

TEXT, FOR THE RECORD

Sacraments as Eschatological Gift and Promise

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A paper for the ALC/LCA Communion Practices Committee
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[When I became the pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Edison, New Jersey, I discovered a file drawer full of documents left by my predecessor Peter Wuebbens from his service on the "Communion Practices Committee" of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). The 1970s were a contentious decade regarding Lutheran liturgical revisions, as documented in studies of the 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship. Among the papers was this essay by Gerhard O. Forde, probably from February 4, 1975, according to the Committee's minutes. To my knowledge, it has never been published before. Paul Rorem, Editor]

I have been asked to speak to you, as I understand it, in the capacity of one who teaches a course in the sacraments at a Lutheran Theological Seminary to give you something of the manner in which I go about the matter. I must apologize first of all, for the fact that I was not able to complete this paper in time for you to have it in your hands so that you could study it and respond to it. The press of other duties made it impossible for me to do so. Secondly, I must admit that I have not been able as yet to make my way through the mass of material dealing with the more liturgical side of the matter. I find it difficult enough, I guess you might say, getting something of a grasp on the historical and systematic materials! So at the present my sorties into the confusing liturgical debates have been at best, occasional, and by no means comprehensive. I must say, however, that these sorties have been enough, together with actual experiences of the new experimental liturgies, to provoke considerable dismay when measured against what seems to me to be the Lutheran theological and liturgical tradition on these matters,

although I do resonate favorably, I think, to genuinely responsible attempts to express that tradition in new ways. That is to say that I do not want what I am about to say to be taken as being against liturgical renewal or reform; we can always stand some of that and no doubt need it. But I am concerned that such reform be a genuine advance which seeks to further the genius of the tradition rather than a retrograde reaction which simply betrays or denies it.

With that short preamble, let me turn to the manner in which I attempt to teach the sacraments. Basically the way in which I approach the sacraments is to say that they must be understood and used in terms of the conceptuality within which they stand in scriptures. That conceptuality is eschatological. With most Lutherans I would insist that one cannot begin with a prior understanding or definition of what sacraments are "in general" in terms of an already given conceptuality be that mythological, ontological, or whatever, but that one must begin with the acts themselves, in particular, as they stand within their own conceptual framework, and only then deduce from them what "sacraments" in the Christian sense are. When this is done it seems to me obvious and unavoidable to say that what we have to do with, in what we have come to call sacraments, is eschatology. This is true, certainly, of both baptism and the Lord's Supper. When I attempt to define sacraments, I try to define them as eschatological gifts and promises. Sacraments are, I would say, occurrences of the end and new beginning in the midst of our time. As such, they are applications of the once-for-all breaking into our time, our lives, of the Christ-event, the crucified, risen Christ, the Christ who is our future and who draws us into his future and life. The conceptuality, it seems to me, is eschatological and what we have to work out is a hermeneutic of word and sacrament and a liturgy adequate to the conceptuality.

It seems to me that one can interpret the development of the dogma of the church as a struggle to achieve that kind of conceptuality and a liturgical practice which adequately conveys it, or perhaps even delivers what God has to give to his people. These acts which we have now come to call sacraments have their roots, it would seem, in the apocalyptic setting of New Testament times. They could, I would venture to say, hardly be called cultic acts, really; they

were performed quite apart from the official cults of the day—out in the open—on the banks of a river, along a roadside, in a house, in a common meal setting. They were performed at our Lord's command in the light of the in-breaking of the end-times in the event of his death and resurrection, and in expectation of his early return. They brought the gift of his presence and the promise that he had given them. The question of the exact how of his presence was not, perhaps, of such great moment to them. He was soon to return. The delay of the parousia, however, seems to have caused problems. How were they to understand and convey his promised presence as they moved farther away from the event itself and he did not return? In broad terms, it seems to me that one can say that the church found its answer in the shift to an ontological conceptuality—away from the apocalyptic-eschatological conceptuality. Many interpreters, mostly Kantian moralists like Harnack, have viewed this as something of a mistake or at least a kind of fateful expedient. Although this shift from the apocalyptic to ontological conceptuality was fraught with difficulties and—I shall point them out as I see them, at least in part—I do not see it as a fateful mistake, but rather as in many ways an advance. The apocalyptic framework was as such inadequate—Christ breaks all frames. It provided a framework, a way of thinking and doing in which one could bring the now absent Christ into the living present. Instead of an absent Jesus who was merely remembered and to be expected in the future, there was an *eternal* Lord who was just as close to every moment to time, whose grace and life was available in the sacraments. Under these circumstances I would venture to say that it was only the sacraments which were the real bearers of what we might call his presence—his eschatological presence. Baptism brought the grace of forgiveness of sins; the Lord's Supper brought—as it was said—“the medicine of immortality” to a dying world. The sacraments became the real, and gradually perhaps almost the *only* bearers of the gospel. The sacraments became, however, ontologized. They brought the “stuff” of eternity, the substance which gives life, drawn from the ontological heaven, the realm of true and eternal being into this finite, mortal world which is fading away to corruption.

