

# THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER



A Report of the Commission on Doctrine and Church  
Relations of The AALC 2025

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## PREFACE

**T**he Commission on Doctrine and Church Relations (CDCR) was tasked with preparing a report concerning the *THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER*. This report was presented to the Ministerium of The AALC prior to being published for general use in the congregations of The American Association of Lutheran Churches. In an effort to provide a statement that is faithful to Holy Scripture, in accordance with the Lutheran Confessions, and that would serve to both represent and unify our Church body, the following document is submitted by the CDCR as a catalyst for teaching, instruction, and discussion in the congregations of TAALC. There are three sections to this document: 1) "The Theology of the Lord's Supper"; 2) "Admission to the Lord's Supper"; and 3) "Practices Surrounding the Celebration of the Lord's Supper." Each section concludes with questions and answers to assist pastors and congregations in their discussions. Following each section is a section entitled, "Congregation Review and Discussion," which contains questions and answers for pastor and congregation to work through together to aid in their understanding each section.

### **Notes:**

All citations from Luther's *Small Catechism* and the Lutheran Confessions are taken from Kolb, Robert, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, Charles P. Arand, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Noted in the document as "Kolb and Wengert."

All Scripture verses, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2016).



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## INTRODUCTION

The Lord's Supper is a precious gift that our Lord has given to His Church. It goes by a number of names, such as *The Lord's Supper*, *Holy Communion*, *Holy Eucharist*, *the Sacrament of the Altar*, and sometimes in shorthand as simply *the Sacrament*. Regardless of which name or names the Church uses, they are all referring to this same gift of Christ of His true body and true blood to His Church for the forgiveness of her sins. It is well worth meditating on this incredible mystery: that our exalted Lord Jesus Christ joins His Word to such ordinary things as bread and wine and they become for us the true body and blood of our Lord, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins. In the Lutheran Church, rather than trying to explain the workings of this miracle, we revel in the mystery and graciousness of our God that He would stoop down to us and give us such an incredible gift.

Sadly, the Sacrament of the Altar has often been misunderstood and misused. Rather than being the source of comfort and assurance of salvation that Christ has intended it to be, at times in the Church it has become a source of fear—am I worthy enough to receive this gift from Christ? Or it has been reduced to a sort of “memorial” meal, in which bread and wine are only symbols of an absent Christ. The truth of the Sacrament as Holy Scripture teaches us is that of a present Christ—present in reality in His body and blood under the humble forms of bread and wine.

In this most excellent of meals, in which our Lord Christ is both Host and Food, is the entirety of our God's salvation of sinners in Jesus Christ. In this Holy Supper we stretch back all the way to the Garden of Eden when our Savior was first promised to our newly-fallen parents (Gn 3:15); we stretch back to the salvation of Noah and his family through the waters of the Flood (Gn 6-9); back to God's calling of Abraham to faith in His Son and making him the Father of many nations through Isaac, the child of promise (Gn 12:1-9, 15:1-21, 17:1-21, 21:1-12); back to God's deliverance of His people from enslavement to Pharaoh in Egypt (Ex 7-12); back to the first Passover and Exodus from Egypt (Ex 12); back to the crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground (Ex 14); back

to Mt. Sinai and the “blood of the covenant” and feasting with God on the mountain (Ex 24:3-11); back to God’s gracious sparing of His people after they sinned with the golden calf (Ex 32); back to the provision of manna and water in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land (Ex 16-17); back to all the times when God delivered His often foolish and rebellious people; back to the return from Exile and reestablishment in the Land of Judah; back to the great mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord and the work that He has accomplished for us through His Life, Suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension into Heaven; and forward to the blessed Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rv 19:6-10) at the end of the present age.

This is what it means to “Do this in *remembrance* of Me.” To celebrate the Holy Supper in the remembrance (Heb זִכָּרוֹן (*zikkaron*), Gk ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*)), of Jesus is no mere cognitive exercise whereby we simply call to mind Jesus’ Passion and Death. It is so much more than that. It is much more akin to the “then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’” (Dt 6:21) that every generation confesses in the first person in celebration of the Passover: “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.” (Ex 13:8). Every celebration of the Passover was actual participation in every generation in that Exodus and salvation from slavery in Egypt. So it is with the Holy Eucharist. Every celebration of the Holy Sacrament of Jesus’ Body and Blood is a participation anew in every generation of the *entire* scope and breadth of our God’s salvation of sinners in Jesus Christ. A most excellent gift, indeed!

The purpose and intention of this report on *The Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper* is to serve the Church, and The AALC in particular, in her understanding of, confession of, and celebration of this most excellent gift that Jesus gives to His Church.

*At the Lamb’s high feast we sing  
Praise to our victorious King,  
Who has washed us in the tide Flowing from  
His pierced side. Hallelujah!*

## INTRODUCTION

*Praise we Him, whose love divine  
Gives His sacred blood for wine,  
Gives His body for the feast—Christ the victim,  
Christ the priest. Hallelujah!*

*Where the paschal blood is poured,  
Death's dread angel sheathes the sword;  
Israel's hosts triumphant go  
Through the wave that drowns the foe. Hallelujah!*

*Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed,  
Paschal victim, paschal bread;  
With sincerity and love  
Eat we manna from above. Hallelujah!'*

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<sup>1</sup> *At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing*, stanzas 1-4. *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 633.

## SECTION ONE: THE THEOLOGY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

In this section we will use Dr. Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* as our guide to bring out and elucidate the teaching of Holy Scripture concerning the Sacrament of the Altar. As one of the foundational texts of Lutheran theology, the *Small Catechism* is well-equipped to walk the Church through the fundamentals of the Christian Faith, which fundamentals include The Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

### LUTHER'S *SMALL CATECHISM*, VI: THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

#### 1-2. *What is the Sacrament of the Altar?*

Answer: It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.

With this statement, Dr. Martin Luther clearly distinguishes the Lutheran position from that of the Roman Catholic Church and from Reformed theologians. Lutherans stand against the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, established by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and reaffirmed by the Council of Trent on October 11, 1551. Transubstantiation claims that:

[B]y the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into

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<sup>2</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 362-363. All citations of Luther's *Small Catechism* in [Section 1](#) are taken from these pages.

the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the species or appearances of the elements do not change, but the essences or substances are completely changed. The substance of bread is removed; the substance of Christ's body is inserted while the external appearance is unchanged. Similarly, the substance of wine is eliminated; the substance of Christ's blood takes its place, while the exterior attributes remain unaltered. Luther rejected this theology as unbiblical and regarded these Aristotelian concepts (viz. species and substances) to be philosophical sophistry.

Luther also rejected the position of the Reformed theologians on the Lord's Supper. For example, Ulrich Zwingli claimed that the Lord's Supper includes nothing but the earthly elements of bread and wine. According to Zwingli, the body and blood of Christ are absent. The physical elements on the altar serve only as symbols to stimulate human meditation and remembrance.<sup>4</sup> Luther rejected this view because it does not express what the Scripture declares. Luther taught in the *Small Catechism* that both bread and wine and the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are present in the Sacrament of the Altar. Lutherans believe that the Lord's Supper is a sacramental union of earthly elements and the divine Person. This concept of divine union is similar to the personal union of the human and divine natures in the Person of Christ, and to the mystical union of Christ in the heart of every believer.

The AALC, together with all Confessional Lutherans, believes that the Lord's Supper includes both earthly and divine elements, as declared in the *Formula of Concord*:

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<sup>3</sup> *Council of Trent*, Session XIII, Canon 2.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Pieper, D.D., *Christian Dogmatics*, III. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 376-378.

1. We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present, truly distributed and received with the bread and wine.
2. We believe, teach, and confess that the words of the testament of Christ are not to be understood in any other ways than the way they literally sound, that is, not that the bread symbolizes the absent body and the wine the absent blood of Christ, but that they are truly the true body and blood of Christ because of the sacramental union. (Ep VII 6-7)<sup>5</sup>

The Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper does not rely upon philosophical interpretation or appeal to intellectual rationalization. It takes the words of Holy Scripture at face value and allows God's declaration to instruct our understanding. (The Words of Institution are found in Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20; and 1 Cor 11:23-25) Francis Pieper writes about the Lutheran understanding of the words of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, "It permits 'bread' to be bread, and 'is' to be is, and 'body' to be Christ's body 'which is given for you.'"<sup>6</sup> Christ took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to His disciples and called it His body. The bread does not cease to be bread, but remains bread as the Scripture declares. Yet, the bread is the body of Christ as He proclaims. Similarly, Christ took wine, gave thanks and gave it to His disciples saying that it is His blood. The wine does not cease to be wine, as God's Word makes clear. Yet, the disciples receive the true blood of Christ, as Jesus proclaims.

The consecrated elements are not a symbolic representation of Christ's body and blood, but the true body and blood of Christ. St. Paul explains this to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10:16), "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" For, Jesus did not say to His disciples, "This symbolizes My body." He did not say, "This represents My blood." On the

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<sup>5</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 505.

<sup>6</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 341.

other hand, the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation also is shown to be false. Its basis is not found in the Words of Jesus Christ at the Supper. The Scriptures say nothing about the inner substance of the bread being removed while the outer shell is untouched. Where is the displaced substance of the bread supposed to have gone? Transubstantiation is a creation of human philosophy, a poor attempt to explain the mystery of the true and bodily presence of Christ in the Sacrament.

## WHERE IS THIS WRITTEN?

### 3-4. *Where is this written?*

Answer: The holy evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and St. Paul write thus: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night in which He was betrayed, took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it and gave it to His disciples and said, 'Take; eat; this is My body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way He also took the cup after the supper, gave thanks, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, and drink of it, all of you. This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'"

Lutherans believe that it is Christ who changes the elements into His divine body and blood by virtue of His own Word, as is made clear in the *Formula of Concord*:

For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ, which He spoke in the first institution of the Supper, were not only effective in the first Supper; they remain so. They retain their validity and power and are still effective, so that in all places in which the Supper is observed according to Christ's institution and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed and received on the basis of the power and might of the very same words that Christ spoke in the first supper. For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup and

wherever the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ Himself exercises His power through the spoken words, which are still His Word, by virtue of the power of the first institution. He wills that His Word be repeated, as Chrysostom says in his Sermon on the Passion, "Christ prepares this table Himself and blesses it; for no human being makes the bread and wine, which are set before us, the body and blood of Christ. Rather Christ Himself, who was crucified for us, does that. The words are spoken by the mouth of the priest, but when he says, 'This is My body,' the elements that have been presented in the Supper are consecrated by God's power and grace through the Word. Just as the saying, 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' [Gen. 1:28] was said only once and yet is continually effective in nature, causing it to grow and multiply, so these words were said once. But they are powerful and do their work in our day and until His return, so that in the Supper as celebrated in the church His true body and blood are present. (SD VII 75-77)<sup>7</sup>

The sanctity and efficacy of the Sacrament, that is, the power to perform what Christ promises, namely to be bodily present and to forgive our sins, is not affected by the piety or impiety of the pastor who celebrates the Lord's Supper. The power of Consecration is not located in a human being; the power of Consecration is in the Word of Christ Jesus. His Word, joined to earthly elements, makes for us the true body and blood of Christ under the earthly elements. This truth puts to rest many questions:

Hence it is easy to answer all kinds of questions that now trouble people—for example, whether even a wicked priest can administer the sacrament, and similar questions. Our conclusion is: Even though a scoundrel receives or administers the sacrament, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ's body and blood), just as truly as when one uses it most worthily. For it is not founded on human holiness but

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<sup>7</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 606-607.

on the Word of God. As no saint on earth, yes, no angel in heaven can make bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, so likewise can no one change or alter the sacrament, even through misuse. For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or unbelief. Christ does not say, "If you believe or if you are worthy, you have My body and blood," but rather, "Take, eat and drink, this is My body and blood." Likewise, when He says, "Do this" (namely, what I now do, what I institute, what I give you and bid you take), this is as much as to say, "No matter whether you are worthy or unworthy, you have here His body and blood by the power of these words that are connected to the bread and wine." Mark this and remember it well. For upon these words rest our whole argument, our protection and defense against all errors and deceptions that have ever arisen or may yet arise. (LC V 15-19)<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Lutherans reject the Roman Catholic dogma that the priest has the power in himself to change the elements into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the reality of the true body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper is not diminished or invalidated because of the weakness of faith of the communicant who receives the Sacrament. The true body and blood of Christ are present and operative, not because of the celebrant's or communicant's worthiness, but because of the Savior's Word.

