

## CHAPTER 14 THE MEANS OF GRACE

We come now to a doctrine that is of particular beauty to Lutherans. We noted already in the Preface to this work that some doctrines are woven like golden threads throughout the whole of the Bible and find their way into just about every other doctrine. Such is the doctrine of the means of grace. We have assumed it in every chapter. Just as we would be lost without the doctrine of our redemption through the work of Jesus our Savior, so we would as well be lost without the means of grace. Though assumed in every other doctrine, and though often taken for granted and left undefined, the doctrine of the means of grace has a profound influence on the way we worship and with whom we worship; it informs the way we share the gospel in our families and throughout the world; it even shapes our attitude toward civil society and the state.

What then is the means of grace and why is it called that. Most simply stated: **The means of grace is the gospel message that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Mary's Son, has redeemed the world and therefore me also by his perfect obedience and his sacrifice on the cross in payment for our sins and the sins of all humankind.** And why is this gospel message called the means of grace? Because **it is that means by which God shows us that he is gracious, and by which he gives himself to us by grace through faith for our salvation. The means of grace is God's own pipeline from his heart to our souls. He promises to come to us and to bring us to himself in no other way than through the means of grace.** As God saves and preserves our physical life through the means of water and air, food and sometimes medicine, so he saves us spiritually by the means of grace. As we cannot have a physical life without the physical means he has given for its preservation, so we cannot have spiritual life apart from the means of grace.

As brief and as simple as the summary definition is, it is at the same time of the greatest weight and importance. It is self evident that without the gospel message we would know nothing of Christ and his work for our salvation. Thus without the gospel message faith in his work for us would clearly be impossible. But just as important is the fact that left to ourselves we could hear the message, but we would not believe it. For who is in his right mind could imagine this to be true: God, who needs nothing and no one, God who lives in unapproachable light, God who is perfection and holiness in his essence and is justly angered by anything lacking that holiness and perfect righteousness, that God became man; he was born in a stable of a lowly virgin so that he could suffer the torments of the damned on the cross and thereby redeem those who don't want him and want instead to be gods themselves. Who could believe that the holy and almighty God yearns for us to spend eternity with him in heaven and that he was willing to suffer hell just so that we would become his dear children and that by faith alone? Into whose mind would it ever enter that God has ruled over all of history to give and preserve for me, even for me, this holy, this mighty, this saving message and its benefit? Who could imagine or believe such things? No one!

Thus the means of grace has to be more than just a message. Original sin makes it impossible for us to believe on our own or even to cooperate in coming to faith. Actual sin deepens in us the habit of resistance to God's goodness and grace. And so God in his inestimable mercy and grace has attached his own power to the gospel message, so that lost and condemned creatures, born as blind, dead, enemies of God embrace the message

with joy. Through the power attached to the message God not only shows himself to be gracious; he becomes gracious for and to each of us as individuals. By his presence in and with the message God creates saving faith in us and preserves us in faith to our end. So full and rich is God in his grace and so powerful is his gracious presence with the gospel, that by means of the gospel the Holy Spirit brings us from spiritual death to life, from blindness to sight, from hatred and hostility towards him to the status of living and loving children whose goal now is to love and serve him who loved us first and gave himself for us. Thus faith which believes the gospel is always a miracle from its first inception to our last breath when God takes us through temporal death to eternal life. And that miracle is created and preserved by the means of grace.

But wait a minute! Are we saying that God's power is limited when we say that our faith depends on his operation through the means of grace? Not at all! Rather God who cannot be bound and who knows no limits in his grace and mercy has chosen to bind us to the saving gospel. And we delight to be thus bound, because of what God gives and does for us in this saving message of the gospel. Indeed what sinful mortal could wish to experience God in his unveiled essence apart from the gospel? He is a consuming fire in his holiness. In the Bible those who wished to experience him unveiled were spared when instead he came to them concealed in a cloud. Consider Moses, for example. He was so close to God that God himself said that he was pleased with Moses. But when Moses wanted to see God in all of his glory, God showed himself, not in his essence, but in his Word of the gospel, so that Moses would not die (Exodus 33:15-23). Likewise the great prophet Elijah needed the assurance of God's presence with him in the face of persecution and total frustration. But how did God show himself and reassure the prophet? Not by revealing his unveiled essence but by a still small voice (1 Kings 19:9-18). Even the apostle always called the beloved apostle in the New Testament could not endure the presence of the Ascended Christ unveiled. When Jesus appeared to him on the Island of Patmos, St. John fell down as a dead man. Only when Jesus spoke, spoke a summary word of the gospel, did John revive and rejoice to meet again his Savior (Revelation 1:9-18).

And so God comes to us in the means of his own choosing, at the manger, at the cross, at the empty tomb, and all of it - - all of himself and his grace and mercy, with forgiveness life and salvation - - wrapped in the beautiful and powerful gospel.

Our Confessions make this same point repeatedly. The Apology, for example, puts the matter so simply and succinctly: "The proclamation of the gospel produces faith in those who receive the gospel" (AAC, XXIV, par. 32, p. 264.) Luther emphasized this doctrine in almost all of his writings. He was especially concerned with its pure presentation because of the host of false doctrines and practices that brought chaos and even bloodshed to Europe when this doctrine was denied. In the Smalcald Articles he declared:

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the "spirits," who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word (Smalcald Articles, 8, par. 3, p. 322).

He goes on to describe the great damage done to souls and to the church by a refusal of this so clearly taught doctrine of the Scriptures, and then continues by saying:

Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil (par. 10, p. 323).

The sad fact is that a rejection of this teaching that God has promised to deal with us only in his means of grace still has a home in most church bodies. To be sure, most churches have a sort of doctrine of a means of grace; that is, they teach that there is a way by which God comes to us, but not exclusively by means of the gospel.

