

A Sermon on the Reception of the Holy Sacrament by Martin Luther

published with two sermons on Christ's resurrection in 1525

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I. THE HOLY SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

1. You, beloved, have often before heard how we should prepare for the time when we receive the most worthy Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. But since this is the time appointed for the consideration of this subject, we must again speak of it, especially those features of it that are needed to be touched upon; for if I mistake not there are some who do not understand it. However, I hold that we cannot better grasp and understand it than by comparing the misuse of the Sacrament with the right Christian, evangelical use of it, which Christ instituted and prescribes,

2. In the first place, hitherto we have taught that we should be of good cheer and firmly believe that under the bread is the true body of Christ and under the wine the true blood of Christ. This is the first thing that has been most emphasized, and when we planted this in the people we thought we were very successful preachers. Afterwards however we proceeded farther and asked the people whether they had a desire to receive the Sacrament, and thus freely gave it to them and then never concerned ourselves further. Thus it rested upon two thoughts, that we thus believe and that we desired the Sacrament; but to what end we should desire it and what more belongs to it, no one cared for that and no one saw that such faith might be, and is, in Satan and all unchristians; for we are easily persuaded to believe this much. For, if I can believe that Christ rose from the dead; likewise that he went through the stone at the mouth of the grave and made no hole in it; and if I can believe that he went through closed doors without breaking or damaging anything, thus that wood and his body were in one place, and yet true flesh and blood were there; then can I also readily believe that the body and blood of Christ are present in the bread and wine.

3. Hence it is an unimportant matter if we let it rest there and believe only that

much, although the communicants thought they thereby did a precious work. Such faith and desire are still not enough for the Sacrament, and all, who know no more about and have not higher faith and desire for it, should remain away; for giving the Holy Sacrament to such persons is not much different than when you thrust it down the throat of a pig. It is mockery and a dishonoring of the Sacrament. Therefore remember you must be different, or not approach the Lord's Supper.

4. Therefore hereafter it shall be ordered that no one is to be admitted to the Sacrament unless he be asked first and it be learned from him what is the state of his heart, whether he knows what it is and why he goes to the communion. We have looked through our fingers at this long enough and tolerated the old misuse of it; but since the Gospel has now been working farther into the world we must give attention to this matter and improve the imperfections. We should here act, as we do with a child or any other person we baptize. When one brings him to baptism, it is not enough for him to believe that that is baptism and a sacrament instituted by Christ. It is also not enough for one to inquire whether he wishes to be baptized, which is the last thing to be asked; but first one asks him: do you renounce the devil, and all his works and ways? Then: do you believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? When the one baptizing inquires whether he has true faith and knows what he is seeking and why he is there and for what purpose he makes use of the Sacrament. Much more then should one do thus in the Lord's Supper, so that no one goes to the communion unless we first hear whether he is a vessel that can contain it, so that it is not thrust as it were into the throat of an unclean animal. For those who go to the Lord's Supper only with such a faith, think no farther than that they may only receive it, they hold it to be a meritorious work and think that is enough. They do it only because it is instituted and it is the custom to do so, just as when you ask one, why he desired to be baptized and he answers: I do not know; it is thus instituted, therefore I will also do like other people. I think it is a good thing to do.

5. Now, one can in no way abuse and dishonor the most worthy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper more than by regarding it only as a good work. For a good work is that which I can do to another and it must be my work; but the Lord's Supper is not my work but God's work, with which I permit myself to be served, and I receive a blessing, therefore, as far as God's work and my work are different from one another, so far are the thoughts separated from one another which hold the Sacrament to be God's and at the same time our own work. Hence it is now clear that it is a great abuse of the Sacrament and blasphemy if you do not esteem it to be the work of God.