## WHAT IS THE BENEFIT OF SUCH EATING AND DRINKING?

5-6. *What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?*

Answer: The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>9</sup> For more information regarding the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the gift of indelible character given to the priest, and his power to confect the Eucharistic sacrifice, see *Lateran Council Mansi*, XXII, 982.

sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.

The clear declaration of the words of Jesus appear to be easy enough to understand: “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Luther declares the right teaching of the benefits of the Lord’s Supper in his *Large Catechism*:

That is to say, in brief, that we go to the sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because the words are there, and they impart it to us! For this reason He bids me eat and drink, that it may be mine and do me good as a sure pledge and sign—indeed, as the very gift He has provided for me against my sins, death, and all evils. (LC V 22)<sup>10</sup>

Neither the Roman Catholic nor Reformed teachings agree with this Lutheran understanding. Roman Catholics have, in fact, anathematized all those who believe that the principal fruit of the Lord’s Supper is the remission of sins.<sup>11</sup> The Roman Church has made it clear that passive reception of the grace of God’s forgiveness is incomplete. The *Catholic Catechism* teaches that penitent Catholics must make satisfaction for their sins. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins. This satisfaction is also called “penance.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, both Zwingli and Calvin contend that there is no forgiveness of sins that is

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<sup>10</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 469.

<sup>11</sup> *Council of Trent*, XIII, Canon V.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P4D.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4D.HTM) The *Catholic Catechism*, Part Two: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery, Section Two: The Seven Sacraments of the Church, Chapter Two: The Sacraments of Healing, Article 4: The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, #1459.

given through the Lord's Supper.<sup>13</sup> Even if they were to agree that Christ gave forgiveness through the Supper, they would argue that only the elect could be His recipients.<sup>14</sup> In other words, they deny that the grace of Christ is given for all. Due to their false understanding, instead of the Lord's Supper being a gift of forgiveness and promise, for them it must become an instrument of fear and doubt.

## HOW CAN BODILY EATING AND DRINKING DO SUCH A GREAT THING?

7-8. *How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?*

Answer: Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, "forgiveness of sins."

This section of Luther's *Small Catechism* may appear to be a simple reiteration of what was written earlier, with no additional teaching given. Nothing could be further from the truth. With this paragraph, Luther has given at least three important clarifications: First, the consecrated elements of bread and wine, the true body and blood of Christ, are not for adoration only. By the time of Luther, the Roman Catholic Church had devised a worship custom of Adoration of the Sacrament, without Reception of the Sacrament. Though Luther taught that the consecrated elements were truly to be revered, this act alone did not fulfill Christ's command. Our Lord's intention was that we would orally receive the body and blood. Therefore, Luther teaches above, "These words, *when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking* (italics added), are the essential thing in the sacrament."

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<sup>13</sup> Zwingli, *Fide Ratio*, in Niemeyer, p. 24; Calvin, *Institutes* IV, 14, 17; as cited in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 376-377.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

Apart from this practice it is not to be regarded as a sacrament—for example, when in the papistic Mass the bread is not distributed but is made into a sacrifice, or enclosed [in a tabernacle], or carried about in a procession, or displayed for adoration. It is the same way with baptismal water. When it is used to consecrate bells or to heal leprosy or when it is exhibited in some other way for adoration, it is not sacrament or baptism. For this rule was initially used against such papistic abuses and was explained by Dr. Luther himself. (SD VII 87)<sup>15</sup>

Second, the consecrated elements of the true body and blood of Christ are to be administered in both kinds. It is the Lord's command that His disciples should receive both bread and wine, His body and blood. Luther makes that clear in the *Catechism* with his words, "eating and drinking." It is not our Lord's command or intention that His disciples should be denied one of the elements or that the clergy should withhold one element. Holy Scripture describes and the *Catechism* teaches that the Lord's command is that both elements be given for eating and drinking. Third, believers receive the blessed benefits of the body and blood of Christ by faith. In the time of Luther, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the priest sacrificed Christ on the altar during the Mass. Through this sacrifice, satisfaction for punishment and guilt was made to God on behalf of the people. It was further taught that this sacrifice and satisfaction were efficacious *ex opere operato*, that is, simply by doing the work of the Mass. No faith was required. The priest performed the words and actions of the Mass and the benefits of forgiveness were necessarily granted, regardless of a person's repentance or faith. In fact, it was taught that the merits and satisfaction of the Mass could be transferred to those who were absent or even dead. Such teaching does not occur in Scripture; in fact, Scripture teaches just the opposite. Therefore, Dr. Luther opposed this falsehood in his *Small Catechism* when he taught: "[W]hoever *believes* (italics added) these very words has what they declare and state, namely, 'forgiveness of sins.'" A fuller explanation is given in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

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<sup>15</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 608.

We have shown why the Mass does not justify *ex opere operato*<sup>16</sup> and why, when applied on behalf of others, it does not merit forgiveness for them: both conflict with the righteousness of faith. For the forgiveness of sins cannot take place and the terrors of sin and death cannot be conquered by any work or anything else except by faith in Christ, as it says [Rom. 5:1]: “[S]ince we are justified by faith, we have peace.” (Ap XXIV 60)<sup>17</sup>

## WHO, THEN, RECEIVES THIS SACRAMENT WORTHILY?

9-10. *Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?*

Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words “for you” require truly believing hearts.

This final section raises the issue of Admission to the Lord’s Supper. In this regard, Lutherans have received wonderful guidance from Holy Scripture and the Confessions.

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<sup>16</sup> International Lutheran Council and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Final Report of the Theological Conversations between the Churches Associated within the International Lutheran Council & the Roman Catholic Church, (2021) 11. “**3.1.7** If the term “*ex opere operato*” (“by [virtue of] the work having been done”) serves to express the priority and foundational quality of God’s action in relation to the celebration of the Eucharist, and thereby accentuates the objectivity of the sacramental gift, then the Catholic and Lutheran positions are in agreement with one another.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 269.

## A GIFT FOR YOU

Of first importance, Luther reminds us that the expressed purpose of the Lord's Supper is the desire and determination of Jesus to give Himself personally to His Church. The true body and blood of Jesus are given to you and "for you," His disciple. This Sacrament is given as a holy communion with Christ and as His Means of Grace for us, that we who believe in Christ may receive Him orally, and together with His body and blood, obtain the complete remission of our sins. Because this is the expressed purpose of Jesus, every Lutheran pastor must desire the same purpose. That is, the pastor wishes that every believer may frequently receive this heavenly gift of Sacramental Union with Christ. Luther writes:

Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood, as I have said, have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint and at times even stumble. Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger. (LC V 23-24)<sup>18</sup>

A pastor is especially mindful of the burdens of sorrow and fear, shame and guilt that are carried by the members of his congregation. Personal communion with Christ, and the divine declaration of forgiveness of sins, are blessings of inestimable power and value. They are blessings of the highest order that are available to everyone who has faith in Christ and who believes that the Lord's Supper provides what Christ has promised: His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Both pastor and congregation must most carefully guard against denying the Lord's Supper to anyone to whom Christ

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 469.

wants it to be given. In his day Luther had to warn not only against laxity in practice, but also against legalism and unnecessary rigor.<sup>19</sup>

Laxity and legalism were not confined to the Church of the Reformation. They still exist. Today, some are lax, infrequent in their reception and unappreciative of the gifts of the Lord's Supper. They must be taught and encouraged by God's Word and the *Catechism* so that they may appreciate the benefits and avail themselves of the gifts of the Lord's Supper. Others, because of their sense of personal unworthiness or fear of divine judgment also abstain from the Sacrament or infrequently receive it. They, too, must be taught and encouraged. The answer to the question: "Are you worthy to receive Christ's body and blood?" is both "No," and "Yes." In and of yourself, you are unworthy to kneel before Him. But, by His command, because of His sacrifice, on account of your need, and by means of the faith that His Word has given you, you must come to receive Him and His promised gifts. As His Word commands and declares, "Take... eat... drink." His body and blood are "for you."

## NOT FOR EVERYONE

Second, in this final section, Luther is careful to make clear that the Lord's Supper is not for everyone. That is to say, receiving the Lord's body and blood is not appropriate for every person. Specifically, Luther teaches that those who do not believe are not to receive the body and blood of Christ. Unlike the preached Word of God, which is for believers and unbelievers alike, Holy Communion is for believers only. It is a gift of Christ to His Church, as we see in St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, regarding right reception of the Lord's Supper:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you...Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first...Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord...So

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<sup>19</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III., 386.

then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. (1 Cor 11:18, 20-21, 27, 33)<sup>20</sup>

The Lord's Supper is not an entrance rite like the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, but is a Sacrament through which Christ personally communes with believers and assures them of His intimate love and complete forgiveness. In short, Christ delivered the Lord's Supper to the baptized believers of His Church.

### WHO ARE THE UNWORTHY?

Third, in this final section, Luther mentions the possibility of persons being "unworthy" to receive the Sacrament. This is St. Paul's pastoral concern in the passage cited above from 1 Corinthians 11, wherein St. Paul cautions against eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner." What does St. Paul mean by this? What would constitute an "unworthy manner"? If we read further, the context will answer the question.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor 11:27-32)<sup>21</sup>

Those who are preparing to receive the Lord's Supper must examine themselves, lest they bring God's judgment upon themselves. Specifically, they must "judge the body rightly." In this case, "the body" is a reference to the passage immediately before, v. 24: "[A]nd when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body.'" Those who come to receive the Sacrament must believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and must believe His Words, that this bread is His body, this wine is His blood, for the

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<sup>20</sup> *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

forgiveness of sins. To judge the body rightly is to believe that the Sacrament provides His true presence and His promised forgiveness, with a direct and personal application to each believer. Such forgiveness is given to those who truly repent and desire amendment of life. In this way, we see that to judge the body rightly primarily refers to judging Christ's body in, under, and with the bread. However, to judge the body rightly also refers secondarily to judging rightly one's actions in relationship to Christ's body, the Church.<sup>22</sup> An explanation is found in *The Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration*:

It is essential to explain with great diligence who the unworthy guests at the Supper are, namely, those who go to the sacrament without true contrition or sorrow over their sins and without true faith or the good intention to improve their lives. With their unworthy eating of Christ's body they bring down judgment upon themselves, that is, temporal and eternal punishments, and they become guilty of Christ's body and blood. (SD VII 68)<sup>23</sup>

In short, those who are implacable and who persist in unrepentant sins should be admonished to refrain from receiving the Lord's Supper for fear of bringing judgment upon themselves.

## WHO GRANTS ADMISSION TO THE TABLE?

We have discussed the desire of Christ that He provide His body and blood, and His complete forgiveness of sins, through this Sacrament to all who believe. But, we also have discussed the possibility that there may be instances when persons are unprepared or "unworthy" to receive the Lord's Supper. Our final task is to discuss who it is that might make such a decision.

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<sup>22</sup> For a fuller examination of the phrase, "judging the body," see: Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 381-190; Ernie V. Lassman, "1 Corinthians 11:29—"Discerning the Body" in Closed Communion?, Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless, eds. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 333-339.

<sup>23</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 605.

That is to say, we must address the roles of the communicant, the congregation, and the pastor in the process of Admission to the Lord's Supper. Each plays a crucial role which must not be overlooked.

It is plainly taught in Scripture that the communicant bears the initial responsibility for his admission to the Lord's Supper. The Word of God says, "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). No person can know another man or woman's heart, but God alone. It is not reasonable to expect that the congregation, a selected group in the congregation, or even the pastor would know the full extent of preparedness or unpreparedness of every person, or any person for that matter. Only God knows the heart, for nothing is hidden from Him. For this reason, the Bible tells all who approach the Lord's Supper to examine themselves. If there is any reason that one should not receive the Sacrament, he or she should speak with the pastor. Ask the pastor for help. In that way, a person may become prepared and may gain the gracious gifts of the Lord's Supper. With the pastor's help and guidance, he or she will judge rightly that Christ Himself is truly present, will repent of any sins against Christ, His Church, or any person, and will truly desire amendment of life and reconciliation as much as it is possible. Then, the person may approach the altar with true repentance and holy joy, to commune with Christ and receive His forgiveness.

Congregational members also may play an important role in this process. If one knows of a person who is afraid to come to the Lord's Table, seek the Spirit's leading so that one may speak with him or her. They may have a wrong understanding of themselves, or of Christ, or of the Sacrament. They may have a burden that needs to be confessed and forgiven. They may simply be going through a time of weak and uncertain faith. Or, they may be living with a sin that they are not willing to discontinue or confess. In any of these cases, it is possible that they are truly unprepared to receive the Lord's Supper. It is even possible that they may bring judgment upon themselves if they were forced to eat and drink at this time.