For Roman Catholics, for example, it is not the gospel that is the means by which God assures us of our salvation; it is the church itself, namely that church which has the pope as its head. It is the church that guarantees salvation, not the gospel. It is fellowship with priests whose ordination is authorized by the pope through his bishops that give the sacraments their ultimate validity. Thus ultimately it is the church that is the means of grace in keeping with the famous formula *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside of the Church no salvation”). And the church by definition is the Roman Catholic Church. Though many Catholics hedge and dispute the meaning of the formula, it remains for the official church a primary teaching and emphasis. Those who place their hope of salvation in the institution of the church instead of in the promises of the gospel may delude themselves with a faith that is no faith at all; that happens among those who care little or nothing for the teachings of the Bible, but are content merely to call themselves “Catholics” and who trust that for that reason alone their place in heaven is secure.

Among Protestants the doctrine of the means of grace as presented in the Bible is universally rejected. They argue that the doctrine of the means of grace limits God, who because he is all powerful cannot be limited in any way. But as already noted, the doctrine of the means of grace does not bind God; he could if he wished act apart from the gospel. It’s just that he never promises to act apart from his promises in the gospel. It is interesting to note that those who imagine apart from the Word of God that God has spoken to them invariably end up denying much of what God has said in his Word, the Bible. They end up making their own words and imagination a means of grace. Or they turn their prayers into the means that God uses for speaking to us. But prayer is our speaking to God; he speaks to us where he has promised to speak to us – in his Word and sacraments. What we imagine to be a speaking that conflicts with what he clearly has said to us in the Word and the sacraments does not come from God but from the devil. For most Protestants faith itself, faith defined either as merely feeling saved or making a decision for Christ is their means of grace. The certainty of salvation rests then not in the Word but in one’s own feeling about the Word and work of Christ or even what they imagine God to be saying to them apart from the Word and work of Christ. Faith in faith is a weak reed indeed for certainty; it is altogether subjective. If in the anguish of temptation or under the afflictions of life I do not feel saved, then I’m not saved. That’s a recipe for despair, the very opposite of faith. But certainty, faith, which rests in the promises of God in his Word and on the work of Christ for us all, that brings peace even

in the hour of death itself. The true means of grace, the gospel, is always certain and sure and a solid foundation precisely because God himself gave the gospel and is ever present with it.

Certainly not all Roman Catholics or Protestants fall into blatant unbelief because of their rejection of the biblical doctrine of the means of grace. Nevertheless that rejection has caused no end of mischief in church history and done damage, sometimes fatal damage, to faith in many. For that reason alone we want to listen attentively to what God says about his gospel message, both as to its content and its saving effect in us. Nor in our faith and life do we ever want to depart even in the least small part from that beautiful, comforting, life giving and saving gospel.

There is but one means of grace and that is the gospel. But this one means of grace wears, so to speak, three dresses. The gospel is received by us in the Word and in the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. In what follows we will consider each of these three dresses separately. But in so doing we note that we are always dealing with one and the same means of grace: the gospel. For the gospel in the sacraments is in its essence no different than the gospel in the Word. The comfort and encouragement given by each may be more specific or less; but the essence of that comfort and encouragement is one and the same, the gospel. Only the outward form is different; the message, the essence is the same.

## **THE WORD**

When we speak of the gospel in the Word, we are speaking of the gospel as we find it in the Bible. Whether we are reading the message or hearing it read, whether we are meditating on it privately or sharing it publicly, whether it is the proclamation of forgiveness in the liturgy and the sermon or the content of a devotion or a book that we are reading, when the content is this that Christ is our Savior, then we are receiving the Word as the gospel means of grace. Written or heard, spoken or sung, remembered in an instant or pondered in an hour, so long as the message is rooted and grounded and in accord with the Scriptures, it is the self-same gospel. And by that gospel the Holy Spirit works in the heart and on the mind to create and preserve faith, as we noted at length in the last chapter.

So then, when we are speaking of the gospel in the Word, we are including also the application of that gospel to our specific circumstances and situations in life. A pastor or a Christian friend hears my anguished confession. The pastor or friend does not respond only with a list of passages. He will apply the passages to what he is hearing. So in answer to a despairing confession, he may say: "Look, Jesus said that he loves the whole world and therefore he loves you too; besides that, look at all the people he received and blessed, like Peter, who denied him, and Paul who persecuted the church; maybe you're not any better than they; but you couldn't be any less deserving than they were! On the cross he thought of you no less than he thought of them. And willingly he died, eager to redeem you no less than to redeem them." Or someone in sickness or in any of a thousand other reverses in life may hear his friend say to him: "God never abandons us; he promises to use even disaster, sickness and death to bring us to himself in heaven; and God never lies; this too he will use to show you his gracious love and rule

over all things for your good. After all, Jesus suffered and died for you; he will not forsake you now, after having loved you that much!” All such encouragement and that offered otherwise in Christian mutual comforting and strengthening might not have a specific passage of the gospel for quotation. Nevertheless, it accords with the gospel in the Word, is based on that gospel; it is an application of the means of grace to a specific circumstance.

The point is that Christians should not be shy or reluctant to encourage one another just because they cannot remember a definite chapter and verse from the Bible to quote; they are sharing and applying the means of grace through which God himself is active and powerful so long as the comfort and encouragement is based on the truths of the gospel. Obviously the better one knows that message in the Bible, the easier it may become to share and apply it. But the young in knowledge shouldn't hide what light they have under a bushel just because their light is a candle and not the sun at noonday; a candle for the darkness of a troubled brother or sister in faith may serve very well indeed!