Now, even though this ontologizing represents in many ways an advance over the inadequacies of the apocalyptic scheme, it has

several obvious liabilities which frustrate what I would call a truly eschatological understanding of life. Among other things, it shifts the focus from a “now-not yet” understanding of life to a time-eternity scheme. *Eternity* is given in the sacraments, but what do we then do with the time we still have to live out? Perhaps this can be seen clearly in what happens to baptism and how that gradually comes to affect also the thinking about the Lord’s Supper. In baptism, it was thought, forgiveness of sins, eternal life was granted. But what then happens *after* baptism? Is it simply an automatic, ineradicable ontological fact? What happens if I fall away *after* baptism? Granted, all men will sin even after baptism, but how far can I go? This gives rise, at least in some early circles, on the one hand to the distinction between venial sins (those which do not cancel baptism perhaps) and mortal sins (those which do and can’t be remedied), and on the other hand to the idea of penance as a “second plank” after the shipwreck of baptism. In some circles, as we know, baptism was even postponed either until *after* one had sowed one’s wild oats or until the moment of death itself so as not to run afoul of the time-eternity problem. I don’t want to use up “eternity” coupons too soon so I wait till the end! But if I do—and in the practice of infant baptism, then this becomes the case universally—then the “second plank” of penance after the shipwreck of baptism becomes more and more important, especially in the west with the predominantly legalized or moralized ontology. The result, as we all know, was a decreasing emphasis on baptism and an increasing emphasis on the other “sacraments” and especially on the Sacrament of the Altar. The result of that was that the Lord’s Supper in the west was more and more interpreted in the context of the penitential theology. It makes up, so to speak, for what is lacking in baptism. This meant that the sacrificial terminology which surrounds it was more and more interpreted in terms of penance: reparation, satisfaction rendered for sins. The death of Christ was then interpreted more and more in those terms. (See Anselm’s doctrine of the atonement.) But how then could that death once upon a time at Golgotha become a present reality for us today? We are back in the time-eternity problem once again. And the way was open at least for popular piety to develop the idea that the sacrifice once offered was in some way repeated or reenacted in the present when the mass was said. And thus we begin to see the

fateful results of the development. Basically what has happened is a fundamental reversal of direction and original intent. Instead of the sacrament being the gift from God *to us* of the new eschatological life breaking into time, it becomes the sacrifice offered from our side to God, a repetition or reenactment of our penance.

A further consequence of this, of course, is what happens to the Word of God and especially the Words of institution. It is here that the ontological conceptuality becomes increasingly evident. The Word of God becomes predominantly instruction. You might say that they are something like instructions on the box—the “Christian box”—which now tends to become a kind of do-it-yourself kit. The Words tell you what to do, what to believe, how to go about it. But where does one get the strength to do it? The only answer could be the sacraments. They are the instances where the grace to carry out the instructions is given. The upshot of this is what might be called the cultification of the sacraments. They become special cultic acts when the grace is to be imparted. The words of institution thus become cultic formula spoken over the elements, the water, the bread and wine, and the action becomes cultic action which must be repeated according to the letter if it is to work. So the priest becomes the one who has the necessary ontological authorization to repeat the cultic formulae so that the bread and wine can be changed into bearers of the ontological reality and offered to God and participated in by the people in the appropriate cultic action.