As one may suspect, the final person with authority and responsibility regarding Admission to the Lord's Supper is the pastor. This is

true, not because he wants such responsibility, but because the Holy Bible and the Lutheran Confessions give it to him. For him to deny that responsibility would be to shirk from his duty, and worse, to violate Scripture and his Calling as a pastor. Every Lutheran pastor must be rightly Called. That is a long and arduous process. He has been trained and educated, examined and colloquized, rostered and certified for Call, Called and Ordained. But, he is still no greater a saint and no less a sinner than any other Christian. He has feet of clay, just as any man does. But, he has been given authority and responsibility that are heavy to bear. Here are just a few passages<sup>24</sup> that the pastor will keep in his mind virtually all the days of his life:

- James 3:1: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”
- Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief for this would be unprofitable for you.”
- I Corinthians 4: 1-2: “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.”

*Augsburg Confession*, VII: “It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”<sup>25</sup>

The Bible declares that the pastor is going to incur a stricter judgment. He will give an account before the Throne of God for the souls in his keeping. He is required to be a “steward of the mysteries” of God, giving

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<sup>24</sup> The following Scripture passages are taken from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. (La Habra: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 42.

and withholding the Means of Grace, for the sake of eternal salvation. The Church is defined by the tasks that have been given to the pastor. This is because the Church is the assembly of believers where the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments administered according to the Gospel. More than any other person in the Church, he is mindful of the needs, sorrows, sins, and failings of those who approach the Lord's Supper. The last thing that he wants to do is deny someone the Lord's Supper, but neither does he want to administer the Sacrament to one who will bring judgment upon him or herself by receiving it.

## CONGREGATIONAL DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

*1-2. What do Lutherans believe regarding the reality of the earthly elements (bread and wine) and divine elements (body and blood of Christ) in the Lord's Supper? How does the Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament differ from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and Reformed Churches?*

Answer: Unlike the Roman Catholics who deny the presence of the earthly substance, and unlike the Reformed who deny the reality of the divine presence, Lutherans believe, teach, and confess that the true body and blood of Christ are really present under the form of bread and wine (*Augsburg Confession X*).

*3-4. How do simple earthly elements become for us the true body and blood of Christ? What part does the pastor play in the process of Consecration?*

Answer: Through the Words of Institution, the elements of bread and wine are joined to the Word of Christ and become for us what the Lord has promised, His true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Roman Catholics ascribe to the priest the power in himself to transubstantiate the elements. This is a false and unbiblical teaching. The Consecration is due to the Word of Christ, as Lutherans teach. Furthermore, the validity of the Sacrament is not determined by the piety or impiety of the pastor. Nor is the Sacrament's power to do what Christ promises dependent upon the communicant's merits or goodness.

*5-6. The words of Jesus declare that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is that through the eating and drinking of His body and blood, believers receive the forgiveness of sins. Do Roman Catholics and Reformed theologians agree with this promise of Jesus?*

Answer: No. Neither Roman Catholic nor Reformed teaching about the Lord's Supper agrees with the promise of Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that passive reception of God's gracious forgiveness is insufficient. Believers must make amends for their sins by doing acts of satisfaction. But, how can a believer be secure in God's forgiveness of sins if some of God's forgiveness must be earned by one's own acts of satisfaction? Can one ever do enough to be sure that forgiveness has been earned? On the other hand, the Reformed teach that the Lord's Supper does not offer any forgiveness in and of itself. But, even if it did, the forgiveness would only be available to those who were the elect of God. How can one know if he or she is elect? It must be demonstrated by a pious life. So, for the Reformed, instead of providing assurance, the Lord's Supper becomes a place of fear and doubt where one tries to convince him or herself of his or her election.

*7-8. What understandings are provided in Sections 7-8?*

Answer: Here, Luther clarifies at least three things: the consecrated elements are to be orally received, the elements are to be offered in both kinds (bread and wine), and whoever believes what the Words declare receives what they promise, the forgiveness of sins. In and of themselves, these teachings direct the way the Lord's Supper is served and the purpose for which it is received. But, taken together they demonstrate a more profound truth. That is, the Word of God says what it means and means what it says. We believe and receive the Holy Scripture as God's unchanging truth.

*9-10. What does Jesus desire to give at the Lord's Supper and who is worthy to receive it? Who should not receive the Sacrament of the Altar? Who are the unprepared? Who is responsible for admission to the Lord's Supper?*

Answer: Jesus desires that every believer would commune with Him. All persons who have faith in these words, "given for you" and "shed for you for

the forgiveness of sins,” are really worthy and well prepared. But, the Lord’s Supper is only for Christian believers. It is not designed for unbelievers, as is the preached Word. It is not an entrance rite, like the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is for baptized believers. Those who do not recognize the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament, who are without contrition for their sins, or who persist in gross offensive sins without repentance should refrain from the Sacrament. The communicant has first responsibility in discerning his or her preparedness. A congregational member or friend may be used by God to assist another Christian in his or her preparation for the Sacrament. The pastor has final responsibility and authority, assigned by Scripture and the Confessions, to rightly administer the Sacrament. Pray for him in all of his preaching and teaching, visiting and counseling, leading and guiding, and especially in his administration of the Lord’s Supper.

## SECTION TWO: ADMISSION TO THE LORD'S SUPPER

*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you. Do this is remembrance of Me." In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:23-29)*

**T**hese words from St. Paul should guide and inform our approach to the issue of Admission to the Lord's Supper. We ought not approach the Lord's Supper as if it were a "social" event, in which we would be expected to extend certain courtesies, such as admitting all to the Lord's Supper who are with us on a given Sunday. Participation in the Lord's Supper is participation in a sacred and holy event, and our approach to this issue should reflect this reality. We confess in our Lutheran Confessions, with Holy Scripture, that all those who partake of the consecrated bread and wine objectively receive the body and blood of Christ, regardless of faith or unbelief. Though all indeed who partake of the consecrated bread and wine objectively receive Christ's body and blood, only those who are Worthy Guests receive the body and blood of Christ to their benefit. Those who are Unworthy Guests receive that same body and blood of Christ to their detriment and judgment. Therefore, Admission to, and participation in, the body and blood of Christ at His Table is no trifling matter. It is not in vain that St. Paul says

that Unworthy Guests are “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” and “[eat] and [drink] judgment on [themselves].” Our approach to the issue of Admission to the Lord’s Supper should reflect the seriousness with which the Apostle assigns to it in 1 Corinthians 11.

## WHO IS TO BE ADMITTED TO THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR?

We believe, teach, and confess that in the Lord’s Supper we receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and “where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.” (SC VI 6)<sup>26</sup> As a Means of Grace that delivers God’s gifts to His people, there are clearly some requirements for the reception of this Supper.

**1. Holy Baptism.** The Lord’s Supper is the Sacrament for the Church. It is not for unbelievers. This is seen in the Institution and the use of the Sacrament in the New Testament Church, especially in the book of Acts and St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. It is a meal for the community of believers. Entrance into this community—the Church—comes through Holy Baptism. In Holy Baptism one is brought into the Church, incorporated into Christ, and made a participant in His heavenly gifts. Luther says in his *Large Catechism* regarding the Lord’s Supper,

Therefore, it is appropriately called the food of the soul since it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood...have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint, and at times even stumble. (LC V 23).<sup>27</sup>

**2. Faith.** Holy Baptism, however, is not the only criterion for Admission to the Supper, for we know that there are many who are baptized that have

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<sup>26</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 362.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 469.

subsequently fallen away from the faith. Faith receives what is given in the Lord's Supper to the benefit of the recipient. In the *Small Catechism*, Luther says,

Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins' is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words 'for you' require truly believing hearts. (SC VI 9-10)<sup>28</sup>

The one who is baptized into Christ rightly receives the Sacrament of the Altar when she or he believes in Christ and trusts in what is promised and given in the Holy Supper. Faith acknowledges who Christ is, who we are as sinners, what Christ has done for us, and trusts in the promises He gives to us in the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood. St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:29, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself."

**3. Confession.** As we read in 1 Corinthians 11, we are called to examine ourselves in light of God's Word before eating and drinking the Lord's body and blood. Therefore, another requirement of receiving the Sacrament is penitence. This means that one acknowledges his or her sins, confesses and repents of those sins, and desires to receive the forgiveness of sins that is given to us in Christ. Holy Communion is not for those who believe they are righteous in themselves or by their own works and therefore do not think they need forgiveness. Neither is Holy Communion for those who desire to remain in their sins, are unwilling to repent and turn from their sins, who give little or no thought as to how they ought to amend their lives and struggle against their sinful desires. These are the ones who despise the Holy Sacrament and the gifts that our Lord gives to us there. They are indeed

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 363.

Unworthy Guests because they do not come to our Lord's Table on His terms, but rather come on their own terms. Such unbelief despises the very gifts that our Lord desires to give in His Holy Supper. St. Paul says that such people are guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord, and that they eat and drink judgment on themselves.

In agreement with Holy Scripture, the *Augsburg Confession*, Article XXIV says that "people are admitted only if they first had an opportunity to be examined and heard." (AC XXIV 6)<sup>29</sup> We will address this in more detail below when we discuss the "Office of the Keys" and the role of the pastor as a steward of the mysteries of Christ.

**4. Catechization.** While we have mentioned faith already, it is important that those admitted to the Lord's Supper are taught the Faith and what it is that they are receiving in the Lord's Supper. Historically, the Lord's Supper was given to those who were baptized, examined, and catechized in the Faith. Part of the examination and catechesis is the *Christian Questions with Their Answers* (first appearing in Luther's *Small Catechism* in 1551) regarding what the communicant believes and confess about the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is for those baptized believers who confess their sins, trust the promises given in the Lord's Supper, and desire to amend their lives and struggle against their sinful nature; therefore, the Lord's Table is not open to everyone. In love for our neighbor, and as faithful servants of the Lord ("servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" – 1 Cor 4:1), it is the duty of pastors—insofar as they are able—to guard against admitting Unworthy Guests to our Lord's Table, whereby they would be eating and drinking our Lord's body and blood to their detriment and judgment. A pastor would indeed be negligent in his calling and responsibility to care for the souls of those who come to the Lord's house if the Sacrament were simply offered to anyone/everyone without adequate regard for Holy Baptism, Confession, and examination.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 69.

## WHO DETERMINES WHO RECEIVES THE SACRAMENT?

### THE "OFFICE OF THE KEYS"

Our Lord says in Matthew 16:19, at the confession of St. Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Again, our Lord says to His Church in Matthew 18:18, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And once more our Lord tells His disciples on Easter evening, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (Jn 20:22-23)

The authority to forgive or retain sins (the Office of the Keys) in the stead and by the command of Jesus is an authority given to the Church. This authority is exercised publicly through the Office of the Holy Ministry, the pastoral Office, on behalf of the congregation. The faithful pastor will not exercise the "Keys" in an arbitrary or retributive manner, but he exercises them responsibly for the care of the souls that have been entrusted to him. He speaks God's Law (the "binding key") and Gospel (the "loosing key") to God's people: announcing forgiveness to the penitent; withholding forgiveness from the impenitent. This is what the Church has been called to do.