It would be difficult indeed to list all of the passages of the Bible that urge this truth on us, that the gospel message in the Bible is God's own power-filled means for coming to us and bringing us to him. St. Paul says it in every one of his letters, says it in one way or another in almost every chapter of every letter. Consider his introduction to his great doctrinal epistle, the letter to the Romans. He declares: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (1:16). The passage is so complete all by itself that nothing further should have to be said. Paul doesn't say that the gospel is a message which presents the possibility of salvation. He doesn't say that the gospel is the message which offers us a rational choice for us to make with our own native intelligence or natural reasoning capacity. No, none of that! The gospel brings with it its own power from God for salvation. The message is far too important to be left merely to the feeble minds of fallen, indeed hostile, creatures. So the gospel carries with it the power of salvation, a salvation which comes from the faith creating message itself.

Paul emphasizes the same truth when he says that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:16). And that message is never separated from the power of God's own presence in it. Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians that when he brought the gospel to them, it had the effect of convincing them that God had chosen them for himself; that conviction was worked by the power that accompanied the message. He says: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:4-5).

In 1 Corinthians, especially in the first three chapters, Paul gives us a beautiful and powerful essay, as it were, on the gospel message as the necessary and saving means of grace. He reminds the Corinthians that everything that they have and are as Christians is a gift of God through the Word of the gospel. He reminds them that neither the wise of the world, nor they themselves, nor even Paul himself could come up with the message or convince anyone of its truthfulness; that would take the power of God's own Spirit in the message, a message so powerful that it causes those who believe to become God's own temple and dwelling place! To those merely wise with natural wisdom, all that seems to be foolishness. But with the power of God in the message is life and salvation for those brought by the message to trust the message.

To be sure, the message is not irresistible. We noted that in the last chapter when talking about faith and have noted it frequently in other chapters as well. Because it is such an important point, we need to briefly repeat the point: Whenever we believe the gospel we have only the grace of God and the power of the gospel message to thank for it. Those on the other hand who reject the message do so of themselves and have only themselves to blame for their ruin. So often the Bible makes that distinction. Faith in the Word comes from God in and with the Word; unbelief, rejection of the Word comes from the perversity of those who reject it. Paul on the missionary journeys recorded for us in the Book of Acts always went first to the Jewish synagogue with the message of the Savior. But most there rejected the message. And Paul laid the blame for that rejection squarely on those who despised the Word, whether Jews or Gentiles (e.g. Acts 13:46, 2 Thessalonians 2:10). Just as emphatically he proclaims the truth that it is the power of God in the gospel message that accomplishes the salvation of those who believe it (1 Thessalonians 2:13, 1 Corinthians 12:3).

So the gospel message is, again, not just words; it is a message that is alive and life giving because of the Holy Spirit's powerful presence in and with the Word. He it was who inspired the message in the first place and who does not wish to be separated from his Word. Jesus demonstrated that same truth so often in the parables that dealt with his Word. The Word, Jesus says, is seed (Mark 4:3-8, 14-20, 30-32); it is like yeast (Luke 13:20-21). The seed is what brings life to the soil, soil which is necessary as that which receives the life giving seed. The yeast is alive and the dough comes to life, as it were, when the yeast is brought to it. In his great High Priestly Prayer on the night before his death Jesus praises the Word which he is leaving behind and in the mouths of his apostles; for by it and by their preaching of that Word faith will be created for years and generations to come (John 17:20). Again, that faith is never separated from God its source or from the Word of God, the means of grace.

Thus the creation of faith by means of the gospel in the Word is not something either automatic or mechanical or the result of our own natural powers. Rather the creation of faith by God through the means of grace is always something that God intends and wills for that individual. God is pictured as a loving father who brings us to birth spiritually through living seed, the seed of his Word (1 Peter 1:23, James 1:18). The gospel means of grace as seed from God gives what God intends and wills as by it he gives us the status of his blood bought children. The seed, the faith creating Word, restores what was lost in the fall of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden. It gives us forgiveness. It gives us back innocence and righteousness in God's eyes, because that's what we have when sin is forgiven. It gives us eternal life now and in the hour of our death.

Little wonder then that the Word, especially that Word of the gospel, has endured indifference, corruption, persecution, and perversion of every sort down through the ages. Jesus promised exactly that. He expected his Word to be attacked. But he would not let his Word perish; even when heaven and earth perish, the Word will endure (Matthew 24:35). Little wonder as well that we cherish that Word, that saints down through the ages have been willing to suffer persecution and death rather than be separated from it!

Some have mocked confessional Lutherans for this emphasis on the Bible and have accused us of worshiping a book instead of worshiping God. The accusation is absurd on the face of it. We do not worship the Book. We treasure it so highly precisely

because by it God comes to us and through it we come to know and to trust in Jesus and all that he has done for us and for our salvation. We cling to it because in it God gives us forgiveness of sins, life and salvation by his grace and by Jesus' merit. Indeed how could one treasure too highly that book which is God's very own Word? To treasure the Word is to treasure the One who gave it. To depart even a hair's breadth from it is to depart just so much and more from the One who said "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

What God said through Isaiah, of course, applies to both the law and the gospel, to the Bible in its entirety, even though it is the gospel alone which is the means of grace. The law does not create faith; only the gospel does that. Nevertheless both are the Word of God. Both have, as we noted in the last chapter, their specific functions and uses when it comes to the faith and the life of the Christian. In this chapter we are concentrating on that part of God's Word which is the gospel message of forgiveness and salvation through the grace of God and the work of Christ. Indeed the insistence of confessional Lutherans on purity of doctrine and a refusal to work or worship or cooperate with false teachers stems not least from this precious doctrine of the means of grace.