6. Therefore the people should be asked when anyone desires to go to the Sacrament: first, what is the Sacrament? Then the answer should be: The words which Christ spoke at his Last Supper are the Sacrament: "Take, this is my body,

which is given for you; this is my blood that is shed for you, for the remission of sins." Therefore Christ instituted by these words the bread and wine, under which are his flesh and blood, for a token and a seal that his words are true. Then ask further: To what end are these words a blessing which Christ here speaks and attaches to them a token? Answer: They are a blessing to the end that I believe in them, not that I make a good work out of them, thus that my faith clings to them with my heart and I doubt not but that it is as the words read. How then do the words read? Thus: "This is my body, which is given for you." Christ says these words to all who receive the Lord's Supper, therefore you must cleave to them by faith, and say, I come and desire the Sacrament because I believe his body was given for me and his blood was shed for me, in order that thereby my faith may be strengthened, for this reason I desire to receive the token of bread and wine. Whoever cannot do this, or does not believe, should by no means go to the communion; for where this faith is not in the heart, all is lost.

7. Behold now how far that and this faith are from one another. For if you do even believe that the Sacrament is the body and blood of Christ, how are you made better? To what end does that profit you? The devil believes that too; but what does it help? By it you do nothing but a good work, and you have no more benefit of it than the box in which the wafer is kept, or the cloth that is spread over it; for you are not a vessel prepared, in which true faith works. But when the faith comes that lays hold of the Word, and says: These words Christ spoke and I believe they are true, and I am ready to die trusting in them, and I am certain and sure that he is there present, that he has given himself to me and he is mine, also that I appropriate him to myself, as if it were my own possession which God has bestowed upon me. This is far different from the other faith; for that gives you nothing, but this gives you and brings you, as you believe, all the treasures of which the words speak.

8. Therefore until the present time we have shown enough forbearance; but hereafter no one shall be given the Sacrament until it is known how he believes and that he is a vessel that can hold it, and knows how to give information concerning his faith. Moreover it is very necessary to do this, because the Sacrament is instituted in an outward form to the end that people may confess and prove their faith, in order that it may become manifest before the world. For before God it is enough that we believe in the Gospel, but now he wants us to remain upon the earth to serve the people and to confess before the world the faith we have in our hearts by means of certain tokens, that is, by means of baptism and the Lord's Supper. With the mouth we must confess the Gospel and then receive the Lord's Supper as a token that the world may know that we are Christians. And in this way I then become certain, as for my own person, that I have a gracious God, besides I have done enough before the world. If you do not do this, what do you accomplish then at the Lord's Supper? What will you do if it should cost you your life and you approach a cross? Likewise, when it comes to the point that you

should die and the devil tests you? If you will then say: Yes, I believe that I received the Sacrament; I believe that it is the true body and blood of Christ; then the devil will reply: yes, that I also believe. Thus your faith will not help you, and the devil has triumphed and will remove you where there will never be any help for you.

9. But if you say: Behold, you tyrant, or you devil and death, I have received the Sacrament, in which my Lord Christ confidently promised through his Word that his body and blood are mine, and this I believe: not only so far as you do, that it is his flesh and blood; but that all is given to me that the words imply. The words will not lie to me, for they are God's words and God's token. In this way you must be armed when you die; there neither I nor any other man can help you, even if all priests stood by your side with the Sacrament; like they heretofore did and accomplished no more than made a good work out of it and imagined it should help. Yes, indeed it should have helped them.

10. We read in the books of the Kings, 1 Samuel 4:3ff., when Israel warred against the Philistines and were defeated and put to flight, the elders of Israel said to the people: The reason God permitted us to suffer defeat was because we have not the ark of the covenant with us. Then they went and brought the ark; when they had now returned they cried in a hostile, triumphant way, so that their enemies almost feared and thought they had now been defeated; but when they met one another, the Israelites were nevertheless again slain. What then was the cause? The ark or chest was in their midst, where God was as surely as he is in the Lord's Supper; why would he not help them? Because they also made of it a work of merit. For they clung to it alone and had no faith; therefore God punished them and they were slain worse than before. We also do likewise, we cling only to our work, that we have received the Sacrament, and go ahead without any faith. Thus will also Satan, when the test comes, smite us worse than any time before.

