up before the food is served and says, “Before we eat, I want to tell you that all the food we have is a gift from God. Now you may eat.” The words seem abrupt and rude. We would be just as surprised if the minister said, “Before we eat, let us give ourselves a hand for what good farmers and cooks we are.” What a self-centered and ungrateful group this must be. Of course we would be more used to hearing words like these, “Let us give thanks to God for the blessings we have received and ask God to bless us and this food.” It seems appropriate that the same spirit of gracious thanksgiving and table etiquette should surround the meal at the Lord’s table. So when the pastor says, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God,” we naturally respond, “It is right to give God thanks and praise.”

Whatever we call the meal at the Lord’s table, I agree with Martin Luther and many others that we are on the right track if we begin by asking the question, “What proclaims the

gospel?” I think the title Eucharist can and does proclaim the gospel and keep the focus of the meal where it belongs: on God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. The church’s eucharistic meal is a liturgical expression of Paul’s sentiment in 1 Corinthians 15:57, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

However, if evangelical Christians are to use the title Eucharist they must remove from it the notion of sacrifice. A common understanding is that when the title Eucharist is used the element of sacrifice is also present. We need to emphasize that one can give thanks without having to participate in a sacerdotal system—rightly objectionable to most evangelical Christians. Sacrifice is not always wrong, of course. When it is understood as a call for commitment from all Christians (as in Romans 12), it is to be encouraged. But in some eucharistic theologies the emphasis on sacrifice can and does lose sight of the heart of the gospel: God first loved us.

We need to start with something as basic as reminding ourselves that the

word eucharist means thanksgiving; it does not mean sacrifice. Let us reclaim the original meaning for this good word. The connection between eucharist and sacrifice is not a New Testament usage. We note also that the New Testament does not use the title Eucharist for the meal at the Lord’s table. So the use of that title by the church can not be seen as an attempt to reclaim a biblical title, but as an attempt to perpetuate a biblical attitude, namely, thanksgiving.

Once we have removed sacrifice from its association with eucharist, we need to show that proclamation should replace sacrifice and be joined to thanksgiving for a proper understanding of the event. A major motif of the entire service of Holy Communion is grateful remembrance and celebration of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is only because of that sacrifice that we have the audacity to come to this table and to invite our friends to join us.

Whether one uses the Words of Institution alone or a Eucharistic Prayer, we are proclaiming to the gathered faithful that Jesus Christ has died for them and is present with them in this meal. Using a Eucharistic Prayer reminds us that we are in the midst of a congregation of baptized believers who have come to worship. The Words of Institution alone can serve as a sort of Christian Haggadah to remind us of our faith heritage (as in Exodus 12 and 1 Corinthians 11).

The Words of Institution alone make their proclamation directly—as one might do in a sermon, when witnessing to a non-believer, or in some other form of prose. The Eucharistic Prayer does the same thing in a more poetic way. The worshiper overhears the truth as it is spoken to God in prayer form. If one assumes the Scriptures have already been read and a sermon preached, then this is a good way to continue the proclamation. If one were to argue that the Words of Institution can proclaim only if they stand alone, then I suppose we should have to quit using hymns and songs as a way of nurturing the faith in the hearts of the people. And to say that we can have only one-way communication in worship does not take into account the nature of love relationships. In love many things can be communicated at the same time in all directions and at many levels of comprehension.

Jesus gave thanks at the Last Supper. We should do likewise. It is right to give God thanks and praise. The Eucharist is a rehearsal for the day when you will join the angel choir, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen!” (Revelation 7:12).