Think of it this way: The gospel is the pipe line in its outward forms of Word and sacraments, as noted earlier a pipeline from the heart of God to our souls. Flowing through that pipeline is the water of God's grace and mercy, his forgiveness and its results for us of life and salvation. Who would be so foolish as to say that it doesn't really matter if the pipeline itself is bent and twisted or how pure the water is in that pipe line is, so long as at least some water can get through and reach us? Would we not want the pipeline to be straight and unobstructed and the water in it to flow therefore purely and freely? Could we be indifferent if someone twisted and bent the pipeline or inserted in it pollutants of one sort or another? Surely we would be angry at the effort and do everything we could to prevent that from happening. Or what if we went to the store and looked for the can of peas on the shelf? Then we found a can that said on the label: "This is mostly good but contains some poison; it probably won't hurt you but it might; don't worry about it." Who would be so foolish as to buy such a product?

Just so foolish, indeed perverse, is the one who says that it doesn't matter all that much what we believe, teach or confess, so long as there is some of God's Word in it. No never! The Bible is the Word of God and it contains the saving means of grace; we cannot tolerate in our teaching and preaching anything that strays in the least from that Word in the Bible; for to the extent that we depart from the Bible, to that extent we corrupt and pollute the means of grace and place obstacles in the path of God's saving intent in his Word. For to reject any part of that Word is to cast doubt on its core, the saving gospel message. So both out of love to God and gratitude to him for his Word and as well out of dread of insulting him and damaging our own souls through a corruption of his Word we will cling to that Reformation watchword: *Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone!*

## **The Sacraments**

Before we begin our consideration of each of the sacraments, we should consider briefly the term itself. The word simply means "a sacred act." The word does not occur in the Bible. It is a word that the church has chosen to identify some very specific and special sacred acts. There are many acts that we may count as sacred. Helping one

another, prayer, suffering for the sake of the gospel, all these and many others are sacred acts, but they are not sacraments. We restrict the term sacrament to designate those sacred acts that are pure gospel, as distinguished from all others which are essentially consequences of the gospel, good works performed as a result of faith and the forgiveness of sins.

Sacraments as distinguished from good works that result from faith are those sacred acts that cause or confirm faith, sacred acts that convey God's grace and the forgiveness of sins just like the gospel proclamation in the Word. They are sacred acts in which God is active and we are passive recipients of his actions. For our purposes we define a sacrament as a sacred act 1) instituted by Christ himself, 2) in which Christ has promised the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, and which therefore either creates or confirms faith 3) and which has an outward visible element attached to it. Using this definition there are but two sacraments, namely the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar.

Roman Catholics operate with a somewhat different definition of the term, and they end up with seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, the Mass, Marriage, Holy Orders, Extreme Unction). According to the Roman Catholic Church each of these offers some grace (never all of God's grace!) which the one receiving the sacrament can use to cooperate in gaining more grace and his ultimate salvation. Thus the whole of the gospel is twisted into a confusion of law and gospel. But the gospel by definition gives everything, and our salvation is entirely God's gift in and through it. When it comes to our salvation, grace is never half done or a little bit. Grace is God's attitude and attribute of underserved love, full and free, by which The Holy Spirit in the gospel offers and gives us everything that Christ has earned for our salvation.

Protestants on the other hand deny entirely the doctrine of the means of grace, especially the sacramental means of grace. Though they regard Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar as sacraments, they turn the sacraments into works that man does instead of saving gifts that God gives. They deny that there is any gospel in them. After all, they would insist, baptism is something that we do in obedience to Christ's command, as is the receiving of holy communion; Jesus said "Do it!" and so in obedience to this new law, we obey.

To be sure, outwardly the sacraments are acts performed by us - - though in baptism of course it is a work performed for us by another, and even in the Sacrament of the Altar the chief aspect of the Sacrament is receiving it and its benefit from another. To the extent that it is a human work, it is so only outwardly. In its essence it is work of God by which he gives the gifts attached to that work. We can think of it this way: The outward work of baptizing and receiving the Sacrament of the Altar is like the shell of a nut. The shell is necessary but of itself does nothing; it is the content of the nut that feeds, nourishes and delights us. So also the sacraments; their content is pure gospel; only the outward shell has the appearance of a work.

It is one of the saddest things in the whole of Christian history that the beautiful, comforting and clear teaching of the Scriptures about the sacraments has been so corrupted by so many! If it is always true, as we have often observed, that false doctrine contradicts the Scriptures, robs Christ of his glory, and deprives the penitent sinner of rich comfort while warning the obstinate of God's wrath; that is most especially true with

respect to the false doctrines that have attacked the sacraments. We shall have more to note on this matter as we consider the sacraments individually.

### **The Sacrament of Baptism**

Some have argued that if God gives us everything in the Word, what further need is there of sacraments that can only offer what we already have in the Word. The argument betrays an ignorance of the way God is and an ungrateful arrogance in the face of his generosity. God is rich in grace and mercy. If he chooses - - and he does - - to offer us the same rich blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation in more than one form, who are we to object? Who would want to? Indeed even in close human relationships do we not seek a number of ways of expressing love? The husband tells his wife that he loves her. He did that on his wedding day. But what a sad marriage that would be in which the husband never repeats the words and never finds ways of showing his wife that he means them. On the other hand, when husband and wife, even into old age, look for and find ways of expressing their devotion to one another, how blessed that marriage will be! So it should not surprise us, indeed it should delight us, that our gracious Savior who delights to call the church his bride, has found more than one way of showering us with his love and grace.

