

Maundy Thursday
The Lord's Supper

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

On this night on which the Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed, on which He instituted the Supper of His body and blood, it does us well to review what it is the believe, teach, and confess with regard to His Supper.

We can simply begin with what the Sacrament of the Altar is. As just said and heard, in fewer words, "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." What Luther taught here, and which we have learned by heart, is confirmed in the words of Christ Himself. Again, these are words you have been taught, the primary text of the Sacrament, and which you hear every Sunday:

[Our] Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

There is something to be noted here. In all four places where the Words of Institution are recorded, in one form or another, the Greek word for "is" is used. In Greek grammar, the word does not need to be included, but here it is. One can infer from this that the word is used to leave no room for doubt or misinterpretation or mistranslation. "This **is** my body...this **is** my blood," Jesus said. He didn't say anything else; He didn't mean anything else.

When you eat and drink the Sacrament of the Altar, you are eating and drinking Christ's true body and blood. But these are still bread and wine, and this St. Paul teaches: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16) The cup—the contents thereof—is a communion of the blood of Christ and the bread of the body. The bread and body of Christ are united in a way incomprehensible to us—communion St. Paul calls it—likewise the wine and blood of Christ, so that when you receive the Lord's Supper, you are eating bread and body in one bite and drinking wine and blood in one sip. This is exactly why another name for the Sacrament is Holy Communion.

Why eat and drink Christ's body and blood? Because there is life there, the life of God, eternal life. Jesus Christ gave His body to death and shed His blood as a propitiation for sins—the wages of which is death (cf. Romans 6:23)—so that men would not perish, but have eternal life. (cf. John 3:16) His body He gives you to eat and His blood to drink that you would remember Him, and, as St. Paul put it, to proclaim His death till He comes again (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26), and that you may have the forgiveness of your sins. Taste and see that the Lord is good (cf. Psalm 34:8); He gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. These words, "for the remission of sins," St. Matthew records Jesus saying as He instituted His Supper. (cf. Matthew 26:28) So, you eat and drink the Sacrament, recalling and proclaiming the sacrifice of Jesus for your forgiveness, and you eat and drink the forgiveness of your sins. "And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

Those words from Matthew, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Whoever believes them, and why doubt them since Jesus said them, has exactly what they say: the forgiveness of their sins.

Now, there are those who want to make the Sacrament compulsory. The intention is well-and-good, but doing so turns the Gospel into the Law. Jesus gives His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and commands and invites you to receive Him in His Supper. His command and invitation should be enough; there is no need for the church to add anything to that. Furthermore, when Jesus says, “Do this,” there is no “or else,” attached to it, much as there almost is with Holy Baptism. Therefore, there is no place for His Church on earth to compel the members of Christ’s Bride to receive the Sacrament.

As a good professor often liked to quip, “The opposite of an error is an error in the opposite direction.” As much as the church cannot force members to receive the Sacrament, it cannot force them not to take it, except in cases of manifest, unrepentant sin, or where the proclamation of the Lord’s death differs between person and congregation. This is the error in the opposite direction of compulsion, and it is exactly what happens in those places which reduce the number of times the Sacrament is offered to once a quarter, certain Sundays, or every other week. In essence, this practice tells the communicant, “You may earnestly desire Jesus today in His Sacrament, but you will not receive it.”

So, what is the church to do? Teach the Sacrament in all of its purity. Jesus invites you to eat His body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of sins. Teach the people how much they need Jesus, and the forgiveness that He won on the cross and gives in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion. And offer the Sacrament often, “every Lord’s Day,” as the saying goes, and even on other occasions—often.

What Luther preached regarding the Sacrament of the Altar, as recorded in the Large Catechism, speaks volumes in this regard:

[T]here is besides [the] command also a promise, as we heard above, which ought most strongly to incite and encourage us. For here stand the kind and precious words: “This is My body, given for you. This is My blood, shed for you, for the remission of sins.” These words, I have said, are not preached to wood and stone, but to me and you; else He might just as well be silent and not institute a Sacrament. Therefore consider, and put yourself into this you, that He may not speak to you in vain.