### CONFESSION OF SINS AND ABSOLUTION

Most of our congregations practice corporate Confession and Absolution before celebrating Holy Communion. However, it was never the intention of the Lutheran Reformers to do away with individual Confession and Absolution with the pastor.<sup>30</sup> When we confess our sins directly to God in private, we have the promise and assurance from His Word that God "is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9). However, there will be times in the life of the believer that he or she

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<sup>30</sup> "Concerning confession they teach that private absolution should be retained in the churches..." (AC XI 1) Ibid., 45; "Therefore it would be unconscionable to remove private absolution from the church." (Ap XII 100) Ibid., 204.

needs to hear the Word of forgiveness from another in order to strengthen faith in that Word (Ja 5:16). While this may happen privately between Christian individuals as a mutual exercise of healing and reconciliation, not all such need will be alleviated in this manner—hence the public exercise of the Office of the Keys by the pastor.<sup>31</sup>

There may also be times when the pastor may need to call on a parishioner to repent in private consultation in order to teach the severity and danger of sin, as well as to speak God's Word of forgiveness into the ears of the repentant sinner.<sup>32</sup> This may include very public sins, or evident sins that are on-going and unrepented. While corporate Confession and Absolution is a good and faithful practice, pastors should give regular opportunities for those in their charge to meet with him privately for Confession and Absolution—especially in temporal proximity to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

## THE IMPENITENT

The "Impenitent" are those who refuse to repent of their sinful actions and are unwilling to turn away from their sins. When we are aware of people who manifest such unrepentance, love compels the pastor, as well as other brothers and sisters in Christ, to admonish them for their sins and call them to repentance. When such people continue in unrepentance in spite of such warnings and calls to repent, pastoral care may take the form of counseling such persons to refrain from participation in the Sacrament until they are

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>32</sup>“ In this way, Scripture makes a practice of joining these two things , terrors and consolation , in order to teach that these are the chief parts of repentance : contrition and faith that consoles and justifies . We do not see how the nature of repentance could be taught more clearly and simply. For these are the two chief works of God in human beings, to terrify and to justify the terrified or make them alive. The entire Scripture is divided into these two works. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The second part is the gospel, that is, the promise of grace given in Christ.” (Ap XII 52-53) Ibid., 195.

willing to repent of their sins and are absolved by their pastor.<sup>33</sup> The Holy Sacrament is not for them, but for those who acknowledge their sinfulness and know that they need and desire God's grace. Those in such a state of unrepentance are to be kept from eating and drinking judgment on themselves—for this is indeed what will happen, as per St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11—for the sake of their soul. In this case, the pastor is called to exercise the "binding Key." Again, Jesus says in Matthew 18:18, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And again in John 20:22-23, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Such an exercise of the "binding Key" is a truly weighty responsibility and judgment, and such an exercise should not be undertaken lightly or hastily. When our Lord gives His Church instructions in Church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20, He does not give us a timeline for each successive stage. This permits His Church to be patient in calling erring brothers and sisters to repentance. But, sadly, there indeed come times when such an exercise of the "binding Key" is necessary. When a pastor asks an unrepentant parishioner to refrain from Holy Communion, or by necessity suspends him or her from receiving Holy Communion, the only proper motivation for such a serious action is that of love for the erring brother or sister and care for his or her soul.<sup>34</sup>

Since the Office of the Keys exists for the care of souls, the pastor has been Called by Christ as a "steward of the mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1) to administer the Holy Supper according to the will and command of our Lord. He must administer the Holy Supper to those for whom Christ intends it, and

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<sup>33</sup> "Those who are impudent and unruly ought to be told to stay away, for they are not ready to receive the forgiveness of sins because they do not desire it and do not want to be righteous." (LC V 58) Ibid., 473.

<sup>34</sup> Francis Pieper says, "In vain is love, or charity, appealed to in defense of 'Open Communion.' The fact is that this practice is contrary both to love of God and love of the neighbor, for it ignores that the Sacrament of the Altar must be properly used, as prescribed in Scripture, and it leads the neighbor to sin by partaking unworthily of the Sacrament." Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 385-386.

deny it to those to whom it has not been given.<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that we are not here speaking about the secret thoughts and intentions of the heart; these are known by God alone. We are speaking about that which has become manifest through words and actions, which reveal the secrets thoughts and intentions of the heart (cf. e.g., Mt 15:18-19). These are what the pastor (and congregation) is called to act upon. That which remains in the secrets of the heart is judged by God alone.

## EXHORTATION TO HOLY COMMUNION

An "Exhortation to Holy Communion," is a statement of varying length that states what it is that the Lutheran Church confesses concerning our Lord's Holy Supper, and what each communicant should also confess and believe. The "Exhortation" seeks to take seriously St. Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 11:28, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." In its simplest form, the examination can be summed up in Luther's statement in the *Large Catechism*,

As we heard about Holy Baptism, so we must speak about the second sacrament in the same way, under three headings, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All this is established from the words Christ used to institute it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and to go to the sacrament should know them. *For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.* The words are these: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to His disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way also He took the cup after supper, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take, drink of this, all of you. This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is poured out for you for

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 381.

the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'” (LC V 1-3, italics added)<sup>36</sup>

The following is offered as an example of an “Exhortation to Holy Communion”:

St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that 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.” St. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 11: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the body and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” What does this mean, and what kind of examination are we to perform? Simply put, this means that you should believe that Jesus gives you what He says He gives you in the Holy Supper: namely, His true body and true blood, under the forms of bread and wine, for you to eat and to drink, for the forgiveness of your sins. And when we examine ourselves, we ought to find and recognize that we fall short of God’s perfect standard, that we only begin to keep His will, and fail in many and various ways. And we ought to desire to amend our lives and to do better. To that end we seek the mercy of God who has given His Son, Jesus Christ, into death to pay the price for our forgiveness. For this purpose Christ has instituted the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood: to deliver to you this very forgiveness of your sins, to strengthen your faith, and to give you all of the benefits of His merit and of His redemption of sinners. To come, then, in a worthy manner is to come trusting in these Words of Christ—that you indeed have what they promise—

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<sup>36</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 467.

“Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all of your sins.” By coming forward to receive the Sacrament, you are saying that you are in agreement with what we believe and confess concerning Christ’s Holy Supper. Having examined yourselves, then, our Lord invites you to come to His Table and to receive His gifts.<sup>37</sup>

Exhortation to the Holy Supper, therefore, involves the tension of two concerns expressed in Luther’s *Large Catechism*. The first concern is that no one be coerced into receiving the Sacrament of the Altar, “lest we institute a new slaughter of souls.” (LC V 42)<sup>38</sup> Coercion to the Sacrament must, of necessity, callously disregard the readiness of the communicant to receive it, namely, faith in these words: “given and shed for you.” The second concern is that “there is also great need to admonish and encourage us so that we do not let this great a treasure...pass by to no purpose.” (LC V 39)<sup>39</sup>

Because of the great benefits of this Sacrament, all should be encouraged to receive it. Along with this, the command of Christ should drive us to the Holy Supper, as Luther writes:

In the first place, we have a clear text in the very words of Christ, “DO THIS in remembrance of me.” These are words that instruct and command us, urging all those who want to be Christians to partake of the sacrament. Therefore, whoever wants to be a disciple of Christ—it is those to whom He is speaking here—must faithfully hold to this sacrament, not from compulsion, forced by humans, but to obey and please the Lord Christ. (LC V 45)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Other examples of “Exhortations” can be found, among other places, in Martin Chemnitz, *Church Order*. Martin Chemnitz’s Works, IX (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 87-90.

<sup>38</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 471.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 471.

Exhortation to Holy Communion, then, is both an exhortation to heed the command of Christ, and an exhortation to receive from Him gifts of inestimable value.

## CONGREGATIONAL CONSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNION POLICIES

Some congregations include communion policies in their constitutions and by-laws. Great care must be taken in the crafting of such policies so that...

1. ...such policies do not reflect popular opinions rather than Confessional and pastoral fidelity;
2. ...they do not bind the conscience of the pastor in the exercise of his Office, both with respect to the altar itself, and with respect to the shepherding of his flock.

Any policies concerning Holy Communion that would prioritize ideas of not causing offense, or of being “inclusive,” or the like, over the clear command and instruction of Holy Scripture, will necessarily find themselves in conflict with St. Paul’s clear warning in 1 Corinthians 11: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord...,” in the same way that admitting Unworthy Guests to the Holy Supper would be in conflict with the same Holy Scripture. Crafting constitutional policies along these lines, then, binds the Pastoral Office to a practice that may very well put the very souls in danger for whom the pastor is accountable before God.

Another way that constitutional policies concerning Holy Communion may bind a pastor’s conscience in the exercise of his Office is by carelessness in their wording. For example, any policy that begins with “Our altar shall be open to all who...” that does not also contain language of clear deference to the discernment of the pastor in the exercise of his Office will likely bind his hands with respect to Church discipline and the proper care of souls.

## AGE OF ADMISSION

For many Lutherans, First Communion has long been associated with the Rite of Confirmation, which, as a matter of practice, has generally been offered after a period of formal instruction culminating roughly somewhere between the ages of 13 and 16. In view of our theology of Holy Communion, the question naturally arises: "Why are we precluding such a large segment of baptized Christians from receiving Holy Communion?" Several factors need to be taken into consideration in regard to the question of the age at which we begin communing baptized children:

1. Although in the Sacrament of the Altar we are given the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, these gifts are first given to us in Holy Baptism.
2. Unlike Holy Baptism, concerning which we believe, teach and confess is necessary for salvation (Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5; Ac 2:38; Tit 3:4-7; 1 Pt 3:21), reception of Holy Communion—while indeed commanded, encouraged, and beneficial—is nowhere taught as necessary to salvation.
3. While there is evidence that Luther and the Reformers wrestled with the question regarding the age of communicants—much as we do today—no clear instruction is given to us with respect to the age of First Communion—either in the Scriptures or in the Lutheran Confessions.
4. The Rite of Confirmation is a human, rather than divinely ordained, institution. Its main purpose is to recognize the completion of a basic level of instruction in the Christian Faith, and is intended as a public affirmation of the Faith into which one was baptized. This instruction in the Faith is commanded by Christ Himself (Mt 28:20).
5. St. Paul admonishes us in 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 as follows: "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself."

6. Faith and cognitive ability are not one and the same, and they ought not to be confused with one another. Faith is not dependent upon stages of cognitive development (Mk 10:15). There is no more an “age of understanding” pertinent to faith than there is an “age of accountability” as some have maintained.
7. The faith-and spiritual development of children-will vary from individual to individual, as well as from family to family.

The ages at which our churches have chosen to begin Confirmation instruction-as well as to signify its completion with the Rite of Confirmation-are, to a significant degree, arbitrary. They have at times been associated with the idea of a “coming of age,” which usually correlated with the onset of puberty (ca. 12 years of age), or with the idea of an “age of reason,” which may have been as young as 7 according to Roman canon law.<sup>41</sup>

The admonition of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 has often been appealed to as a justification for the existence of an “age of understanding,” or an “age of reason,” but interpreting this text in this way confuses faith with reason/understanding. But the most significant issue is the meaning of the word διακρίνων (translated “discerning”). There is a temptation to presume that St. Paul’s use of this word implies a minimum level of cognitive ability as prerequisite for the reception of Holy Communion. This implication is dubious,<sup>42</sup> however, and runs afoul of the warning of the Lutheran

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<sup>41</sup> Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 56-57.

<sup>42</sup> The context of this passage is the abuse of the Lord’s Supper, presumably by adults. This context cannot be readily dismissed if we are to understand St. Paul’s meaning. It is within reason to recognize the whole admonition as solely in opposition to the abuse that is occurring in the congregation at Corinth. However, even if we assume a broader scope to the admonition, which seems prudent, it does not necessarily follow that an “adult-sensibility” must be inferred from the admonition as requisite for Admission to the Sacrament. Furthermore, how St. Paul intends his readers to understand “body” in “discerning the body” does not affect the question of whether διακρίνων must be understood in terms of a specifically cognitive prerequisite for reception of Holy Communion. This can be tested

Confessions against asserting anything other than faith (apart from Holy Baptism) as a measure of worthiness for the reception of the Sacrament: “And because He offers and promises forgiveness of sins, it is part and parcel of the sacrament that it be received by faith.” (LC V 34)<sup>43</sup>

The instruction and examination of children or adults prior to Admission to Holy Communion should come with a caution against measuring outcomes in terms of a threshold of understanding. Rather, the concern should be one of the articulation of faith, so that the pastor can faithfully administer the Sacrament with a proper care of souls. Infants may believe—their faith, insofar as it is saving faith, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which is promised in Holy Baptism—but they cannot express to us that they believe, or what they believe. It is therefore advisable to focus on instruction in the Faith until such time as a child is able to express his or her faith under examination by the pastor in a manner consistent with Admission to the Holy Supper. It is lamentable that in many of our churches, a child's first encounter with Luther's *Small Catechism* occurs only upon enrollment in the Confirmation class. This was clearly not the intent of Luther.

Instruction with the *Small Catechism* in the home should, therefore, be strongly encouraged as this was and is the primary purpose for which it was written (see, e.g., each part or section of the *Small Catechism*: “In a simple way in which the head of a house is to present them to the household...”). In this way consultation between parents and the pastor regarding the faith of the child and the child's readiness for Admission to the Holy Supper can take place—as Luther says in the *Large Catechism*:

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against both possible meanings of “body.” If St. Paul means that the communicant must discern the body of Christ in the bread of the Sacrament, in the sense of understanding or cognition, then we must presume that it is actually possible to understand this mystery, that is, that there is a rational explanation of the Sacrament that is comprehensible to the human intellect. Such intellectual hubris is at the heart of the papistic doctrine of Transubstantiation. The same problem occurs if by “body,” St. Paul means “the congregation of the saints.” This, too, is a mystery that defies rational explanation. It follows, then, that St. Paul's use of the word in this context must indicate the “discernment of faith.”

