



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Biblical and confessional resources for communion practices conversation

Marcus Kunz

This short essay identifies some key starting points in the Scriptures and Lutheran confessional writings for conversation about communion practices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is not an argument for or against any of the practices or changes being proposed or suggested, either explicitly or implicitly.

God's word

1. Jesus' own words and actions are the starting point for discussion of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament writings and in the 16th-century Lutheran Confessions, whose authors desired only to give a Christian witness that faithfully interpreted the Scriptures.

These words and actions are recorded in several places in the New Testament writings, first in Paul's correspondence with Christians at Corinth and later in the synoptic Gospels (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; and Luke 22:14-20). The Small Catechism combines all four into a single "conflated" version.

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." (Small Catechism V.4)ⁱ

With these words and actions Christ instituted the Lord's Supper and is fully present (that is, bodily, not just "spiritually" or metaphorically) whenever the Lord's Supper is observed according to Christ's command and promise. The Confessions give particular emphasis to Christ's words. "The chief thing is God's Word and ordinance or command. It was not dreamed up or invented by some mere human being but was instituted by Christ without anyone's counsel or deliberation" (Large Catechism VI.4).

In other words, the Lord's Table is what Christ's word says it is: his new covenant, his word of forgiveness, a promise in his body and blood that faith can trust confidently in any circumstance, regardless of the supposed unworthiness or misuse of any participant. "For as Christ's lips speak and say, so it is" (LC V.14). As Martin Luther memorably wrote on one occasion:

"Where his Word is torn away from the Supper and mere bread and wine are made of it, then I grant that they may make a parish fair or carnival of it. ... We know, however, that it is the Lord's Supper, in name and reality, not the supper of Christians. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and gives it himself, and is himself cook, butler, food, and drink."ⁱⁱ

Benefits and recipients

2. "To know Christ is to know his benefits," Philip Melanchthon once wrote.ⁱⁱⁱ The New Testament and the Confessions give focused attention both to the benefit itself and to those who receive it in the Lord's Supper.
 - a. "*For the forgiveness of sins*" The New Testament writings teach that the Lord's Supper is participation in Christ's own life, a partaking or communion (*koinōnia*; 1 Corinthians 10:16) that bestows the forgiveness of sin, and in that, God's fullest mercy. The Small Catechism similarly unpacks what is implicit in the words Jesus used. "Forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation" (SC VI.6).
 - b. "*For you*" The Confessions give particular emphasis to the words "given and shed *for you*" precisely because questions and doubts about eligibility or worthiness can be so bedeviling. "This is difficult, however, for we always have this obstacle and hindrance to contend with, that we concentrate more upon ourselves than upon the words that come from Christ's lips" (LC V.63). Jesus' simple words "for you" speak directly to everyone who hears them.

“What the words say and what they give ... are not spoken or preached to stone and wood but to those who hear them, those to whom he says, “Take and eat,” etc. ... All those who let these words be addressed to them and believe that they are true have what the words declare. ... The treasure is opened and placed at everyone's door, yes, upon the table” (LC V.33-35)

Theological foundations

3. The particular way that the Lutheran confessional writings attend to Jesus' words in Scripture illustrates their fundamental theological convictions about God's word addressing faith as command and promise.

The Confessions assert that the Lord's Supper “is not founded on human holiness but on the Word of God. ... For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or unbelief” (LC V.16-17). These words that Jesus speaks are God's word, and they come to human ears as command and promise or law and gospel. As words, they do not merely describe. These words are also actions.

The command “Do this often in remembrance of me” urges Jesus' hearers not simply to partake of what is promised, but especially to receive it confidently trusting the promise and the one who is making the promise. The promise attached to the commandment actually gives what it promises. Jesus “offers us all the treasures he brought from heaven for us.” The Large Catechism compares the benefit of the Lord's Supper to a remedy that heals sin's disease. It is “a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body is helped as well” (LC V. 66, 68).

Questions of practice

4. Both the New Testament and the Lutheran confessional writings address matters of practice by building directly on Jesus' words.
 - a. In writing to the Corinthians Paul reminds them that it is Christ who makes both the bread and cup and the gathered assembly what they are: the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper is the “contempt for God's church” demonstrated in the exclusionary practices of the Corinthian congregation that do not discern the body of Christ where Jesus says it is present. Where Christ's word is not believed, God's judgment results (1 Corinthians 11:17-32).

- b. Similarly the Lutheran confessions insist that unbelief in Christ's word of promise compromises neither the reality of the sacrament nor the validity of its administration. Rather, unbelief becomes a judgment on those who do not trust God and God's word (for example, LC V.15-19). Consequently, questions of "unworthiness" to participate are answered on the basis of faith's trusting God's word, and not on the basis of other factors (for example, LC V.53-63).

In both historical contexts the questions of practice are decided in relation to the command and promise given by Jesus in the Supper itself.

Relationship to Baptism

5. The New Testament writings do not make any direct connections between the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Whatever connection exists is on the basis of common points of reference. Three points are especially prominent. Foremost is God's word spoken by Jesus, both the promise of forgiveness and the command to administer these two sacraments (see Matthew 28:18-20 in addition to the Scriptures cited above). Second is the benefit received by faith in God's word (Mark 16:16 in addition to the Scriptures cited above). Third is the explicit reference to Jesus' death and its benefit for those addressed by God's word (Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:26).

In two places in the section on the Lord's Supper the Large Catechism expresses the assumption that Baptism will have occurred previously in the experience of Christians (LC V. 23-24, 87). In both instances the main point is the benefit in Christ that is common to both sacraments: the life of a new creation within the community of believers. In a third instance the Large Catechism explains that the Lord's Supper is to be considered in the same way as Baptism, namely, on the basis of Jesus' words under three headings — what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. This third instance concludes saying, "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" (LC V.2). In all three instances in the Large Catechism the relationship between the two sacraments is parallel. That is, baptism is mentioned because, like the Lord's Supper, its institution, benefits and recipients all arise from the command and promise spoken by Jesus.

Marcus R. Kunz, Ph.D., is Assistant to the Bishop and Executive for Theological Discernment in the Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Endnotes

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1. Small Catechism, part V, paragraph 4. References to the “Book of Concord” are by writing, part, and paragraph (hereafter in abbreviated form; for example, SC V.4). The Lutheran confessional writings are available in several modern translations. The one used here is “The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

The Lutheran Confessions are notably restrained in their use of Jesus' discourse in John 6 as a basis for teaching about the Lord's Supper (unlike many other Christian writings, including much modern theology and hymnody). The Confessions use the John 6 discourse only to describe the “spiritual eating” of faith. “This spiritual eating, however, is nothing other than faith—namely, hearkening to, accepting with faith, and applying to ourselves God's Word, which presents Christ to us as true God and a true human being along with all his benefits (God's grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life).” (FC SD, VII.62) Similarly, the Confessions do not rely significantly on either the various feeding narratives or the feast parables in the Gospels for elaborating their teaching about the Lord's Supper.

1. Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My Body,’ Etc. Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics” (1527) in “Luther's Works, American Edition,” vol. 37, p. 142.
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