



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Welcome to Life in Christ: Reflections on Baptism and Hospitality at the Table of the Lord

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A widespread discussion has been taking place in the churches of North America about the relationship of baptism to Holy Communion. This discussion commonly involves one question and its many implications: Must one be baptized in order to be welcomed to communion? If one answers yes, then has the congregation thereby become significantly inhospitable, quite unlike the stories of Jesus himself welcoming outsiders and sinners to common eating? On the other hand, if one answers no, has the congregation then simply become a carrier of current cultural values, given to the immediate satisfaction of individual choices and to the idea that nothing ought to ever be denied to anybody? In either case, what does baptism mean?

Lutherans can find help in this discussion by seeking deeper grounding in a biblical, liturgical and confessional theology of the means of grace. Indeed, the document of the ELCA titled, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*¹ may be one of our best resources for this discussion. Principles found there — that document's consideration of the things that unite us in our worship practice amid all of our continuing diversities — can anchor the conversation and help us join with other Christians throughout the *oikumene* in thinking about these important questions. That document still comes to ELCA congregations with good proposals for local practice. What follows here is one person's reflections on these issues and that document.²

¹ Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997; in what follows references are made to UMG.

² This paper was originally written as "Twelve Theses on Eucharistic Hospitality" and presented to the Lutheran scholars of liturgy who regularly gather prior to the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, in their January 2013 meeting held in Albuquerque, NM.

We might state the matter in this way: Baptism and the holy supper are the gospel of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit made into a continually recalled initiatory bath and a regularly recurring communal meal. Through them God identifies us with the death and resurrection of Jesus, gathers us together with Jesus into the astonishing new age, brings us again and again to faith, makes of us a community witnessing to God's mercy for the life of the world, continually renews and forgives us, and constantly turns us together toward our neighbors and the earth itself. Baptism and Holy Communion are thus essentially communal events, things that happen to us together. Along with the read, preached and sung word of God, they continually create and mark the church.³

When we then see how these events work together, it is not wise for us to spend too much energy enumerating or distinguishing them. In many ways, Baptism and Holy Communion make up a single sacrament or a single sacramental economy. Described by the human material out of which they are created — thus, the “element” to which the word comes, to use terms drawn from St. Augustine's definition of a sacrament⁴ — they are like washing up before a festal meal and then the meal itself. Because these things bear witness to the arriving new age, the “washing up” occurs once-for-all⁵ and involves an immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus, an introduction into the community around him, and an identification with those — the outsiders, the needy, the sinful, the dying and the earth itself — with whom he identifies. Baptism is thus a “new birth.” The meal is continually repeated,⁶ the end-time banquet available now in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the food for the new-born, turning them also toward the hungry world. Catechesis, the echoing and deepening word that accompanies baptism, is also continually repeated in age-appropriate form.⁷ One could say that the baptismal process — call the whole thing, say, by the name *baptisma* — is the basic sacrament. It is as if the holy supper is one extended and repeatable part of the baptismal process. The word that accompanies baptism and the announcement of the forgiveness of sins — absolution — are yet other parts that extend into our whole life. And the preached word of God in the assembly must constantly be announcing to us, in the terms of the texts of the day, what this *baptisma* means.

In truth, the basic sacrament is Jesus Christ, God in the flesh and in the material of our world, immersed in our alienation and death, changing everything. This is what we mean by “new age.” The word of God in assembly, baptism as the introduction to that assembly, and the supper as the assembly's meal are faithfully seen as concrete means

³ See UMG 2 and 3.

⁴ “The word comes to the element and so there is a sacrament, as if it is itself a kind of visible word.” In *Johannem*, 80:3. This definition was beloved by Luther.

⁵ UMG 16.

⁶ UMG 35.