<sup>43</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 470. See also LC V 36-37 and SC VI V.

Therefore let all heads of a household remember that it is their duty, by God's injunction and command, to teach their children or have them taught the things they ought to know. Because they have been baptized and received into the people of Christ, they should also enjoy this fellowship of the sacrament so that they may serve us and be useful. For they must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight against the devil. (LC V 87)<sup>44</sup>

### MENTAL DISABILITIES AND DEMENTIA

Because there is virtually no way to predict the plethora of individual circumstances these categories may encompass, it is extremely important to defer to pastoral discernment in each individual case, and that the pastor faithfully and prayerfully use careful judgment. Because there is no *in extremis* ("emergency") circumstance for the Sacrament of the Altar, there may be situations in which it is best to withhold it. The following are some points to serve as cautions both for and against withholding Holy Communion from those with mental disabilities and/or dementia:

1. No two individuals are alike in their intellectual abilities.
2. Faith is not equivalent to cognitive ability, and we cannot judge faith according to cognitive ability.
3. It follows from number 1 that no two individuals will process instruction the same way.
4. Individuals, whether mentally disabled or suffering from mental decline, should not be coerced or forced to receive Holy Communion. Those who are not mentally cognizant, or are unconscious, or comatose should not be given Holy Communion.
5. There is a need to be careful not to presume too much about the ability of dementia-sufferers to comprehend and believe.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 476.

Dementia sufferers who would gladly receive Holy Communion should not be denied it simply because we do not think that they are able to “understand” (Mk 10:15). Nor should we easily dismiss the patterns and habits of faith that may continue to resonate in the responses of those suffering from dementia.

## RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION AT NON-LUTHERAN ALTARS

Only a few short generations ago, most Christian denominations “fenced” the altar—even those not holding to a biblical doctrine of Holy Communion. Only in recent generations have churches begun to open their altars to everyone so as to minimize the risk of offending visitors and/or potential new members. Given the fact that Admission to the Altar is a matter of the care of souls, this shift is profoundly unwise.

## IS IT HOLY COMMUNION ?

Many are the anecdotes of modernity that describe churches wherein “communion” is ostensibly celebrated, but no Words of Institution are spoken. Luther teaches in the *Large Catechism*:

And just as we said of baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here, too, that the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread and wine such as is served at the table. Rather, it is bread and wine set within God's Word and bound to it. It is the Word...that makes this a sacrament and distinguishes it from ordinary bread and wine, so that it is called and truly is Christ's body and blood. For it is said, *Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*, that is, “When the Word is joined to the external element, it becomes a sacrament”...The Word must make the element a sacrament; otherwise, it remains an ordinary element. (LC V 9-10)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 467-468.

Without the Word, it is no Sacrament. Participation in any such so-called “communion” is participation in the denigration and mockery of the Sacrament and is to be refused.

## FELLOWSHIP AND DOCTRINE

The fact that most Protestant denominations “fenced” the altar until very recently is a reflection of at least a residual cognizance that in Holy Communion we are not only communing with Christ but also with one another. Therefore, “communion” with those with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement constitutes something that is not what it purports to be (unity in Confession) and should also be refused. One danger that is posed to many of our members today is that of those congregations and church bodies that claim to be “Lutheran” but do not hold to the Lutheran Confessions or the authority of Holy Scripture. Such congregations may appear “Lutheran” on the surface—and may even include the word “Lutheran” in their names—but are not in agreement with us or with the historic Evangelical Lutheran faith they claim to represent.

The AALC has recognized “altar-and-pulpit-fellowship” with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), as well as the *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* (Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church–SELK) in Germany, and the *Den Lutherske Kirke I Norge og Island* (The Lutheran Church of Norway and Iceland–LKNI). This means that we recognize that we are in doctrinal agreement. We are also currently a member church body of the International Lutheran Council (ILC), and this may lead to further recognitions of “altar-and-pulpit-fellowship” in the future. Congregations are encouraged to keep current with these developments, and church members ought to be encouraged to consult with their pastor when in doubt.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Information about the International Lutheran Council (ILC) can be found here: <http://ilc-online.org>

When visiting the Divine Service of a Confessional Lutheran congregation, it is courteous to announce oneself (introduce oneself and ask to be admitted to the altar) to the pastor before communing. When visiting congregations with whom we are not in “altar-and-pulpit-fellowship,” and with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement, our members should refrain from participation in whatever that congregation calls “communion.”

## CONGREGATIONAL DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

### 1. *Who is admitted?*

Answer: Those who are baptized, are properly instructed, examined, penitent, who believe in the real presence of Christ with His body and blood in the bread and the wine of the Sacrament, and who share a common fellowship and doctrine.

### 2. *Who determines who is admitted and who is excluded?*

Answer: The pastor, exercising the “Office of the Keys,” is primarily responsible for determining who is admitted or excluded from the altar in prayerful concern for the spiritual welfare of those who are under his care. Constitutional policies in regard to Holy Communion can be problematic in that, if they are carelessly worded, they can bind the conscience of the pastor in the exercise of his Office and impede proper pastoral care.

### 3. *At what age can someone receive communion?*

Answer: Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions give no clear guidance on a specific age to begin communing a child. Parental and pastoral focus should be on instruction of the baptized—especially in the *Small Catechism*, and parents and pastors should work together to determine when a child is ready to be admitted to Holy Communion.

### 4. *What about people with disabilities or cognitive decline?*

Answer: Pastoral discernment should be exercised based on the assumptions of our doctrine and the particularities of specific cases, taking care not to

force communion on anyone, and not to dismiss the habits of faith retained by those in mental decline.

5. *What about taking communion at non-Lutheran altars?*

Answer: "Communion" at non-Lutheran altars should be declined where no real communion is offered and where no unity of doctrine exists.

## SECTION THREE: PRACTICES SURROUNDING THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

The Church has long recognized the impact that worship practices have on what people believe. St. Prosper of Aquitaine immortalized this concept with the phrase, *“lex orandi, lex credenda”* (“the law of prayer/worship is the law of belief”). Essentially, what one believes influences and impacts how one practices, and how one practices influences and impacts what one believes. Worship and belief are formed not just by words that we hear or read on a page, but also by what we do with our bodies, and the various objects—or lack thereof—that are used in worship. The types of furniture and how they are adorned matters. The various paraments and vestments, as well as the prominence of the altar and the baptismal font affects what we believe the content of the Christian Faith to be. So it is with practices that are associated with the celebration of Holy Communion. The elements of this practice, and what we do with the bread and wine after the celebration of the Sacrament impact and inform what we believe about our Lord’s gift of Holy Communion. Because this is the case, it is important that the way in which we practice would be consistent with what is taught and confessed in the Lutheran Confessions, which in turn reflect what the Scriptures teach concerning our Lord’s Holy Supper.

### THE USE OF ELEMENTS

There are three fundamental elements to a Sacrament as confessed in our symbolic books: 1) an Institution by Christ; 2) a promise of grace; and 3) visible elements. When celebrating the Holy Eucharist, we ought to celebrate it in a manner that corresponds to Christ’s original Institution. The Church does not have the freedom to discard the specific visible elements divinely instituted for any others. For the Sacrament of the Altar, Christ has chosen the elements of bread and wine to be the visible elements to which He joins

His Word, by which He delivers His body and blood to His people. The Church cannot rightly exchange these elements for others, e.g., using soda instead of wine, or a candy bar instead of bread. In both the Old (Lv 10:1-3) and New Testaments (1 Cor 11:30), human innovation in the elements of worship results in severe consequences.

We indeed recognize that there are special circumstances in which the elements as given are unable to be received by certain communicants. For example, someone who has celiac disease will cause damage to their body if they consume gluten, and so may be unable to eat the bread commonly used in Holy Communion. In other cases, some communicants may be sensitive to alcohol for varying reasons and such people may find it problematic to partake of the wine commonly used in Holy Communion. In these circumstances, abstaining from receiving Holy Communion is not advised because the body and blood of our Lord are vital to the Christian life. There are suitable solutions to these difficulties. The principle that should guide our thinking and discussions in these matters is a simple and straightforward one: we should use that which is closest to the elements our Lord used when He instituted the Sacrament of the Altar as is possible, and exceptions do not determine the rule of practice.

## THE BREAD

Basically, when it comes to the bread, bread is bread. Whether the bread is made from wheat, sorghum, rye, barley, rice, corn, etc., is of no consequence. If someone has celiac disease, or a non-celiac gluten intolerance, for example, bread made from rice or corn or a grain that does not have gluten is a relatively easy solution. As with the type of grain used to make the bread, whether the bread is leavened (made with yeast) or unleavened (without yeast; a flatbread or cracker-type bread) is an *adiaphoron*<sup>47</sup>, and one is not better than the other. Certain traditions in the Church have used unleavened

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<sup>47</sup> *Adiaphora* (pl.; sing., *adiaphoron*) refers to those things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God in Holy Scripture. They are areas of Christian freedom, unless they are pushed to the point of confession of the faith. See the following: AC XV; Ap XV; FC SD X.

bread to mirror the unleavened bread used in the Passover celebration, whereas other traditions in the Church have used leavened bread. Either way is acceptable and in keeping with our Lord's Institution.

## THE WINE

In regard to the wine, some of the issues that tend to come up are those relating to prior struggles with alcohol addiction, health-related sensitivity to alcohol, sensitivity to the strength of the alcohol in the wine, and those who struggle in their conscience for various reasons concerning the propriety of consuming alcohol. Though none of these reasons determine the rule in regard to our practice, they are genuine issues that should be addressed with appropriate compassion and pastoral care.

One possible option is simply to dilute the wine with water. This would have the effect of reducing the strength of the wine and reducing the effect of the alcohol consumed. This in no way departs from our Lord's command, since diluted wine is still wine, and the practice of mixing water and wine is not a new practice in the history of the Church; this practice was likely employed in the New Testament setting. This option is the simplest solution, but there are some others as well. Another option is the use of *mustum*. Mustum is juice from grapes that is suspended at the beginning of the fermentation process. There is a minimal amount of alcohol that remains—anywhere from .01 to .049 percent ABV. This amount of alcohol would be similar to that amount found in many cough syrups. The use of mustum is a viable option that retains faithfulness to our Lord's command and also is sensitive to various issues that arise regarding the consumption of alcohol. A third option is that of "Dealcoholized" Wine or "Alcohol-Removed" Wine. These wines also retain a minimal amount of alcohol—less than one half of one percent ABV. Again, this amount is akin to that found in many cough syrups.

When it comes to the issue of a believer's conscience regarding alcohol, this situation also needs careful attention and pastoral care. There is a difference between asserting that consumption of alcohol is categorically sinful and therefore Christians cannot rightly partake of alcohol, and one

who struggles in his or her conscience regarding alcohol and for whom the consumption of alcohol would go against his or her conscience, though they would not assert that Christians cannot consume alcohol without sin. The first scenario pushes something that is an adiaphoron to the point of confession of the Faith. In such cases, it ceases to be an adiaphoron. In the second case, this is a question akin to the “weaker brother” that St. Paul speaks of in Romans chapter 14.

There may be various reasons why a person would be in this situation in regard to their conscience. Perhaps one is a convert to Christianity from Islam, or from Mormonism. In both of these religions alcohol is forbidden. Or perhaps one grew up in a particular part of the Church where alcohol was either outright forbidden, or else strongly discouraged. Situations like these can cause trouble for the conscience of a weaker brother or sister. In such cases, St. Paul instructs us not to look down upon or despise the weaker brothers or sisters among us. And so while we do not treat matters of Christian freedom as if they were in fact not matters of Christian freedom, we are called to use our freedom wisely and with an eye to loving our neighbor. In such situations, again, the options of mustum or “dealcoholized”/“alcohol-removed” wine may prove to be a solution for those who struggle in their conscience regarding alcohol. One route, however, should not be taken: that of withholding the cup, or a parishioner refusing the cup and only receiving the bread. Our Lord’s Institution is that of bread *and* wine, not either bread *or* wine. Communion under one kind is not faithful to our Lord’s Institution, and so this should not be pursued as a viable option.

In the matters that have been laid out above, there is no rule as to which option is better than others. There is freedom for the pastor to decide what route to take, and to change course if need be. What should be kept in mind, however, is that we want to be as faithful and as close to Christ’s original Institution as possible, and we want to address and navigate these various issues with Christian love and compassion for our brothers and sisters.