Since the time of the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, to say nothing of modern historical criticism, there has been pronounced reaction to this ontologization of the sacrament and its somewhat exaggerated claims. As we all know, this reaction has been of different sorts. The Lutheran reaction, as we are aware, was of a quite different sort than that of other more generally Protestant reactions. I think it is still true that we have not paid sufficient attention to what distinguishes the Lutheran reaction from others and what that may mean for us today. For purposes of simplification perhaps we can say that the general Protestant reaction has been the spiritualistic one, or perhaps even the moralistic one. This reaction has concentrated on the cultic—perhaps even magical—excesses of the ontological conceptuality. The basic objection seems

to be that that understanding places too much power in the hands of the priest on the one hand and by-passes man's moral and spiritual obligations on the other. They objected to the implication that the sacrament is akin to a bit of magic placed in the hands of the priest which supposedly "works" (*ex opere operato*) quite apart from or independent of man's faith and moral response. Thus they tended to de-cultify the sacrament and turn it into a "mere symbol" of a man's faithful response to God's once-for-all action in history. The cultic machinery which bridged the time gap was removed, even though the understanding of sacrifice that had developed remained basically intact. The sacrifice of sin, that is, was understood in the same way but it was insisted that this could not be repeated by cultic action. The basic direction, that is, was not changed, even though the cultic exaggerations were removed. The time gap between the past and the present, or the ontological gap between time and eternity was to be bridged by "spiritual" means—either by memory (*anamnesis*) of the past, or by the ascending of the Spirit to the eternity where Christ supposedly now was. We all know, I suppose, what the result of that has been: an increasing emphasis on the Word at the expense of the sacraments, the reduction of sacraments to "mere" symbols of faith and devotion with the consequent rejection of infant baptism, and so forth.

In recent years it has been realized, it seems, for both exegetical and other reasons that this spiritualistic or moralistic reaction has proceeded too far and actually demanded of the sacraments the power that they are supposed to have. So the search has been on for a conceptuality that will restore, somehow, the sacraments to their rightful place. But where is such conceptuality to be found? Here, it seems that moderns have hit upon what can, I think, properly be called a mythological conceptuality borrowed from the current study of religion and the new science of the Phenomenology of Religion. The basic idea, the conceptuality, is that one participates in the sacred myths by re-enacting them in the religious cult. The myth is not repeated as such, but one participates in its reality by re-enacting it appropriately in the religious cult. What one hopes to achieve thereby will, of course, vary with one's understanding of the purpose of the myth. For Eliade, as I understand it, the re-enactment

of the myth is the means by which one escapes from secular, fallen time, into the primal, sacred time. One retraces one's steps, so to speak, out of the secular into the sacred by the re-enactment. For Levi-Strauss, it would seem, the myth is the means by which one overcomes the ambiguities of existence and participates in the ultimate destiny of many. In any case, the key word is *action*, cultic action, or re-enactment of the myth.

Under the aegis of the movement, the attempt is being made to restore the place of sacraments by what we might call re-certifying them in terms of the mythic conceptuality. So the stress is being placed on cultic action, on getting the people, both clergy and lay, involved in the re-enactment of the original action which supposedly found the cult. That action is now supposedly not repeated, but recalled, remembered, and re-enacted, made present again in the cult when it is done properly. Thus the stress is on the action, the celebration, and that that action be repeated exactly as it was performed once upon a time, and upon getting people involved "in the action" as much as possible through offertory procession, re-introduction of sacrificial terminology, and so on. The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is not repeated, we are told, as in popular medieval piety, but it is re-enacted, re-presented, remembered, and made present again in the cultic action, and this is to inspire and be met by our sacrificial participation in the cultic action. Thus the time gap between the once-for-all sacrifice and the present is to be bridged by cultic re-enactment.

Now there is no doubt that this re-cultification of the sacraments under the aegis of the mythic conceptuality results in considerable enrichment of the sacraments over against their spiritualization and moralization in the modern reaction to their ontologization in medieval catholicism. But as Werner Elert remarks, it really is a rather sad commentary that contemporary theology has had to go this route in the attempt to recapture what sacraments are supposed to be about. And Lutherans, especially, it seems to me, ought to know better and to take a long and very critical look at what is going on. For the Lutheran reaction to the ontologizing of the sacraments and its attendant cult was really quite different from the outset from that of the spiritualizers and the moralizers. It is not enough, at the

outset, merely to attack the cultic aspects of the ontologizing of the sacrament, and then subsequently to re-cultify the sacrament at a later date under different auspices as long as one leaves the basic question of the direction of the sacrament and the idea of sacrifice intact. To be sure, certain aspects of the *basic intent* of the ontological conception could be affirmed as an advance over the apocalyptic conceptuality, namely, that Christ is to be understood as being brought into the present and given to us in reality in the sacrament. The sacraments are a means of grace—if we may put it crudely—a part of the delivery system of the presence of Christ. Thus Luther's insistence on the *real* presence and the *est*, the *is* in "This *is* my body, this *is* my blood, given *for* you." But the cultic excesses of the ontological conceptuality are to be met by re-evaluating the relationship of word and sacrament, seeing the words not as cultic formulae which bring about ontological change, but as words of promise, the testament, spoken to the people which declare what it is they are to receive in the sacrament. Word and sacrament are thus united as the "means of grace," the delivery system through which we receive the gift that God has to give in Christ—the gift of forgiveness and new, eschatological life.