For here He offers to us the entire treasure which He has brought for us from heaven, and to which He invites us also in other places with the greatest kindness, as when He says in St. Matthew 11:28: “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Now it is surely a sin and a shame that He so cordially and faithfully summons and exhorts us to our highest and greatest good, and we act so distantly with regard to it, and permit so long a time to pass [without partaking of the Sacrament] that we grow quite cold and hardened, so that we have no inclination or love for it. We must never regard the Sacrament as something injurious from which we had better flee, but as a pure,

wholesome, comforting remedy imparting salvation and comfort, which will cure you and give you life both in soul and body. For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved. Why, then, is it that we act as if it were a poison, the eating of which would bring death?

To be sure, it is true that those who despise it and live in an unchristian manner receive it to their hurt and damnation; for nothing shall be good or wholesome to them, just as with a sick person who from caprice eats and drinks what is forbidden him by the physician. But those who are sensible of their weakness, desire to be rid of it and long for help, should regard and use it only as a precious antidote against the poison which they have in them. For here in the Sacrament you are to receive from the lips of Christ forgiveness of sin, which contains and brings with it the grace of God and the Spirit with all His gifts, protection, shelter, and power against death and the devil and all misfortune.

Thus you have, on the part of God, both the command and the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ. Besides this, on your part, your own distress which is about your neck, and because of which this command, invitation, and promise are given, ought to impel you. For He Himself says: "They that be whole, need not a physician, but they that be sick;" that is, those who are weary and heavy-laden with their sins, with the fear of death, temptations of the flesh and of the devil. If, therefore, you are heavy-laden and feel your weakness, then go joyfully to this Sacrament and obtain refreshment, consolation, and strength. For if you would wait until you are rid of such burdens, that you might come to the Sacrament pure and worthy, you must forever stay away. For in that case He pronounces sentence and says: If you are pure and godly, you have no need of Me, and I, in turn, none of thee. Therefore those alone are called unworthy who neither feel their infirmities nor wish to be considered sinners.

But if you say: What, then, shall I do if I cannot feel such distress or experience hunger and thirst for the Sacrament? Answer: For those who are so minded that they do not realize their condition I know no better counsel than that they put their hand into their bosom to ascertain whether they also have flesh and blood. And if you find that to be the case, then go, for your good, to St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, and hear what sort of a fruit your flesh is: "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like."

Therefore, if you cannot feel it, at least believe the Scriptures; they will not lie to you, and they know your flesh better than you yourself. Yea,

St. Paul further concludes in: “I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.” If St. Paul may speak thus of his flesh, we do not propose to be better nor more holy. But that we do not feel it is so much the worse; for it is a sign that there is a leprous flesh which feels nothing, and yet [the leprosy] rages and keeps spreading. Yet, as we have said, if you are quite dead to all sensibility, still believe the Scriptures, which pronounce sentence upon you. And, in short, the less you feel your sins and infirmities, the more reason have you to go to the Sacrament to seek help and a remedy.

In the second place, look about you and see whether you are also in the world, or if you do not know it, ask your neighbors about it. If you are in the world, do not think that there will be lack of sins and misery. For only begin to act as though you would be godly and adhere to the Gospel, and see whether no one will become your enemy, and, moreover, do you harm, wrong, and violence, and likewise give you cause for sin and vice. If you have not experienced it, then let the Scriptures tell you, which everywhere give this praise and testimony to the world.

Besides this, you will also have the devil about you, whom you will not entirely tread under foot, because our Lord Christ Himself could not entirely avoid him. Now, what is the devil? Nothing else than what the Scriptures call him, a liar and murderer. A liar, to lead the heart astray from the Word of God, and to blind it, that you cannot feel your distress or come to Christ. A murderer, who cannot bear to see you live one single hour. **If you could see how many knives, darts, and arrows are every moment aimed at you, you would be glad to come to the Sacrament as often as possible.** But there is no reason why we walk so securely and heedlessly, except that we neither think nor believe that we are in the flesh, and in this wicked world or in the kingdom of the devil. (LC V.64-82, emphasis mine)

“If you could see how many knives, darts, and arrows are every moment aimed at you, you would be glad to come to the Sacrament as often as possible.” The Sacrament is defense and antidote against these knives, darts, and arrows. There, Jesus gives you Himself, who overcame the assaults of the devil and conquered him who would throw these knives, darts, and arrows at you. So, then, if Jesus gives Himself to you and has overcome and conquered the devil, then you can be assured of this: you are forgiven for all of your sins—that is the “you” you put yourself into.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.