⁷ See UMG 19 and 37E, F.

whereby the Spirit of God draws us into that one sacrament and so into the life of the Holy Trinity. As *The Use of the Means of Grace* says:

Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in the Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, this Word washes a people to be Christ's own Body in the world. We have called this gift of Word and Sacrament by the name 'the means of grace.' The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father.⁸

The understanding and practice of this profound sacramental economy can be minimized and endangered in our times. Such minimizing occurs both by a kind of religious consumerism and by a certain sacramental legalism. The reception of communion ought not be seen as the reception of an individual religious product, implying no communal involvement and no continuing commitment. Such reception is not a "right" or a religious "work." It is not an occasionally nice thing for an individual to do. Similarly, having baptism "done" ought not be seen as the satisfaction of a divine demand or the meeting of a vague social or religious requirement, also without ongoing communal significance other than familial interest in a ceremony. On the other hand, the sacraments ought not be protected, as if they were religious rituals meted out only under the control of our leaders, without reference to the heart of the sacraments, the basic sacrament that is Jesus Christ, nor to his gracious identification with outsiders and sinners. Both of these misuses call upon our assemblies to teach the meaning of the sacraments and continually renew the practice of the sacramental economy — of *baptisma* — in all of our contexts.

For example, Paul's admonitions to the Corinthian congregation about the Lord's Supper⁹ have been misunderstood and misused when they have been taken to mean that only those with a certain level of religious knowledge and "discernment" should be admitted to the table. On the contrary, Paul urges the current participants in the meal at Corinth to "discern the body," that is to see the poor members of the community, whom they are excluding by their practice, as members of the Body of Christ. By this act of exclusion, they risk sickness and death. It is toward the stopping of exclusion that Paul urges the participants to "examine themselves." Still, the excluded here were most likely baptized members of the community. And the goal of Paul included the establishment of a truly communal meal: not "each of you goes ahead with your own

⁸ UMG 1. See also *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 6.

⁹ 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

supper," but "wait for one another." More: for Paul, the ground of this inclusion was that the meal is to proclaim the cross, Jesus' identification with all in their need.

On the other hand, Jesus' meals with outsiders have also been misinterpreted when they have been taken to imply that baptism is not needed or that participation in the supper has no consequences. To read the stories of Jesus without thinking of the context of the churches in which they were told is naive and misleading. The stories of Jesus' meals were probably indeed recounted in the Gospels with the intention of reforming the meal-practice of the communities of the late first and early second century, among other things the intention of urging the inclusion of Gentiles and other outsiders. But, for example, the Markan Jesus has compassion on the crowd and urges the disciples to feed them after "they have been with me now for three days" (Mark 8:2), an old symbolic shorthand for being with Christ in his death and resurrection, the very content of baptism. In the time of the church, these outsiders and Gentiles are of course to be baptized and so gathered into the community of the cross and resurrection, so brought to be with Jesus for "the three days." Just so, the young man who is stripped at the outset of the passion in Mark (14:51-52) — stripped like an ancient candidate for baptism — three days later appears as witness to the resurrection for the community, clothed in a white robe (16:5). It is as if he has been immersed in the cross of Jesus and so clothed with the gospel. The very meaning of baptism is so symbolized. And throughout Mark, Jesus being with the sinners and outsiders is a down payment on and image of the cross¹⁰ as well as a promise of the resurrection, of his continued presence with these same people.

Just so, the Lukan Jesus finds the outsiders included in both a kind of eucharist, with the widow at Zarephath, and a kind of baptism, with Naaman at the Jordan (Luke 4:25-27), and for saying this the Lukan Jesus is threatened with another down payment on the cross (4:29). Then too, the Markan Jesus says to the disciples, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Both cup and baptism are to be full of the cross, and they belong together. Similarly, the Johannine Jesus says, in the foot washing that stands for both baptism and supper, "Do you know what I have done to you? . . . you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:12-14). Participation in the meal has consequences, draws us into the way of the cross, raises us up with the resurrection, and turns us toward the needs of our neighbor, even when we do not initially see those consequences, even when we easily say with James and John, "We are able" (Mark 10:39). Baptisma always intends to make clear those meanings and those consequences in our lives. The holy supper is always intended as grace, never a work. But it is not cheap grace. Nor is "grace" easily understood in our culture without profound catechesis. Anyone who eats and drinks

¹⁰ E.g., see 3:6 at the end of the stories in chapters 1 and 2 of Mark.