11. I know very well that this misuse of the Sacrament is, alas, a deeply spread evil; therefore we must indeed bestir ourselves to root out the error and give the alarm to those who think it is enough for one to believe that the body and blood of Christ are present in the Lord's Supper. True it is, the food is indeed there; but you do not eat and enjoy it. Christ does not say in his words: Behold, there it is, there it lies; but he says: "Take," it shall be yours. It is therefore not the nature of the Sacrament that we should have Christ lying there; but that we should make use of him and his.

12. Then there is no right use of the Lord's Supper unless you believe that this body was offered for you and this blood was poured out for you: then you have what you believe. When your conscience troubles you and says: There and there you have sinned and you are anxious to be free from your trouble, then go to the Sacrament, and say: Have I sinned, then this body has not sinned, it is without

guilt; this body is offered for me, and this blood is shed for me for the remission of sins, this I do believe, and as a token of it I will receive the Sacrament. When you do this, then your sins are taken away and can cause you no more distress. For who then can do you harm? Everything must here close its mouth and remain speechless, in spite of Satan and all misfortune; for I am one bread (ein Kuchen) with Christ, and no suffering can befall me, of that I am certain; and there I have then triumphed.

13. It is now necessary for every Christian to know this, so that he can also tell, when asked, that he knows why he takes the Sacrament. Therefore I say again, although heretofore indeed according to the old custom everyone who came was allowed to go to the Sacrament; yet from now on it shall not continue so, but be so ordered that whoever wishes to receive the Sacrament must be asked what the Lord's Supper is and what he seeks there; and that he answers as I just mentioned: First, that the words of Christ and the token of Christ's body and blood are the Lord's Supper. Secondly that he seeks the supper to strengthen his faith and to console his conscience, so that we get out of ourselves and come to Christ. In this you must prepare yourself so that you may know how to make the right use of the Sacrament; can you not do this, then the Lord's Supper should not be administered to you.

14. Besides, be on your guard not to make a false faith, even if you do believe that Christ is there given and is yours; and if your faith is only a human thought, that you have originated, then remain away from this Sacrament. For it must be a faith that God makes, you must know and feel that God works this in you, that this Word and token are given to you, and that you are so bold as to think you would be willing to die for it. And if you still waver and doubt, then kneel down and pray God to impart to you grace that you may forsake self and come to the true faith. Then you would see how few Christians there are and how few of them would go to the Sacrament.

15. However we should plan and accomplish it, as I have earnestly wished, that we might gather into one place those who truly believe, and acknowledge our faith before others. I earnestly desired to have this done long ago, but circumstances did not permit; for this truth has not been preached and urged enough. That is the way Christ did; he delivered his sermons to the multitude for everybody as the apostles later did, so, that every person heard them, believers and unbelievers; whoever caught it, caught it. We must do the same. But we are not to cast the Sacrament among the people in a crowd, as the pope has done. When I preach the Gospel, I do not know to whom it applies; but here I should take it for granted that it applies to those who come to the Sacrament. Here I must not act in doubt, but be sure that the one to whom I give the Sacrament has laid hold of the Gospel and has true faith, just like when I baptize any one; neither the one who receives the Sacrament should doubt, nor the one that is baptized. Thus you have now the right way and the Christian use of receiving the Lord's Supper. In addition we will

speak of the fruits that follow when one makes the right use of the Sacrament. We will now consider this thought.

The Fruits Of The Holy Supper.

16. We have two blessings or fruits from the holy Sacrament. The one is that it makes us brethren and fellow heirs with our Lord Jesus Christ that thus he and we become one bread, (ein Kuchen, one cake). The second is, that we become like, and one with all other believers, wherever they are upon the earth, and all are thus one bread, one cake. St. Paul touches upon these two fruits in his first Epistle to the Corinthians: "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread,*" 1 Corinthians 10, 17. Likewise in the same connection Paul says in verse 16: "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*" These words should be very familiar and constantly repeated in Christendom and thoroughly understood, since so much is embodied in them. When we eat the bread, he says, then we all have the same food, you have just what I have, and there is no difference, whether you be a man or a woman; and in that we all receive it in common in the Sacrament. We receive all that Christ has and is. When I believe that his body and blood are mine, then I have the whole Christ, my Lord, and all he can do is to make my heart happy and bold, because I do not trust in my own goodness, but in the innocent blood and in the pure body, which I receive at the Communion.