## COMMUNION IN RESERVE

*Communion in Reserve* is the practice of retaining the consecrated bread and wine beyond its use in the celebration of Holy Communion for a significant period of time, or the practice of consecrating bread and wine and keeping it for an extensive period of time before Distribution and Reception. This practice is associated with the use of a *tabernacle* or a *sacrament house*—boxes in which the consecrated bread (the host) is stored. A practice that is related to Communion in Reserve is that of *Eucharistic Adoration* as a form of worship. This practice engages in adoration of the host apart from Distribution and oral Reception—for example, placing the host in a *monstrance*<sup>48</sup> for bowing down to or viewing. This practice is perhaps most well known in its connection to the *Corpus Christi*<sup>49</sup> procession observed in the Roman Catholic Church. Both the issue of Communion in Reserve and Eucharistic Adoration are addressed clearly in our Confessions.

The most extensive exposition of the Confessional view of the Lord's Supper is found in Article VII of the *Formula of Concord*. In this article, alongside the errors of the Sacramentarians,<sup>50</sup> the authors of the text write against the medieval abuse of the Supper. The specific issues addressed include the reservation of the host along with its Adoration apart from Reception. The *Formula* states:

But this “blessing” or the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as Christ administered it, is not observed (as, for example, when the consecrated bread is not distributed, received, and eaten but is instead locked up, made into a sacrifice, or carried around in a procession). On the contrary, Christ's command, “Do this,” must be observed without division or confusion. For it includes

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<sup>48</sup> A box or receptacle in which the consecrated bread (host) is displayed.

<sup>49</sup> A festival observed chiefly in the Roman Catholic Church. *Corpus Christi* means “body of Christ.”

<sup>50</sup> This term refers to those who deny that Jesus is truly present in His body and blood in the Sacrament to be eaten and drunk along with the bread and the wine.

the entire action or administration of this sacrament: that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord's death is proclaimed, as St. Paul presents the entire action of the breaking of the bread or its distribution and reception in 1 Corinthians 10[:16]. (FC SD VII 83)<sup>51</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions clearly state that there is one singular action (*actio*) involved in a Eucharistic celebration ("the Consecration, or Words of Institution, and the Distribution and Reception or oral partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ's body and blood.").<sup>52</sup> Therefore, these parts of the whole are to be observed "without division," or "whole and inviolate" (*totum et inviolatum*). A further qualification is that this entire action occur "in a [single] Christian assembly." The practice of consecrating at a service either days, weeks, or months prior to Reception is directly contrary this teaching of our Confessions. Over against the Roman position, Lutheran theology has always held that Consecration and Reception are two necessary components of a single act which constitutes the Sacrament of the Altar, and therefore these two aspects of the same action cannot be separated from one another by any significant period of time. Regarding the issue of Eucharistic Adoration, the *Formula* rejects the common practices of the medieval period, such as the use of a monstrance or tabernacle, where the host was reserved to be the object of Christian worship. Proper adoration of the consecrated elements is not being rejected here. With the Words of Christ, He is mysteriously and miraculously joined to the bread and the wine and is indeed present with His Church. Kneeling and bowing are proper expressions and a proper acknowledgement of Who is present here with us. These acts of reverence and devotion, however, are to remain connected to the Distribution and Reception of the bread and wine, body and blood. The purpose for such Eucharistic Adoration is the very fact that in and with the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>52</sup> FC SD VII 86. Ibid., 608.

consecrated bread and wine we receive the gift of Christ's own body and blood. Any adoration outside of this use is out of bounds and inappropriate to our Lord's purpose and Institution.

Dr. Martin Chemnitz, chief author of the above statement from the *Formula*, further elaborates on the teaching of the Confessions. In volume two of his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Chemnitz includes a section titled, "Concerning Reserving the Sacrament of the Eucharist and Carrying it to the Sick," in which this question of reservation is explicitly addressed. He speaks about whether the Sacrament can be reserved "so that finally, after a number of days, weeks, months, or years the taking and eating may follow."<sup>53</sup> Chemnitz answers this by pointing to the Scriptural example of the Last Supper as paradigmatic for all further celebrations of the Eucharist. He concludes that,

there is not a trace to be found in the history of the apostles to indicate that they did something else or different, such as separating or tearing apart the distribution and reception from the blessing; neither can any apostolic example of reserving the Eucharist be produced. Therefore the truth of the divine Word lends no support whatever to the custom of reserving the Eucharist.<sup>54</sup>

He further states that both the practices of adoration and reservation "are not supported by even so much as one syllable or letter in the words of Christ."<sup>55</sup>

For this reason, Chemnitz argues for the Consecration of the Sacrament at the home of the sick by the minister rather than a Consecration at the altar and then a later Distribution to the sick.

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, II (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 293.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 294-295.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

## ONLINE COMMUNION

An issue that has come to the forefront in more recent times is the practice of—ostensibly—celebrating of Holy Communion through usage of the Internet. This may involve a participant with bread and wine at their home, and a pastor on Zoom or some other video conferencing platform who follows the Eucharistic liturgy—including the use of the *Verba* (Words of Institution). With this practice comes two distinct, though related, questions : 1) Is this a valid Eucharist?; and 2) Is this proper practice?

In answer to the first question, it is our judgment that the validity of the Sacrament in such a context is highly questionable—to say the least—and severely problematic. While it is certainly true that the efficacy of the Sacrament is dependent upon the power of the Word of God as it is spoken over the elements, this should not to be understood in an “automatic” or “magical” manner. If a child, for example, is playing “church” with a friend and uses the Words of Institution in front of a piece of bread, this does not mean that this food is now the body of Christ. The same could be said of a movie scene in which a Eucharistic service was acted out, but not intended as a true celebration of Holy Communion. In both situations, the context and purpose of the gathering and use of the Words clearly indicate that this is not an actual Consecration. The practice of “online communion” differs from these two examples in that the intention of both the minister and congregation in an online service is to have a valid Eucharistic meal. However, what these two above examples demonstrate in this regard is that there are more considerations than the simple use of particular words and the eating and drinking of specific elements.

If, in view of the above examples, one argues that all that is necessary is 1) intention; 2) the elements; and 3) the *Verba*, additional questions are raised. If the celebration of the Eucharist is valid through a platform such as Zoom, would this not also apply to watching a church service on TV, to which one is not in any way connected? And even if it is through Zoom, can one then keep a recording of the *Verba* from that Zoom service and then play it throughout the week to have daily “communion” at home? Or consider a scenario in which one lives next door to a church where the celebration of the

Eucharist occurs at the same time every Sunday. Can such a one-knowing that the *Verba* is being spoken next door—have bread and wine at home with the knowledge that the *Verba* is being spoken elsewhere and thus have a valid Sacrament?

In each of these three circumstances, the intention is that a genuine celebration of the Sacrament occurs, the elements are there, and the *Verba* is spoken. However, there is an additional element that is lacking: the locally gathered assembly of believers. As discussed above in the quotations from the *Formula of Concord* and *The Examination* regarding “Communion in Reserve,” each part of the Sacrament of the Altar is to be considered inseparable from the entire action of the Sacrament (Consecration, Distribution, Reception). Given that the practice of “online communion” separates the Consecration from Distribution and Reception, and separates Consecration, Distribution, and Reception from the locally gathered assembly of believers, there can be no other conclusion according to Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions than that this is not a valid Sacrament, for those things which are to be inseparable have been separated.

Again, it is only in the context of the local assembly of believers that Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions consider the right use of the Holy Supper. We ought not attempt to use or allow technological innovations to change fundamental elements of divine worship, for these elements are not ours to change and modify as we please. In addition, it is a fruitless and unconvincing manner of arguing to claim that Jesus, St. Paul, or any other early Christian leaders—had these technologies been available to them—would have used them in whatever way we think they should be used today. This line of argumentation is of necessity entirely speculative, for that is information that the Church has not been given, and such speculation is pointless. As Christ’s sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd in His Holy Word, we are bound to what He says and to what He has given, and to the way that He has given it to us. This does not include “online communion.”

Furthermore, it is well worth seriously considering the precedent that would be set by such a practice. If the Eucharist does not have to be Consecrated, Distributed, and Received in the local community, this further

exacerbates the cultural problem of video services replacing actual divinely-instituted local bodies. In the same way that sermons have become consumer-driven affairs—where one listens to whatever pastor he or she happens to enjoy online—so also the Sacrament of the Altar would follow suit. There is also the question as to how far this would go. Does this stop with the Eucharist? There is no logical reason for why it would. What about Holy Baptism? Can a pastor recite the Triune Name via Zoom while someone at home pours water onto his or her own head?

As we have discussed at length in the previous section on Admission to the Lord's Supper, not all guests are Worthy Guests, and the pastor is called to faithfully exercise the Office of the Keys for the care of the souls in his keeping. The practice of "online communion" significantly hinders the pastor's ability to guard the Lord's Table. The pastor cannot properly exercise the "Keys" through an online worship setting. Allowed to progress to its logical outcome, this practice could lead to the deconstruction of the entire ministry of the Church as it has been instituted by her Lord. The answer to the second question—is this ("online communion") a proper practice?—is definitively, "No."

## INTINCTION

*Intinction* is the practice of dipping the host into the wine and then giving the mixture to the communicant. This practice has become common in some churches when celebrating the Sacrament of the Altar. This practice is especially popular within the Roman Catholic Church as a way to allay fears that the blood of Christ could be spilled by uncaredful congregants. As this is not a historic practice in the Lutheran Church, we do not recommend the use of Intinction as a normal mode of giving the body and blood of Christ for the following two reasons: First, and most importantly, the consuming of the blood of Christ by means of the bread is simply not what our Lord has commanded. In all three Gospel accounts where the Words of Institution are recorded, along with the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:25, the explicit command is given that the blood of Christ should be drunk. Since we do not have the freedom to change what God has commanded in divine worship, we

should do precisely what Jesus has commanded us, viz., “Take and eat,”; “Drink of it, all of you...” Second, a superstitious fear regarding the spilling of the blood of Christ stands behind the practice of Intinction. In the medieval Western Church, fear of an accidental spill led to the withholding of the cup from the laity altogether—a clear act of disobedience to Jesus’ command. It is this same concern which led, in the Roman tradition, for the reintroduction of the consumption of Christ’s blood on behalf of the laity with the practice of Intinction. The Lutheran Reformers rejected such argumentation—as if this could be used as a reason to disobey the divinely-instituted means of receiving the Sacrament. Though Intinction is a less serious error than withholding the wine entirely from the laity, it still remains a problematic practice that we reject as the normal mode of administering the Sacrament in the Church.

A final word on Intinction: Though we do not recommend the practice of Intinction in the normal course of Eucharistic celebration, there may be circumstances in which the communicant is unable to chew or swallow the host without a serious risk of choking. In situations like this, Intinction can provide a safe way to administer Holy Communion to such a parishioner. As with the usage of non-alcoholic wine, gluten-free bread, or administering lay Baptism, this practice may be rightly used—but only rarely when this is a true necessity. When the wine can be consumed by means of drinking, and the bread by chewing and swallowing, that should be our practice. When this is not possible—and only then—Intinction may be considered a valid mode of administering the Sacrament of the Altar.

## WHO MAY ADMINISTER THE SACRAMENT?

Article XIV of the *Augsburg Confession* states that “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call (*rite vocatus*).”<sup>56</sup> In

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<sup>56</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 46. This is the English translation of the German. The English translation of the Latin is similar: “Concerning church order they teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called.” *Ibid.*, 47.

accordance with this teaching, only one with a proper pastoral Call is authorized by Christ to Consecrate the Sacrament of the Altar. This is not so because of any “indelible character” within the ordained (as is claimed in the Roman Church), but it is, rather, an issue of vocation and vocational authority. Though no one vocation in particular is “higher” or more “spiritual” than another before God, God has not invested the same measure of authority into every vocation. The authority to Consecrate/Celebrate the Sacrament is vocationally proper only to one who has been properly Called and placed into the Office of the Holy Ministry. In addition, this makes for good order in the Church and it reflects how God has chosen to order and structure the Church, which is His own divine Institution. Only one who has been properly Called (i.e., one who has been trained and educated, examined and colloquized, rostered and certified for Call, Called and Ordained) into the Office of the Holy Ministry has the proper authority from Christ to Consecrate Holy Communion, for the pastor stands *in persona Christi*<sup>57</sup> when the Words of Institution are spoken or chanted. As the Old Testament priests were given a unique role in their public function in worship, so has God instituted this uniqueness of the pastoral Ministry in the New Covenant.