And that's exactly what happens in Baptism. It is as though there were a great well and fountain of God's love and grace in heaven. Then in the Sacrament of Baptism God takes all of his love and mercy and pours it into a funnel. It gushes down from heaven through the funnel of Baptism and covers us as the spigot is opened fully in the simple baptismal act. The pastor acts as Christ's stand-in, in the name and in the stead of Christ. He repeats the Word of the gospel that gives the Sacrament such power. He says "I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And it is as though Christ has taken the one being baptized in his arms and placed that one in the lap of his Father declaring "See! Here is one for whom I lived on earth, shed my blood, suffered the torments of the damned and died! For my sake adopt also this one as your own dear child for time and for eternity. Forgive all sin and conquer death so that also this one may live and reign with me forever in heaven." And the Father delights to answer the prayer of his Son and to make us his own dear children. If there were a newspaper in heaven, surely the angels and the saints already there would cry out: "Stop the presses! Look what has happened on earth! Another one has been washed of all sin and guilt! Another one has been born again! Another one has become an heir of eternal life through faith in the Savior's work and by his word of the gospel!" For no matter what is happening on earth at the moment that may seem so important to people, nothing matches the beauty, the wonder and awe, the power of what takes place in a baptism.

Or does all of this sound like hyperbole? It is not! Listen to St. Paul's description of baptism and its effect!

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the

hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

Or this:

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Could it be said any more eloquently? Could Paul's praise of the love and grace of God in baptism be any more lavish? Everything that Christ is for us as Savior comes down to us from heaven through the "washing of rebirth." There is "renewal," the granting of the new birth and rescue from the consequences of original sin and guilt inherited from Adam and Eve. There is adoption as we become in baptism heirs with the sure and certain hope of eternal life that comes only by virtue of Christ's work and only through faith. There is the gift of perfect holiness, the very righteousness of Christ, granted in the Sacrament. And all that is just another beautiful way of saying that baptism gives forgiveness, life and salvation. For where sin is removed, there its dread consequences of eternal death and hell are removed. There is life. There is salvation.

Paul made the point more than once and each time made it emphatically that in baptism we receive grace heaped upon grace, forgiveness of all sin, life and salvation. Everything in short that the gospel of salvation in the Word of God in the Bible offers and gives to us God gives as well in the Sacrament of Baptism. For the Sacrament is that self-same gospel; it is a wearing, as we put it earlier, of another dress. It is just with such imagery that Paul tells the Galatian Christians, "You are all sons<sup>1</sup> of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). "Wearing" Christ, we wear all that he is for us as Savior, his innocence, his righteousness, his life and death and resurrection for us; thus when God sees us, he sees Jesus. With this verse in mind Lutherans may well think of their baptism when they recall that famous hymn verse of Ludwig von Zinzendorf: *Christi Blut und Gerechtigkeit, das ist mein Schmuck und Ehrenkleid* (Christ's blood and righteousness, that is [all] my adornment and [only] robe of honor).

St. Peter likewise sums up the matter so clearly and succinctly when he compares baptism to the water of the flood at Noah's time. The water that destroyed the unbelieving saved those held up by it in the ark; Peter says that, "the water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). If baptism save us, then it is certainly a means of grace, a means whereby God shows us his grace and brings us into possession of grace, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Yes, in it God is active, man is passive; God gives everything and we receive his gift without our works, without our righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> The word "sons" of course is not intended to exclude women. The word emphasizes a relationship that carried with it rights of inheritance. Thus all who are baptized, women as well as men, are sons in this sense that they all receive an adoption that includes with it the promise of inheritance at the death of the one who adopts: Christ made us such adopted sons and won for us the inheritance of sons by his death.

Peter had said exactly that in his great Pentecost sermon when his hearers were struck to the core by their need of God's mercy and forgiveness for the monstrous crime they had committed in the murder of God's Son. They wanted to know what they could or should do in the face of such monstrous sin and guilt - - as though any work they might have done could ever atone for such an unspeakable crime! Peter told them:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

There is nothing for them to do. Repentance, as noted in the last chapter, is sorrow and dread because of sin, and then trust in the promise contained in the gospel message. And as the Holy Spirit works dread and sorrow to the point of despair through the law, so he works trust in the gospel promise through the gospel. And that promise is there full and free, perfect and complete in the gift of baptism.

All of that is exactly what Jesus promised when he spoke of and then instituted this Sacrament. He spoke to Nicodemus of its importance and necessity when he promised that regeneration, the new birth of spiritual life, would come through baptism: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). And in his final and great commission to the church of every age Jesus linked salvation to the preaching of his Word and the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism; they are not an either/or proposition; they are a both/and, each in its turn bringing all that we mean by the word “salvation.” Jesus said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

It is all so simple, so clear, so direct. Disciples, (i.e. those who learn his Word and believe it) are made through the teaching of the gospel and through baptism. And indeed it is by that teaching and by that baptizing that Jesus promises to be present with us until the end of time and his return in glory. He can make such a promise precisely because he has all authority in heaven and on earth. The miracle of saving faith comes then through the means of grace, through his Word and baptism by virtue of his power attached to his promise in Word and Sacrament.

As plain and clear as the Bible is in its teaching about the Sacrament of Baptism as an effective means of grace, one finds nevertheless no end of objections raised against it that we have to at least address in brief.

- 1) *But wait a minute*, someone will object: *What about faith? I thought that faith saves; is baptism a substitute for faith.* No, baptism is not a substitute for faith, any more than the gospel message in the Word is a substitute for faith. Rather just

like the gospel, baptism is a cause of faith. For baptism is not a mere or empty ceremony. Baptism proclaims the gospel and applies it to us individually. The gospel in the sacrament creates or confirms faith. For in baptism God makes promises to us, promises that awaken faith, promises that faith then embraces. Just as with the promises in the gospel that we have in the Bible, if someone rejects those promises in stubborn unbelief, then that person rejects as well the saving benefit offered and conveyed in the Sacrament. Again, the Sacrament is not a different gospel; it is the same gospel that we have in the Word but in another form, another dress.