17. Now, what has our Lord Jesus Christ and what is he able to do? His body and blood are without sin, full of grace, yea, the bodily dwelling place of the divine majesty. In brief, all that the Lord God has is Christ's, and all these possessions become here mine. But in order to have a token and the assurance that such precious and indescribable treasures are mine, I appropriate to myself the body and blood of Christ. Therefore no sin will ever be blotted out by a work of mine, as the poor, raging multitude under the papacy has falsely taught; but through my fully and truly believing that the body and blood of Christ are given to me. Therefore I am fully assured and conscious that Christ, my Lord, bestows upon me all the treasures he has, and all his strength and authority. Thus his wisdom, truth and godliness take away and blot out all my sins; his eternal life swallows up death for me; through his strength and influence I conquer Satan. Then will the Christian be an heir of eternal life and lord over all things, so that nothing can do him any harm.

18. Such vast possessions you cannot acquire even if you held a thousand masses every day. Christ is a person who gives himself for you, so that it is impossible for sin, death, hell and Satan to stand before him, not to mention that they should gain a victory over the Divine Majesty. Now where his flesh and blood are, there he will always without a doubt have his eyes open and never permit them to be

trodden under foot; you have all power that God himself has; that is, we become one bread, one cake, with Christ, our Lord, so that we enter into the fellowship of his treasures and he into the fellowship of our misfortune. For here his innocence and my sins, my weakness and his strength are thrust together, and all thus become one. What is mine is his, and what is his— that I also have. This is high, inexpressible grace, because of which the heart must be happy and of good courage. If you are now one cake, as it were, with Christ, what more do you wish? You have all in superabundance whatever your heart desires, and you are now sitting in paradise.

19. This is what we should have heretofore urged had we really treated of the Lord's Supper. But it has been so completely lost that not a word has been heard about it. When we wished to prove what kind of fruit and benefits the Lord's Supper brought, we taught whoever hears a mass on any day no harm would befall him that day: and they thus applied it to all outward fortune and misfortune. Besides this they have done more, and so cancelled and covered up the words that no one should hear or speak them in Christendom except the priests only, because they were the holiest words in the mass. Who but the worst devil in hell has spoken and originated it, that we should keep that covered up and concealed which we are to tell forth and advocate above everything else in Christendom, and which should be the best known of all things? If that is governing Christendom, then may God have mercy. This is now the first fruit of the Lord's Supper.

20. The other fruit or blessing of the Lord's Supper is, that we become also one bread and one drink among one another, as Paul says. These are marvelous words and out of the ordinary way of speaking, so that we do not understand them; and the only reason of this is that we make a meritorious work out of the Sacrament. How is it then that we are all one bread and eat one another? It is done in this way. When I eat the Sacrament, then it eats me again: outwardly I eat the Sacrament; but inwardly and spiritually I receive all the treasures of Christ and even himself, just as when I eat my temporal bread it strengthens me inwardly as to my physical existence. So when I receive the Sacrament, then Christ receives me and consumes me also, and devours me and my sins, and I enjoy his righteousness. Thus his godliness and riches swallow up my sins and misery, so that afterwards I am nothing but righteousness.

21. Just so is it also among us, we all become one bread, one cake, and eat one another. You know when we make bread all the grains of wheat are crushed and ground, so that each grain becomes the flour of the others, they are then mixed together so that we see in a sack of flour all the grains joined together, and that each has become the flour of the other, and no grain of wheat retains its own form, but each gives the other its flour, and each loses its body, in order that the body of the many grains may become the body of one bread. The same way is it when we make wine, each grape mixes its juice with the juice of the other grapes, and each

loses its form, so that there comes from it one drink. So should it also be with us. When I become a public servant and serve you so that you enjoy my service whenever you need me, then I am thus your food; even as you enjoy your daily bread when you are hungry so that it helps and gives strength to your weak body and your hungry stomach. Therefore when I help and serve you in every time of need, then I am thus your bread. Again, are you also a Christian, then you do in return act so that you do serve me with all you have, that all may be benefitted and that I may enjoy the same as my meat or drink. For example, am I a sinner and you are pious through God's grace, then you approached me and shared your piety with me, you prayed for me, interceded in my behalf before God, and do interest yourself in me as if you were in my place. Thus you do swallow by your godliness my sins, as Christ devoured our sins. Thus you ate me; then I in return eat you.