Christ's meal inevitably belongs to the way of baptisma. They need to have that way made continually available to them. This is true for all of us. All of us need the catechesis and the way of baptisma.

"Holy things" are indeed for "holy people," as the old Eastern Christian text before communion says, warning the participants and warning us. But "only one is holy," as the people wonderfully respond in that same text. That one is Jesus Christ, and he welcomes sinners. While the Markan Jesus calls the Gentile woman a "dog" (Mark 7:27), she willingly becomes the dog under the table who eats the children's crumbs. While the Matthean Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs" (Matt. 7:6) and the Didache uses that very passage to warn the unbaptized and the unrepentant against participation in the eucharist,¹¹ the liturgies of the Christian East have legitimately developed the response that is not unlike that of the Syrophoenician woman, now in the mouth of the assembly: "Only one is holy, Jesus Christ." Admission to communion is always a paradoxical matter of warning and contradictory welcome. Pastors, teachers and liturgical leaders have a responsibility to guard and heighten this paradox, not flatten it into either legalistic refusal or easy, consumerist admission. The practice of the church should say something like this: "Yes, you are welcome. Absolutely. But also, it will cost you your life." "Yes, this is for you. Absolutely. But also, this will turn you toward your neighbor's and the earth's need." "Here is the food of the great and free new banquet. It is the body and blood of the crucified, risen one."

The Use of the Means of Grace has it right and should be taught and practiced in our churches:

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.¹²

Sometimes, it is indeed true that someone comes first to the single sacrament that is Jesus Christ through the means of the eucharist. That may be increasingly so in our congregations as eucharist continues to become the principal service of every congregation, every Sunday, as good eucharistic preaching occurs, and as our congregations practice "strong center and open door" in a mission land, amid many people who have known nothing of authentic Christianity. Pastors know this. Eucharist

¹¹ "But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'" Didache 9:5. The Didache is most likely a late first century text with roots earlier in the century.

¹² UMG 37G. The one word in UMG 37G that I wish was different is the word "inadvertently." No one ought ever be communed "inadvertently." In the mercy of God, I think no one ever is. I would prefer that the text read ". . . and is communed outside of the normal order in which baptism precedes communion . . ."

does indeed proclaim the gospel. People who hear and eat and drink the gospel first in this way ought to not be presented with baptism as if baptism were a requirement or a demand rather than a gift, a thing to shame people by its absence. As Kent Knutson, former professor of theology and former president of the American Lutheran Church, said, "Baptism is always gospel, never law." But one who eats and drinks with the community, even once, is bound to the community and the community to her or to him. The way of baptism must be made available, even if it is approached first in this way. The community cannot simply let such a person go, unconnected, as a solitary consumer.

Still, two other important passages in *The Use of the Means of Grace* are also right: "The Holy Communion is given to the baptized . . ." and "All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion . . ."¹³ The ordinary, classic and meaningful order of washing and festal meal is to be maintained and made clear as the norm for our practice. Ordinarily, we should welcome any seeker first to catechesis and baptism. Ordinarily, eucharistic hospitality is extended to all baptized Christians of whatever church — indeed, like James and John, of whatever conviction about the supper.

While these proposals together do not make up a consequent and logical legal decision, they can have the value of maintaining the pastoral paradox: "Holy things for holy people." And "only one is holy."

Some communities, however, may be called to a "critical exception"¹⁴ in their practice. Their open table and later baptismal process may stand as a challenge to us all to recover the deep anchor of the sacraments in the single sacrament of Jesus Christ. Examples of communities engaged in such a critical exception might include the Episcopal congregation of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco and many Methodist congregations.¹⁵ Still, such communities have a weighty responsibility to understand their practice as an intentional exception and, thus, a responsibility to maintain a dialogue with the larger church, to establish a serious baptismal process, to make constant reference to the Trinitarian and Christological center of the sacraments, to undertake a profound engagement with the needs of the world, and to exercise a critique of their own practice.¹⁶ The decision to be such a community of exception ought not be taken lightly.