- 2) *What then is the difference between the baptism of an infant and the baptism of an adult who already believes the gospel promises in the Bible?* It is true that baptism does not create faith in an adult who already has faith. But look at the examples in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 8:28-38, 9:17-19, 10:27-48 et al.). Adults who had already heard the gospel message and by it had come to faith were eager to be baptized. And why? Because of the promises that God has attached to baptism, promises which in baptism are applied to the individual. That is the special comfort that God gives in the sacraments: What he announces to the world in his Word and lets us apply to ourselves he gives to us individually, one at a time, in the sacraments. The adult looks back on his baptism with such great joy and with thanksgiving declares: *Look at the redemption Christ won on the cross for the world; and now look at how much he has loved me, even me, that he declares to me as an individual that the redemption is indeed meant for me!* So an adult brought to faith already by the proclamation of the gospel will eagerly ask for the Sacrament and most gratefully receive it. In fact to refuse baptism or to despise it is the same thing as despising the gospel; for that's what baptism is, the gospel.
- 3) *But what about an infant? An infant doesn't ask for the gospel in either Word or Sacrament. In fact how can an infant even believe and have faith if faith is what we said it is in the last chapter, namely knowledge of, assent to and confidence in the gospel message?* It is exactly because we cannot sit down and teach an infant the gospel that the Sacrament of Baptism is so precious to us as a means of grace for little children. But to understand that we have to sweep away some false assumption both about children and about faith. First of all who said that infants can't believe? Jesus certainly did not say that. In fact he said the opposite: "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). In Luke 18:15 Jesus took up little children, infants, in his arms and blessed them. Would someone want to say that his blessing was for nothing, just empty words, words without affect? Far be it from us to say such a thing! They received his blessing, a blessing that was gospel from beginning to end, and they received its benefit. Moreover we have the many examples in the Book of Acts (cf. for example again to Acts 10 where the entire household of Cornelius together with the households of his relatives and friends were baptized). Are we to imagine that in all of these instances there were never any children? But even more than that we have the command of Christ in the institution of Baptism itself (Matthew 28:18-20) where Jesus commanded that "all

nations” should be taught and be baptized. Children, even new born infants, are part of nations; they receive the legal and other benefits of their nation even in infancy when they are unable to express their understanding of those benefits or an appreciation for them. Thus while there is not a specific command to baptize children, children are included with all the rest of us as those who need it and those for whom its gospel blessings are intended. Finally what about the assumption that children cannot believe because they cannot express their faith? The assumption is even on the basis of observation an empty one. Does an infant know its mother? Does it trust its father? Does it grasp that there is a difference between these two and all others? Who would doubt that? Yet the child cannot tell us such a thing or explain to us why or how it recognizes and trusts its parents. Indeed the simple fact of the matter is that we cannot analyze what an infant knows or doesn’t know. For we have long since passed the day when our thinking was without words that we could express. We just do not remember how we went from the one stage to the other. All we know is that the child learns to express thoughts in words with the passing of time when it somehow figures out that it is easier to get what it wants with words than without them. So we will leave to God how he gives faith to the child in the gospel promises so abundant in baptism. Yes, it is always far better to trust his promises and their power than to rely on our own feeble senses and fallen reason. Jesus says that infants believe. That’s good enough for us! The “how” we will leave to him. No one questions or doubts that the one who is asleep or in a coma retains faith even when unable to express it; we will not question or doubt either that God gives and preserves faith according to his promise even in an infant who likewise is unable to express that faith. Rather we will most gladly apply those promises to our children and take great comfort in the love of God for us and for them as he pours that out in the Sacrament of Baptism. Indeed while a child because of original sin needs baptism’s blessings as much as an adult, and while faith, whether in a child or an adult, is always and alone a miracle worked by God through the gospel, one might dare to think that the miracle is an easier for God to perform in a child than in an adult. For at least the child has not yet acquired the bad habits of years of actual sin accompanied by perverse and fallen reason which throw additional obstacles in the path of the Holy Spirit’s work through the gospel.

- 4) *Is baptism then necessary for salvation? What if a believer for some reasons dies without baptism?* Jesus has given us the Sacrament for our comfort and encouragement. The one who knows that the Sacrament is a means of grace intended by Jesus to show us his love and grace for us as individuals, but who despises and refuses the Sacrament has despised God’s Word and grace. Such a one will surely perish. On the other hand there may be times where it was not possible for a person to be baptized. Such was the case with the thief on the cross next to Jesus on Good Friday. But Jesus promised the thief that he would enter paradise that very day (Luke 23:43); clearly there was no chance for the thief to be baptized first. So what do we find in the Scriptures? We find that where baptism was possible it was eagerly desired and administered. Faith which trusts the promises of God’s grace and Christ’s merit for our salvation will cling to those promises, both in the Word and in the Sacrament. But where the Sacrament

is not despised but cannot for whatever reason be administered, there we trust that faith saves in accord with God's promises. It might happen, for example, that a child past infancy wants to be baptized; but its parents forbid and prevent it. Such a child is surely in a state of grace, a dear child of God, a believer. As soon as it is possible, of course, the child will seek the Sacrament.

These and other questions that cast doubt on the benefit of the Sacrament come primarily from Protestant church bodies. As Protestants generally deny the entire biblical doctrine of the means of grace, so we can expect that they will deny the saving benefit of the sacraments. Their denials fall into two distinct camps.