22. Here you see what an exceedingly great thing this Sacrament is when a person uses it rightly, that man would be terrified to death because of its greatness, if he fully experienced it; for reason can never grasp it. Is it not great that the High Majesty intercedes for me and even gives himself as my own? Afterwards, that all the saints step before me and stand there, are interested in and care for me, and serve and help me? Thus God places us in fellowship with Christ and his elect; there we have great comfort upon which we can depend. Am I a sinner, Christ stands there and says: The sinner belongs to me, I will lay hold of him with my holy fingers, who will murmur against it? Thus my sins drop out of sight and I enjoy his righteousness. And we Christians do the same thing among one another, one becomes interested in the other, so that one bears the other's sin and infirmities and serves him with his piety. This we do not understand; and even if we did hear and understand it, we could not believe it; therefore we continually rush ahead and never experience any fruit or change for the better.

23. These are the fruits of the wafer of the Sacrament and this is its true Christian use, and in brief it consists in this (we must soon conclude) that we believe the words to be true that belong to the Sacrament, and then go forth and confess that we are Christians. Later we can feel and see whether those who received the Lord's Supper also prove thus that the fruits follow and whether they show love for others; where they will not do as they thus profess we can excommunicate them from the congregation. Thus may it come into use again, so that it may be known who are faithful Christians and who are not.

II. CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

24. This we have said for the present on the reception of the Lord's Supper; we will now speak a little on Confession and soon conclude. In confession, certain words are also spoken, by which the minister absolves you as the representative of God; these same words we ought not to despise here. We will force no one to

enumerate all his sins; still no one should go to the Lord's Supper who does not esteem the confession. But we have often preached on this; yet we wish now to say and admonish you: When you desire to confess, then be on your guard that you look to, and think about, your future more than your past life; and do not, as persons formerly did, go to confession because you were commanded to go once a year, by which the conscience was sorely oppressed, and especially, in that you were forced to relate all the details and the circumstances, when, how and where. The people only thought of going through the form of confession and never cared how they might live better lives in the future. Therefore, we should turn this around, so that you be wholly concerned about your future; for all the sins you committed before are now forgiven. Therefore you are to see to it, how you may begin a different life, and that you grieve over, and are tired of, your former life. 25. Then be on your guard that you be thus disposed. If you are not, then it will not help you, even if you confessed all your life. For when you go and confess, it should serve to the end that you be absolved and think about beginning to live another life; so that you may now say that your sins are forgiven, and God is gracious to you. The pope commanded and by law forced people to go to confession every year at the time of the Easter festival when they went to the Sacrament, and all there confessed the sins they did during the entire year, and every year the same was to be repeated; when it should have been left free, only for the benefit of those who are prepared to begin a new life; then each may confess whenever he will. The papists thought it was in our power and free will to be penitent over our sins and begin a different life; therefore they urged it with laws. But here they bring the people to the point that they must lie and say they are sorry for their sins when it is not true. Therefore see to it that you thoroughly grasp this part.

26. The other part that belongs in this connection is that you hear with true faith the absolution, and doubt not that the words he speaks, to whom you confess, are spoken by God himself. For God thus humbled himself and condescended to lay his holy, divine Word in the mouth of man, so that the one confessing should in no way doubt that God himself said it. Therefore we should receive it as if God himself did it. He did it for your good; for perhaps you might not stand it, if he spoke to you directly. How you would run, yes, to the end of the world, if you heard that God himself was announced to speak there. This you have at home at your door. Why do you not then see it? And it is as sure here as there, yea, even surer. For here I have his promise, there I have it not. Therefore prepare yourself to the end that you may believe and think how to lead a different life; otherwise it is better for you to remain away from the Confession and the Lord's Supper. We will let it rest at this for the present and call upon God for grace.