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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

“Given for you all”: Eucharistic Hospitality

Moses Penumaka

One of the joyous moments in ministry of word and sacrament for me is to say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” One of the gracious moments for me is to invite by saying, “The things of God for ALL the people of God! Draw near and receive.” Baptism and eucharist are the visible signs of invisible grace of God. They are the means of grace through which God communes with us. There is a lot of preparation. There are many questions and a great deal of tradition to follow to use both of these sacraments in the life and witness of not only each of followers of the Christian faith but also of the community of faith - the church. In this essay I will describe briefly the theological meaning and significance of baptism and eucharist and the relationship between these two sacraments. I will also share a few of the true stories in ministry that may be used as case studies for discussion and clarity on the use of the means of grace.

Baptism

The Augsburg Confession of our faith states: “Concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him.”¹ In the *Book of Concord*, edited by Kolb and Wengert, one can find out the confessional articles and the explanation of the same over a period of time. In studying these sacraments it is helpful to understand the *nature* and *effect* of the sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

What is the *nature* of baptism? It is a gift from God. God gives it to us. God baptizes us. According to Scripture it is part of the great commission and therefore can be

¹ Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, ed. *The Book of Concord*, Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2000. p. 42.

understood as God's ordinance. It is commanded by God according to the Scriptures. In baptism through the water and the word, our sins are washed, our human nature is endorsed, and our relationship with God as our creator and we, as children, is affirmed. The Holy Baptism involves first and foremost God, then an ordained minister of the church (when available) and also the community of faith. God baptizes us and we receive baptism by faith. Baptism is once for all. There is no need to be re-baptized. There are many false teachings about rebaptism or baptism by the Spirit by pastors who misinterpret and misuse baptism to claim new members and keep them in their fold.

What is the *effect* of baptism? Through baptism our sins are forgiven, our guilt of sinful nature (original sin) is removed and we enter a new life a new birth. One more important effect is that baptism justifies us saints in spite of our sinful nature because God through Christ has forgiven us. We die and rise like Christ, being justified as saints. For all these theological and confessional reasons, we believe that infant baptism is necessary, right and efficacious.

Both the nature and effect of baptism are to be explained and discussed in detailed during the preparatory classes with the parents, family, sponsors or Godparents and the community of faith as much as possible and necessary. I have baptized a number of children often by parents who were not married or who were divorced and are in a new relationship. It is very touching and powerful that many couples who are not able to afford a wedding or could not marry in the church, or are unchurched, look to the church as soon as they have a child. They seek baptism of their child not only for the child to be blessed in the church but also that their relationship as mother and father are to be recognized in the community of faith at the service. The preparatory classes are a great opportunity to explain the nature and effect of baptism as a means of grace.

The Lord's Supper

The Augsburg Confession states: Concerning the Lord's Supper, it is taught that the true body and blood of Christ are truly under the form of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper and are distributed and received there. Rejected therefore is also the contrary teaching."² How do we define the *nature* of eucharist? The Lord's Supper is based on the scripture; the witness of the gospel writers and Paul who narrate Christ's words and institution. It is the tradition of our church that the words of institution should be interpreted not as figurative but as they stand, in their proper, clear, literal sense. In this sacrament also it is God who invites us to the table, who offers us hospitality and who becomes not only the host but the feast itself.

² *Ibid*, p. 44.

How do we understand the *effect* of eucharist? At the Lord's Table we receive God's grace and forgiveness of sins. We commune- live in union- with God, Christ's true presence in the bread and wine as body and blood. The *effect* of the Lord's Supper is again the word the omnipotence of God in Christ. The Sacrament of the Altar does not rest on our belief or unbelief but on the word and ordinance of God. Who is worthy to receive is also not our piety, merit, holiness, or worthiness but it is purely as God's gracious gift for the forgiveness of sins and the sustaining of life in all its abundance. Luther says "In the same way I also say and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar the true body and blood of Christ are orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even if the priests who distribute them or those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament. It does not rest on human belief or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God...." ³

Two practical issues arise on the nature and effect of eucharist in Indian faith communities, especially among the vegetarians. At special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, many Hindus worship in congregations are open to come to the table. If we apply the nature of eucharist as explained above in the strict literal sense, those who are pure vegetarians and do not eat meat cannot really understand the literal meaning and significance of the Sacrament of the Altar. However as Luther explains in the effect that even those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament, it will remain as real and true bodily presence of the crucified and risen Lord.

Open table at a Wedding at Queens, NY

In New York there was an inter-religious wedding. The bride is Christian and the bridegroom is from the Sikh faith tradition. The wedding took place both in the congregation and at the *Gurudhwara*, the worship place (dharbar - King's court) of their faith. The wedding had brought together a big crowd. The pastor was inspired by the crowd and the Holy Spirit and so after solemnizing the wedding, he spoke the words of institution and served communion to the newly-wedded couple and then gave the bread and cup to the bride and bridegroom to serve the communion to everyone attending the wedding. It was well received. Everyone was happy. Everyone was served the grace of God and the true presence of Christ by the newly-wedded couple. The crowd that was gathered were from many faith traditions and were not baptized. Some of them might have received it as simple bread and wine, some might have receive it as *prasad* (sacred food offered at the temples), and others might have wondered what is it all about. Now, do we rejoice that everyone received the body and blood of Christ, or do we question the pastor if what he did was appropriate or

³ *Ibid.*, p. 598.32.

not? Can this be a theologically sound example of open table? How do we respond to this event?

Ethnic cultures in tension at the Table— Oromoean Christians in Fremont, California

Ethiopian Lutherans, both Amharic and Oromean, are not only large in numbers but are fast in growing as a church. In the San Francisco Bay, there are many Oromeans. Before they acquired a property generously given by a Lutheran congregation, they worshiped at Good Shepherd South Asian Ministry, a multicultural congregation in Fremont, California. Sometimes we used to have combined worship with all caucasians, south Asians and Oromeans. It was a very powerful experience of Pentecost. During communion it was the tradition of the church that the ushers invite communicants pew by pew. Our guest Oromenas are used to going as a whole crowd. This cultural behavior was seen as objectionable to some long-time Lutherans who decided to quit the church and never worship again. Such responses reveal not only the cultural ignorance but also theological bankruptcy on the most important sacramental understandings.

Conclusion

Today the body of Christ and the communion of saints have grown beyond the four walls of the sanctuary and above the memorials of the church. Therefore, the apologetics of the confession of the church are to help us open our hearts and eyes and see what God is doing among us, how the crucified and risen Lord appears to the world in the most unexpected places and how all are welcome and how the sacred and true presence of God “given for you” is literally “given for you ALL.”

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