Some (Baptists and most Pentecostal churches) deny that a child can believe. They therefore refuse to baptize infants. At the bottom of that refusal is also the error that baptism is not a means of grace but a work of the law, a work of obedience. For such churches baptism is a confession of faith, not a means whereby faith is either created or confirmed. Once someone has denied that baptism is a means of grace and teaches instead that it is work of obedience that we render to God, then it is easy to see why they would reject infant baptism. But it is a sad thing indeed to deprive children and their parents of the rich consolation that God promises in the Sacrament because of a rejection of God's power and promise attached to this means of grace. That is most tragic in those cases where an infant is very ill or dies; how sad not to be able to comfort the anxious or grieving family with the assurances that God gives in his Word about his love for little children as he expresses that love in the Sacrament of Baptism.

All other Protestant churches (Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, et al.) do however "baptize" infants. Nevertheless they really prefer to call the ceremony "christening," or a "dedication." The child later on, when it can make a confession of faith for itself, may choose to count this "christening" as his baptism; or if not, the child/adult may choose to be baptized. These churches deny both that the child can believe and often as well that the child even needs the forgiveness offered in baptism. For just as they deny the possibility of faith to an infant, so many deny that it has any sin or guilt that needs to be forgiven. They too see the Sacrament as law-obedience, not gospel promise. For they deny the devastating consequences of original sin. But whatever they choose to call the ceremony, so long as it is the application of water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is a baptism; for God's promises are extended in his Word to that child whether those presenting the child and those performing the ceremony believe it or not. The validity of God's promises depends on God, not on the unbelief of bystanders!

Roman Catholics do not deny that children need forgiveness. Nor do they deny that baptism gives the forgiveness that they need. Rather they limit the grace of the Sacrament. They teach that it forgives the guilt only of original sin and that in the process it gives the child some initial grace. As with all Catholic teaching about the sacraments, there is an unfortunate mixing of law and gospel. For, as already noted, grace is seen as a quantity; God doles it out in the sacraments so that by grace the individual may cooperate with God in gaining still more grace on the way to salvation. Thus while there is comfort for their members in Baptism, the comfort is limited, as grace is limited.

In spite of the errors that surround the Sacrament of Baptism among Protestants and Roman Catholics, the Sacrament is valid, so long as Christ's institution of it is

retained. That is, God gives the benefit of the Sacrament so long as the baptism is performed with the application of water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For that is the essence of the Sacrament - - God's Word of promise joined to the ceremony. The gospel essence of that simple formula is that God becomes our Father in Baptism; the Son becomes for us what he came to be - - our Savior; and the Holy Spirit does his special work of breathing into us the promise of forgiveness and salvation, which promise is designed and intended to create faith or to confirm it in those who already possess saving faith.

We should add one word of caution: If either the Word or the water is absent, then there is no baptism. In some Protestant churches the "christening" is performed with rose petals instead of with water! What a shocking abuse of God's Word and of this Sacrament! Where the essence of the Sacrament is absent, the Word with the water, there is no Sacrament.

The point is that when someone joins one of our churches, there is no need to baptize them if they were baptized in a Christian church and their baptism had the essentials of God's Word and the water. But we need to ask and be assured that such was indeed the case. If the Word was absent or the water was omitted, then there was no baptism.

There are a few loose ends that deserve comment before we move on to the Sacrament of the Altar. It is our practice to have our pastors administer the Sacrament. That is what we have called them to do, to publicly proclaim the gospel in all its forms, in the preaching of the Word and in the administration of the sacraments. For an individual to take that responsibility on himself apart from the church would be at the very least disrespectful of the holy office of the ministry. It would violate good order and introduce confusion about the call of Christ and his commission to those in the pastoral office. And so we are happy to call on our pastors to administer the Sacrament in union with the church, so that the church can rejoice with us in this sacred act. In cases of emergency, where it is just not possible to reach a pastor and the child's life is in danger, any Christian can perform the Sacrament. All that is necessary is, again, water and the Word: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Many Christian parents will advise their (Christian) doctor and the hospital that in case of such an emergency, they should baptize their baby in just this way.

It is wise for parents to arrange for the baptism of their children as soon as practical after their birth. To delay it for weeks on end without some compelling reason is to delay the child's joy and ours too in the benefit afforded by this Sacrament. In many Lutheran parishes it was the custom that after the child came home from the hospital, it did not leave home again until it went to church to be baptized.

It has long been the custom that children have "sponsors," or "God-parents" when they are baptized. The custom goes all the way back to the early church when sponsors were required even for adults. Someone had to vouch for the sincerity of an adult seeking baptism. When Christianity was an illegal religion, some would ask for baptism so that they could get the names of Christians, in order to turn them in to the government. If a Christian was arrested and convicted of the crime of being a Christian, his property was confiscated by the state and a share of it was turned over to the one who handed in the Christian for arrest. Seeking out Christians became a profitable business. So having

someone vouch for the sincerity of an adult seeking baptism was a safety measure. Sponsors were also sought for infants. The sponsor promised that in the event that the parents died, the sponsors would take the child and raise it themselves and see to it that it was raised as a Christian.

While these functions of sponsor have long since ceased to be important at most baptisms, the custom of having them remains, though sponsors are no longer required. These days there are basically two kinds of sponsors. There are sponsors who make certain very specific promises, chiefly the promise to do all that they can to encourage and assist the parents in raising their child in accord with the Word of God. When parents want the sponsors to make those kinds of promises, the sponsors must be from their own church fellowship; it should be obvious that one who does not accept the religion into which the child is baptized should not be expected to assist in raising the child in that religion. It would be unfair to ask for such a promise. Indeed, those outside of that church might not even know what it was that they were promising to do.