¹³ UMG 37 and 49.

¹⁴ For "critical exceptions," see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 244. For the same phenomenon, called "catholic exceptions," see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 157-8.

¹⁵ See Mark W. Stamm, *Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest: A Theology of the Open Table* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). It is important to note, however, that John Wesley's understanding of holy communion as a "converting ordinance" is to be understood within the context of 18th century revivalism: those to be "converted" were the already baptized but inactive or inattentive members of the church.

¹⁶ See Stamm, 19-40.

Every Lutheran congregation needs to make clear the grace and open mercy that is available for all people in baptism. More: They need to place a congregationally-based baptismal/catechumenal process at the very center of their life.¹⁷ This baptismal process should be seen as important, beautiful, existentially powerful, desirable, highly valued by the Christian community, challenging, life-changing and yet utterly open and free. We need to practice “the open yet serious font.” Baptism is always gospel, and that gospel needs to be seen and heard.¹⁸ A recovery of immersion pools, of a baptismally focused Lenten observance, and of the liturgy of the Three Days can assist in this seeing and hearing in our time.

On the other hand, it must be said that pastors deceive themselves if they think that baptism without catechesis and formation are easily perceived by people as “grace,” instead of as a thing those people think they “ought to have done” — perhaps even a thing required by God or necessary for “going to heaven” — for themselves or for their child. Pastors are also misled if they think that reception of the Holy Communion apart from the word of the cross and the mystery of the trinity, the words that fill a faithful baptismal process, is perceived as “grace.” Pastors may think — as they themselves have been catechized to believe — that they are forgiving sins by the free distribution of Holy Communion. Many communicants, however, may themselves see no particular need for the forgiveness of sins and may altogether miss the many other meanings of the supper. In our culture, God’s grace and these many meanings need to be taught. The danger also exists that while baptism without sponsors, catechists and catechesis, and eucharist without baptism may seem to congregations to be the most hospitable or “gracious” choices, these practices may have actually come into existence largely as the easiest and most culture-conforming way, requiring the least effort by the congregation or the pastor.

The communal meanings of baptism and the supper will be much clearer to us all with a renewed eucharistic practice as well as a renewed baptismal practice. The continued use of medieval hosts and of individual glasses in the distribution of communion tends to support the American individualist and consumerist approach to religious meaning. So does the “eastward” celebration of the thanksgiving, the absence of a full thanksgiving prayer, and the kneeling congregation. A shared loaf of bread and a shared cup of wine need to be widely recovered,¹⁹ and the latter needs to be clearly taught as the most communally hygienic mode available. The celebration of eucharistia should be at a table, with the presider facing a participating assembly that is standing together — as they have been raised up with Christ so to stand — around the holy gifts. For a visitor to see that assembly, that sign of the body of Christ

¹⁷ See UMG 18-20.

¹⁸ UMG 25-27.

¹⁹ UMG 44A.

enlivened by the Spirit and standing before God and the world, will also be for her or him to see the gospel, into which we all are being continually invited.

The consequences of receiving Holy Communion may be best taught in our day with the words of Martin Luther's 1519 "Sermon on The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ." This sermon makes clear to all of us how receiving communion is always a communal matter, gathering us together into God's going out in care for the life of the world, inserting each of us into a fellowship of beggars. Baptisma exists to gather us into this fellowship and form us in this mission:

When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship . . . Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given to you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and — if you cannot do more — have heartfelt sympathy . . . It is Christ's will, then, that we partake of it frequently, in order that we may remember him and exercise ourselves in this fellowship according to his example.²⁰

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²⁰ Luther's Works 35:54-56. See UMG 54.