The result of all this, it seems to me, is a fundamental reversal of the basic direction of the sacrament which carries through, I would argue, the eschatological intent of the New Testament. It proposes that sacraments are best understood neither in terms of ontology nor mythology but in terms of eschatology. The Lutheran Reformation, although it did not at that time have in its group the understanding of eschatology that we now have, was inspired by an almost uncanny intuition and anticipation of what was at stake in New Testament eschatology. This is what we need to understand more fully and to work out. It is, to my understanding, a fundamental mistake to criticize the Lutheran view of the sacraments from the viewpoint of modern attempts to recultify the sacraments in terms of mythic re-enactment. It is a mistake on that account to view Luther's insistence on simply the words of institution and the distribution of the elements as a liturgical hack-job by someone who didn't know what he was about. He knew full well what he was about. What he wanted to avoid, it seems to me, was precisely the kind of thing

that has subsequently developed in modern sacramentology, namely, seeing the New Testament as a testament to be either morally or cultically imitated. That is an understanding of word and sacrament utterly foreign and abhorrent to him and to the Lutheran reformers. Their understanding was that Christ was not to be imitated. But the word was not merely to be imitated nor were the sacraments merely remembrances or to be cultically imitated as though they were magical acts. Christ's sacrifice was not offered *to God*, but *for us*, so that we might have his new eschatological life. Word and sacraments are not to be understood as standards to be imitated but as working together with the same end in view. They are means of grace—they are a “delivery system” for the new eschatological life. All of Luther's and the Lutheran reformers' efforts were dedicated to that end: developing an understanding of word and sacraments which reverse the direction so that in and of themselves they bridge the time gap and deliver what they promise: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Luther's insistence that the Lord's Supper is constituted solely by the words of institution, the promise, and the distribution, cutting out all cultic God-ward traffic, is not simply slavish literalism nor reductionism. It was the result of his keen insight that the time gap between the once-for-all sacrifice and the present could be bridged only if they were deeds from God's side which actually do the eschatological deed *to us* here and now. That is to say, they actually put to death the old, unbelieving Adam, with all his heavenward traffic and raise up the new Adam. They give in the present the eschatological life that they promise. His insistence on the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine and his concentration on the elements was, for his part, fully consistent with his eschatological thrust and intuition. When asked why he insisted on that he replied that, in the first place, that is what the Word of God says but if pressed further he would reply that it was in order that the proud might stumble and fall, but the humble arise and be filled. The point is always the same: sacraments are the gifts of God which spell death to the Old Adam and life to the New. They, in themselves, bridge the time gap by doing the eschaton to us.

Thus I return to my starting point. Sacraments are occurrences of the end and new beginning in the midst of the time, applications

of the once-for-all breaking into our time, our lives of the new life in Christ. They give what they promise. If we are really serious about renewal, it seems to me that we ought to be about working out a liturgy which better conveys that fact. I am not at all sure that I can say at present what such a liturgy would look like. But I am convinced that we are not very well served by the current furor about cultic re-enactment, re-introduction of sacrificial terminology without careful systematic treatment and vague generalities about liturgical richness and so on. Actually my own suspicions and sentiments are that we might be better served by looking to the east than to the west and its sacrificial and penitential liturgies for help. But even that would have to be watched so that a creative synthesis between a theology of the cross and liturgy of resurrection could result. But that is perhaps just an aside that is more confusing than helpful at this point. In general, the Lutheran heritage of a Theology of the Cross and resurrection stands under enough peril today from many sides. We ought to take extreme care that we don't unwittingly move some of its mortal enemies into the sanctuary itself. Liturgy has a profound effect on the life of the church and its piety. We should take care that that liturgy really says what we want it to say. We are not bound to slavishly repeating what the reformers did. But we ought to be aware of the fact that they did leave us a legacy that should be investigated more carefully before we simply succumb to the latest fads, especially if those fads are designed to remedy faults which were not really ours in the first place and only succeed in perpetuating the errors the reformers sought to avoid.

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