Sometimes there arises confusion in the Church in regard to this because the Church has recognized throughout her long history Holy Baptism *in extremis*, that is, in the case of an emergency any Christian may administer Holy Baptism. In this practice some have seen, or attempted to see, a precedent set for the Celebration of the Eucharist by laity—at least in some circumstances. In response, we give three reasons why this is not the case: First, lay Baptism *in extremis* is not the normal practice of the Church. The normal, regular practice is Holy Baptism administered by a pastor who has been properly Called and placed into the Holy Office. Only in cases of emergency (such as when the one to be baptized is near death and no pastor is available) are lay Baptisms administered. Second, the Church, again in her long history, has not recognized any *in extremis* circumstances in regard to

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<sup>57</sup> This phrase means, to put it simply, that in his relationship to the congregation he is called to serve, the pastor represents Christ in his words and actions toward his congregation.

Holy Communion, as she has for Holy Baptism. The Scriptures do not attach the same kind or degree of necessity to this Sacrament that they do for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The two Sacraments, though both equally Means of Grace, are not identical with one another. If they were indeed identical, the Lutheran Church would give the Sacrament of the Altar to infants and young children, as it does with Holy Baptism. Third, we do not want to treat the Sacraments as a general category with a series of principles that are then applied to everything within that category. The Sacraments should rather be treated individually, as they have been Instituted for different purposes in the Church.

Another question that may often come up in connection with this is, what should a congregation do if there is not a Called pastor available to administer the Sacrament for them? In The AALC, when these situations arise, we try very hard to make sure that one of our Called pastors can get to our congregations without a pastor at least once a month to administer the Sacrament to Christ's saints in that location. When this is not possible, as regrettable as it may be, it is necessary to go without the Sacrament. This is certainly not ideal, but we can take comfort in that we feed on Christ spiritually by faith through the Word. (FC SD VII 61-62) Again, there is no *in extremis* for Holy Communion. This means that where the Sacrament cannot be administered by a Called pastor, then there is no administration of the Sacrament. This is precisely what *in extremis* refers to.

Recognizing the necessity of the Proper Call (*rite vocatus*, AC XIV) for the Consecration and administration of the Sacrament of the Altar has led the Church to the practice of the pastor communing himself, that is, he receives the consecrated elements from his own hand, just as the other communicants under his care receive the consecrated elements from his hand. This practice has longstanding precedent in the Church, reaching at least as far back as Hippolytus of Rome (ca. AD 170-235), Justin Martyr (ca. AD

150-160), and *Didache* (ca. AD 80-120).<sup>58</sup> This practice is also consistent with Dr. Martin Luther's instructions to his pastors as to how they should conduct the liturgy of Holy Communion in his *Formulae Missae* of 1523. Luther says, "Then, while the *Agnus Dei* is sung, let him [the liturgist/pastor] communicate, first himself and then the people."<sup>59</sup> And again,

The bishop [or pastor] should also be free to decide on the order in which he will receive and administer both species [bread and wine]. He may choose to bless both bread and wine before he takes the bread. Or else he may, between the blessing of the bread and of the wine, give the bread both to himself and to as many as desire it, then bless the wine and administer it to all.<sup>60</sup>

Luther also says of this same order of worship, "Therefore, I have used neither authority nor pressure. Nor did I make any innovations."<sup>61</sup> This practice should not be confused with the "private mass" condemned in the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>62</sup> "Private Communion" does not refer to how one receives the consecrated elements, but rather to the erroneous practice that crept into the medieval Western Church of the priest "saying Mass" by himself and he alone receiving the elements. The practice of the pastor receiving the elements from his own hand is a proper practice in the Church, and it is practiced in the Lutheran Church (though not in every place) in accordance with the

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Warneck in *Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice*, makes this comment: "The practice of the bishop (pastor) communing himself dates back to the Early Church Fathers." The particular documents he references are *Didache*, *First Apology* of Justin Martyr, and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome. Warneck, *Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 176 (see also footnote 220).

<sup>59</sup> Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*. Luther's Works, 53. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Warneck, *Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice*, says, "There is nothing amiss in the context of the Lord's Supper for the pastor to receive the elements from his own hand. This is not the 'private mass' condemned in the Lutheran Confessions." Warneck, 176.

teaching of Holy Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the long tradition of the catholic (universal) Church.

In smaller congregations it is certainly possible for the pastor to administer both bread and wine, host and blood, to the communicants present. In larger congregations, however, it becomes necessary for the pastor to receive assistance in distributing the consecrated elements to communicants. This raises the question as to who may appropriately assist the pastor in Distribution. Depending upon the particular situation of any given congregation, there are a couple of different options.

The first option occurs in congregations where there is more than one pastor on staff. In this situation, one of the pastors would be the *celebrant*, that is, the one who Consecrates, and the other pastor or pastors assist in Distribution. In this case, the celebrant consecrates the elements, communes himself, communes his assistant(s), and then the rest of the communicants present. The celebrant leads with the host and the assistant(s) follow with the blood. The second option involves the use of a *liturgical deacon*, that is, a layman who assists the pastor in the Distribution. In this situation, the pastor is the celebrant, and as such, he consecrates the elements, he communes himself, then his assistant (the liturgical deacon or other layman), then he hands the wine to the liturgical deacon and the deacon follows the pastor as he distributes the host to the remaining communicants.

We recognize that our congregations have varied practices regarding the person distributing the wine in Holy Communion, but we recommend that however it is done, those who are chosen to assist with the Distribution have a proper understanding of the Sacrament according to Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Having a liturgical deacon—a common practice in the Early Church—who is trained to function in a secondary role during the worship service is preferable. Because of the widespread confusion in the Church regarding the Office of the Holy Ministry, and who may occupy it, we must say here that a liturgical deacon, or other layperson, who assists with Holy Communion is to be male. This is because the administration of the Sacrament of the Altar is proper to the Office of the Holy Ministry, and this Office can only be filled by certain qualified men.

Because assisting in the Distribution of the elements of Holy Communion is, according to our Lutheran Confessions, part of the singular action (*actio*) of the Sacrament, it would be inappropriate and confusing for a woman to assist at the Table of our Lord. Dr. Richard Warneck says it well:

The *instituted-use* principle casts light on assisting with distribution of the Lord's Supper. Hundreds commune in services conducted for large congregations. Assistance in the distribution is necessary. Lately, the Lutherans distinguish between the presiding minister who consecrates and the assisting ministers who distribute. Because the pastoral office administers the Sacrament—one holistic action of consecration, distribution, and reception—any who assist in this one action are doing so simply in an assisting role (FC SD VII 80, 83–84). Because the pastoral office administers the Sacrament—one holistic action of consecration, distribution, and reception, as ordered by our Lord—only men should assist in the distribution of Holy Communion, preferably men serving as elders in the congregation.<sup>63</sup> (*italics original*)

## PRACTICES REGARDING THE ELEMENTS FOLLOWING THE SERVICE

An issue that has often caused debate and questions within the Church is that concerning what ought to be done with the remaining consecrated elements after the service. Part of the difficulty in answering this question is that Holy Scripture does not address this issue specifically. This presents possible errors in a couple of directions. On the one hand, one can be too dogmatic concerning the proper disposal of the remaining elements, which can then result in the binding of consciences where Holy Scripture has not bound them. On the other hand, if one concludes that since Holy Scripture does not give specifics, therefore disposal of the elements is an adiaphoron and thus one need not give serious thought to what is done with the elements, this can

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<sup>63</sup> Warneck, 170. What Warneck refers to here as “presiding minister” is what we refer to above as the “celebrant.”

lead to an attitude of irreverence and a practical denial that something actually took place when the Words of Institution were added to the bread and wine. Care is needed so that we do not fall into either error.

It is certainly true that since Holy Scripture does not address this issue specifically, it belongs to the theological category of *adiaphora*, i.e., those things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God in His Word. It must be said, however, that *adiaphora* does not mean *not important*. Nothing we do in the Divine Service; nothing we do or say when handling the things that God has entrusted to us, should be done with carelessness, flippancy, or irreverence. At the same time, since the particulars of what to do with the remaining consecrated elements is indeed an *adiaphoron*, we cannot, for fear of irreverence or flippancy, dogmatically insist on one particular practice or another. We are not free to bind consciences where God in His Word has not done so, and as Lutherans we do not make it a practice of trying to probe the mysteries of God when He has not revealed them to us.

Again, Dr. Richard Warneck is helpful here. He says the following in his *Pastoral Ministry*:

In the consecration, the Words of Christ unite with the bread and wine; He states, "This is My body," and "This is My blood." This sacred action composes the *unio sacramentalis*, or sacramental union. The meaning is that Christ, "when giving the bread, gives us simultaneously His body to eat." This mystery, though impenetrable, is the subject of inquiry that has led to three notable factors that have implications for the practice of the Sacrament among Lutherans. 1. *Inception*, the *Verba* engaging with the elements, bread and wine 2. *Duration*, the notion that the sacramental union extends beyond the *usus* and *actio* within the celebration of the Sacrament 3. *Termination*, the view that post-Communion or outside the use and action, the sacramental union does not prevail. ... In regard to these factors, widely discussed and debated with respect to practice of the Sacrament, ultimately the Word of Christ and nothing else must prevail. Taking rigid positions and dogmatically insisting on certain

practices as a result of speculation over the implications of the sacramental union must be discouraged. Luther would have nothing to do with such attempts to penetrate the mystery and manipulate practice of the Sacrament. Rather, Luther let God be God; and consistently he returned to the clear Word of Christ, the ground for his faith expressed in these words, “We maintain the bread and the wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ” (SA III 6 1; FC SD VII 19, 77). Beyond this assertion, he would not speculate, nor would he advocate practice evolving from such speculation. The *Formula of Concord* echoes Luther: “Faith does not make the sacrament, but only the true Word and institution of our almighty God and Savior Jesus Christ, which Word is always powerful and remains efficacious in Christendom” (FC SD VII 89). The discussion prompts a guiding principle: The best course for the Lutheran pastor, in the light of factors raised by consideration of the sacramental union, is to seek the clear Word of Christ and recognize that His Word does not address numerous issues raised about the significance of the consecrated elements in the Sacrament beyond their proper use and action—the consecration, distribution, and reception of the Lord’s body and blood. (*italics original*)<sup>64</sup>

Since we do not have a command or teaching from Holy Scripture in regard to this issue, one of the ways we should consider this is from the perspective of teaching. What might it teach and communicate to Christians if we simply mix the remaining host(s) back in with the unconsecrated bread? Or if we pour the remaining consecrated wine back into the bottle of unconsecrated wine? We might inadvertently be teaching Christians that nothing really happens in the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine are just bread and wine and that is all. It is also worth considering that in our culture where not much remains sacred, it can be helpful in our Christian piety to draw some of those lines back between the sacred and the ordinary. It is true, according to our

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

Lutheran Confessions, that outside of the *use* or *action* of the Sacrament, the elements do not retain the character of a Sacrament, but this does not mean that the bread and wine used in celebration of the Holy Eucharist simply return to being ordinary bread and wine. Those particular elements were set apart for use in holy things. Treating them with reverence and respect is fitting for things used in such a way. This is much like the altar, pulpit, lectern, baptismal font, etc. These things have been set apart for use in sacred things. Simply tossing them in the garbage when they are no longer being used would send a conflicting message that what we do in worship is not sacred. Again, *lex orandi, lex credenda*—how we worship affects what we believe. This concern for reverence and the sacredness of what we do in worship is well worth serious consideration.

Recognizing what has been laid out above, and also recognizing that the bread and wine that have been consecrated have been set apart from ordinary bread and wine for a sacred purpose, the following practices have been used as ways to reverently dispense of, or dispose of, the remaining consecrated elements:

- 1) The consumption of all remaining consecrated bread and wine by the pastor and/or those assisting with the Sacrament.
- 2) The retaining of the remaining consecrated elements in a separate container/location from the unconsecrated elements for the purpose of using those elements in the next celebration of the Eucharist. This is different than “Communion in Reserve” because the consecrated bread and wine would be consecrated again prior to Distribution and Reception. The separate storage containers is simply a visual confession that these elements have been used for a sacred purpose and thus are different in that sense from ordinary bread and wine.
- 3) The pouring out of the wine onto the ground—imaging the pouring out of Christ’s blood on the ground at the cross—and the burying of the remaining consecrated bread in the ground.

- 4) The pouring of the remaining consecrated wine into a special sink that goes directly into the ground rather than into the sewer.

## HOW OFTEN SHOULD THE CHURCH CELEBRATE THE HOLY EUCHARIST?

As we approach the issue of frequency of reception of the Lord's Supper, it is good and helpful for us to consider both what Holy Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions say in regard to this issue.

In Acts 2:42 we find these words from St. Luke: "And they [the Church] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." And in Acts 20:7, St. Luke also records these words: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them..." In both of these texts we find the regular reception of the Lord's Supper at the gathering of the Church.

In the Lutheran Confessions we find these words from the *Augsburg Confession*, Article XXIV:

But Christ commands that it be done in memory of Him. The Mass, therefore, was instituted so that the faith of those who use the sacrament should recall what benefits are received through Christ and should encourage and console the anxious conscience. For to remember Christ is to remember His benefits and realize that they are truly offered to us. It is not enough to remember the history, because the Jews and the ungodly can also remember that. The Mass is to be used for the purpose of offering the sacrament to those who need consolation, just as Ambrose said: "Because I always sin, I ought always to take the medicine." Since the Mass is such an imparting of the sacrament, among us one common Mass is held on every holy day, and it is also administered on other days if there are those who desire it. Nor is this custom new in the church. For the ancient teachers before the time of Gregory do not mention private Masses, but often speak of the common Mass. Chrysostom says that the priest

stands daily at the altar, inviting some to Communion and keeping others away.<sup>65</sup> (AC XXIV 30-37)

And in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XXIV, we find these words as well: “Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved.”<sup>66</sup> (Ap XXIV 1) The Lutheran Confessions reflect the texts from Acts quoted above, as well as the common practice of the Church throughout the ages.

In the Lutheran Church we find differing practices in regard to how often the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. Some congregations receive the Sacrament once a month, some twice, some weekly, etc. There are a variety of reasons for why and how these differences developed and came about. And while it is certainly true that Christ is present with His gifts in gatherings of the Church without celebration of the Sacrament (Christ is indeed present wherever His Word is present among His people), the fact remains that the Holy Eucharist is another gift that Christ gives to His Church in addition to the gifts He gives in His Word, in Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, etc. It is good and right for Christ’s Church to desire all of the gifts that He has for her as often as she can receive them, and she does indeed need them often.

The Lutheran Confessions set before us in a helpful way our regular and frequent need for this particular gift that Christ has given to His Church, and this by way of St. Ambrose. St. Ambrose says, as quoted above, “Because I always sin, I ought always to take the medicine.” Here is (what ought to be)

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<sup>65</sup> Kolb and Wengert, 71. This is the translation from the Latin. The translation of lines 34-37 from the German reads, “Now since the Mass is not a sacrifice for others, living or dead, to take away their sins but should be a Communion where the priest and others receive the sacrament for themselves, we celebrate it in this fashion. On holy days and at other times when communicants are present, Mass is celebrated, and those who desire receive the sacrament. Thus, the Mass remains among us in its proper use, as it was observed formerly in the church. This can be demonstrated from St. Paul (1 Cor. 11[:23-33]) and from many writings of the Fathers. For Chrysostom tells how the priest stands every day and invites some to receive the sacrament, but forbids others to approach.” (AC XXIV 34-37), *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

the heart of the Church's desire for receiving this gift of Christ regularly and often: we sin daily and are often plagued by a bad or tormented conscience, and we need regular assurance that our sins are indeed forgiven for Christ's sake. Again, though the forgiveness of sins is certainly delivered through the Word of the Gospel and of Holy Absolution, Christ has instituted the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood for this very special purpose: to deliver to His Church in a regular, tangible way, the forgiveness of all of her many and varied sins. Because we regularly and often have the need, we regularly and often need the remedy. Again, St. Ambrose: "Because I always sin, I ought always to take the medicine."

### CONGREGATIONAL DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. *What does the phrase, *lex orandi, lex credenda*, mean, and why is it important when considering our worship practices?*

Answer: *Lex orandi, lex credenda* means "the law/rule of prayer/worship is the law/rule of belief/faith." This is important to recognize because while what we believe certainly impacts and influences how we worship, it is also true that how we worship impacts and influences what we believe. It is often easier to recognize the influence and impact of what we believe on how we worship than it is to recognize the ways in which how we worship influences what we believe.

2. *According to our Confessions, what are the three elements that make a Sacrament?*

Answer: The three fundamental elements are 1) an Institution by Christ Himself; 2) a promise of grace; and 3) visible elements.

3. *What are the visible elements that we are to use in celebration of the Holy Eucharist?*

Answer: The visible elements that Christ has instituted for use in the Sacrament of the Altar are bread and wine.

4. *May we substitute other elements for the bread and wine?*

Answer: No, the Church is not permitted to change what Christ has Instituted. Variations such as gluten-free bread, or alcohol-removed wine, do

not change the essence of the elements that Christ Himself Instituted for this use.

*5. As we attempt to navigate through various situations that arise, such as food allergies or issues with alcohol, what should be the guiding principle in our approaches?*

Answer: The guiding principle should be that we want to be as faithful to and as close to Christ's original Institution as is possible. And a second, exceptions do not make the rule.

*6. What is Communion in Reserve, and why is this practice rejected by the Lutheran Confessions?*

Answer: Communion in Reserve is the practice of retaining the consecrated and wine beyond its use in the celebration of Holy Communion. In this practice, the consecrated elements may remain "in limbo" for an extended period of time between Consecration and Reception, or the consecrated bread may be placed in a monstrance or tabernacle to be viewed and adored.

This practice is rejected by the Lutheran Confessions because the purpose of the consecrated bread is to be eaten by the communicant. Extensive periods of time between Consecration and Reception break the action of the Sacrament and produce an invalid Sacrament. Placing the consecrated bread in a tabernacle or monstrance to be viewed or adored apart from Reception is outside the *use* of the Sacrament, and thus the consecrated bread ceases to have the character of a Sacrament.

*7. What is Eucharistic Adoration, and why is this practice rejected by the Lutheran Confessions?*

Answer: Eucharistic Adoration is the bowing down to or adoring the consecrated elements apart from their Reception by the communicant. This practice is rejected by the Lutheran Confessions because it is contrary to our Lord's Institution and command. Jesus told His Church to take the consecrated bread and wine and to "eat" and "drink."

8. *Why does “online communion” fail to meet the requirements of a valid and proper celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar?*

Answer: “Online communion” fails to meet the requirements of a valid and proper celebration of the Sacrament because it breaks apart the single *action* of the Sacrament (Consecration, Distribution, Reception). “Online communion” separates Consecration from Distribution and Reception. It also removes Consecration, Distribution, and Reception from its proper biblical and Confessional context: the local assembly of believers (*local* here refers to the *located-ness* of the gathering of believers and is not referencing how close or far the gathering is from where one lives).

Other problematic aspects of “online communion” include also the removal of the Distribution of the Sacrament from the one who is authorized to distribute it: the Called pastor of the congregation, and places it with any layperson wherever they happen to be watching the service. This practice also hinders the pastor’s ability to apply Church discipline and examination as may be needed. If “online communion” is an acceptable practice, there is no reason to refrain from “online baptisms” either.

9. *What is the practice of Intinction, and why is it not recommended for use as a normal way of Distribution and Reception of the Sacrament?*

Answer: Intinction is the practice of dipping the host (the consecrated bread) into the wine and giving the mixture to the communicant. This practice is not recommended as a normal, regular mode of Distribution because our Lord has given us two commands in regard to the elements: “Take, eat;” and then, “Take, drink.” When our Lord also commanded us to “Do this,” He meant, “Do as I do; use what I use.” We are not free to depart from this Institution.

10. *In what circumstances might Intinction be used properly?*

Answer: In circumstances where it may be impossible for a communicant to chew and swallow the bread without imperiling their life, Intinction may be appropriately used. Outside of these kinds of circumstances, Intinction should not be used.

11. *Who is authorized by Christ to administer the Sacrament of the Altar?*

Answer: Only the pastor who has been properly Called (*rite vocatus*) is authorized by Christ to administer the Sacrament of the Altar. A properly Called pastor is one who has been trained and educated, examined and colloquized, rostered and certified for Call, Called and Ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry.

12. *What should be done in regard to the Sacrament of the Altar if a pastor is not available to administer it?*

Answer: If no pastor is available to administer the Sacrament of the Altar, it is better to go without until a pastor can come, rather than one who is not authorized to administer the Sacrament carrying out such administration. Obviously, this is not ideal, but when such circumstances arise, we can take comfort in the fact that we eat of Christ spiritually by faith through His Word, and His Word will certainly sustain us in times when we do not have access to the Sacrament.

13. *Has the Church recognized Holy Communion in extremis ("emergency"), as she has for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?*

Answer: No, the Church has not recognized Holy Communion *in extremis*.

14. *Why has the Church not recognized Holy Communion in extremis?*

Answer: The Church has not recognized *in extremis* situations for Holy Communion because even though both Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are Means of Grace, they are not the same. Holy Scripture attaches the language of necessity for salvation that it does not attach to Holy Communion. Holy Scripture also teaches that whereas Holy Baptism is for all people, Holy Communion is only for worthy guests who can examine themselves prior to Reception. Along with this, the pastor may need to withhold the Sacrament from those who are obstinately unrepentant, and this is information that laity are not likely to have.

15. *Why might a Lutheran pastor commune himself?*

Answer: A Lutheran pastor might commune himself because he is both a communicant at the altar, and the one who is Called and authorized to administer the Sacrament. The pastor receives the elements from his hand just as the other guests receive the elements from his hand. This practice has a longstanding precedent and pedigree in the history of the Church.

16. *How is a pastor receiving the elements from his own hand different than a “private mass”?*

Answer: “Private Mass” refers to the practice of a priest speaking the Words of Institution over bread and wine by himself, and he alone partakes of the consecrated bread and wine. This is “private” because it is separated from the assembly of believers. The pastor receiving the elements from his own hand is not “private”—he is part of the assembly of believers, and he partakes along with them of the same consecrated bread and wine.

17. *Why is it improper and inappropriate for a woman to assist with Holy Communion?*

Answer: It is improper and inappropriate for a woman to assist with Distribution because there is one singular *action* in the Lord’s Supper: Consecration, Distribution, Reception. Because the singular *action* of the Sacrament is administered by the Office of the Holy Ministry, any assistants must be male, since women are not permitted by our Lord to occupy the Office. A woman assisting in Distribution would blur these lines and cause confusion in the Church.

18. *How should we handle the remaining consecrated bread and wine? Why does it matter?*

Answer: Recognizing that there is no specific command of our Lord concerning the remaining consecrated elements, we want to approach the manner in which we dispense or dispose of the elements with reverence and respect because this bread and wine has been set apart and used in sacred things. We also want to recognize that what we do teaches those who observe,

and how we worship influences and impacts what we believe (*lex orandi, lex credenda*).

19. *How often should we celebrate the Holy Eucharist?*

Answer: Both Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions give us the example of frequent reception of the Lord's Supper. In Acts 2, the Church devoted herself to...the breaking of bread and the prayers." In Acts 20, St. Luke and St. Paul, among others, were gathered on the first day of the week (the Lord's Day) to break bread together. Our Lutheran Confessions speak of celebrating the Sacrament on each Lord's Day, holy day, and many festivals and other days. It is good for Christ's Church to desire all the gifts that Christ has for her, and to desire these gifts regularly and frequently. St. Ambrose summarizes well this desire: "Because I always sin, I ought always to take the medicine."

## CONCLUSION

**E**ight years ago, the Commission on Doctrine and Church Relations (CDCR) began work on the *THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER*. From the outset, we knew that these topics and discussions can sometimes be a source of disagreement or disunity in our church body. But we believe this gift of grace to be so precious and these issues regarding the Lord's Supper to be so important that they require our attention and merit our discussion. Indeed, Our Lord's purpose in giving us the Sacrament of His body and blood was to grant us the mystery of communion with Him, and through Him, to grant us the mystery of communion with each other. This is the Sacrament of our unity with Jesus Christ and with one another.

We pray that this brief report will be an opportunity for pastors and congregations to study and share together. May it prompt discussions about the wonder of God's grace, and the power of Christ's love. May this simple study be a reminder that Jesus gave us the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of our eternal life through His own precious body and blood! And may it draw us into even greater unity as the body of Christ, by His grace and mercy.

*This is the feast of victory for our God! Hallelujah!*

*Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,*

*Whose blood set us free to be people of God.*

*Power, riches, wisdom, and strength, and honor, blessing, and glory are His.*

*Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation:*

*Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever! Amen.*

*For the Lamb Who was slain has begun His reign! Hallelujah!*

*This is the feast of victory for our God! Hallelujah!<sup>67</sup>*

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<sup>67</sup> *This is the Feast. Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 155.

## CONCLUSION