Where parents are not seeking sponsors who could assist and encourage them in this way, another type of sponsor is the sponsor that just serves as a witness. Such a sponsor promises nothing. Such a sponsor is asked only to note that the child is being baptized with water in the name of the Trinity. For sponsor-witnesses it is only required that they be Christians.

Very often pastors will encourage children in a confirmation class, for example, to ask their sponsors to tell them about their baptism. It is a beautiful thing when someone besides the parents can sit down with a child and say, "Yes, I was there. I held you in my arms while the pastor poured the water over you and said those beautiful words." Especially if the sponsors were of the first type, children should know as they grow, that their sponsors always pray for them and are interested in their Christian training. It is a good thing when such sponsors take the time to take their "God-children" aside occasionally to tell them/ask them about their growth in the truths of the gospel.

So then, in sum, Baptism is a means of grace by which God show us his grace and gives us all that his grace and the merits of Christ intend for us, adoption into God's family, forgiveness, life and salvation. All of this comes as the gospel, the Word of promise in the sacramental act, creates faith or confirms it in those who already have faith. All of our lives we do well to remember our baptism as the gospel source of our life with Christ. In times of joy the sight of the baptismal font in church points us to our greatest joy, that of being a child of God by faith in Christ Jesus, no matter how old we are. In times of trouble and sorrow, calling to mind our baptism cheers and encourages us: No, God has not forgotten me, nor can he; for he made me his own dear child in baptism and never will he forsake me; though deep the waters of trouble, though the shadow of death itself threaten and finally overtake me, he is still my dear Father for Jesus' sake, and at the end will take me to himself in heaven. In times of temptation, we remember what we have become in baptism, and we struggle to live as God's own children, as a member of his household; we do not want to shame ourselves or disgrace his name by living in sin. In times when we nevertheless stumble and fall in the battle, we cling to the promises of forgiveness in the gospel, as those promises were made our very own in the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Sacrament of Baptism is indeed a beautiful means of grace, is it not?!

## THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

More ink has been spilled in attacking the Bible's teaching about the Sacrament of the Altar than perhaps any other doctrine of God's Word. Satan must really despise this powerful and beautiful expression from the heart of God to our hearts to have made it such a special object of his scorn and venomous hatred.

That the doctrine of this Sacrament has been so much the subject of abuse and error is all the more surprising to us when we consider from the words of Jesus how simple, plain and clear his words are in his gift of this Sacrament. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul give us Jesus words of institution for the Sacrament. Matthew tells us:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Jesus words are indeed plain and clear. It is the night before his death. His words come at the close of the Passover meal, that great Sacrament of the Old Testament, which called to mind the rescue of the children of Israel from death when the Angel of the Lord passed over the houses on whose door post was painted the blood of a lamb. By the blood of that lamb - - a picture of the blood to be shed the very next day by THE Lamb of God who delivers from eternal death - - they were spared. Now in this most solemn moment at the close of the Passover meal, Jesus makes his last will and testament. What on this most solemn night before his death will he bequeath to his beloved disciples? He has no earthly wealth or land. He has no palaces, no coffers filled with gold and silver. He has no princely realms to bequeath for them to rule. And so, having nothing, he who had humbled himself so fully, so completely in his lowly birth and trouble-filled life and who would in the next day humble himself yet more in his death on the cross of a criminal, what would he leave for them? Having nothing, he left them - - himself!

How sublime! How rich his grace and mercy! His words need no interpretation. They are utterly self-explanatory. What is in the Sacrament is exactly what he said and what he gave in his words of institution. His true body and his true blood are there. And in the giving of himself, he gives what he came to gain for us by the sacrifice of himself on the cross: the forgiveness of sins. The whole of the gospel is wrapped up there in those simple words, in the simple act of receiving him in the Sacrament.

Lest there be any doubt about it, years later the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write the same thing with an added emphasis that was needed because already in his day people had started to corrupt the Sacrament. St. Paul writes:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16)?

And then:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Corinthians 11:23-30).

What then do we have in the Sacrament? We have two earthly elements, bread and wine ("whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup," "whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup"). The bread remains bread, and the wine in the cup remains wine. But at the same time as we receive the two earthly elements, we receive as well two divine elements, namely Jesus' true body and true blood. Are the earthly and the divine mixed together? That's not what the text says. Do the earthly change into the divine? The text doesn't say that either. Are then the divine elements really there or are the bread and wine just symbols that represent Jesus' body and blood? The text certainly doesn't say that. In fact St. Paul is very emphatic that an irreverent careless receiving of the bread and wine is a terrible sin not against bread and wine, but against the body and blood of Christ! What then is in the Sacrament? Bread and wine, and Jesus' true body and blood - - and that because of his promise to be there, because he says so!

But doesn't Jesus some times speak in picture language, in metaphors, that are not to be taken literally, as, for example, when he tells us that he is the gate and the vine (John 10:7, 15:5)? Yes, Jesus often used metaphors and picture language. But when he did, he always explained what he was saying, always made it clear that he was using a metaphor and speaking in picture language. But he most emphatically does not do that in the words of institution for the Sacrament. He gives not the slightest hint that he might be speaking figuratively or that we shouldn't take him literally. Again, St. Paul emphasizes that in his words about the Sacrament.

So we take Jesus at his word. If he says that his body and blood are really and truly present in the Sacrament, then they are truly present. If he tells us that he thus gives us himself in the receiving of the earthly elements, we believe him. It is so odd that the very people who object to the doctrine of the means of grace because they think that that doctrine limits God who cannot be limited nevertheless maintain that it is impossible for him to do what he plainly tells us he is doing in the Sacrament.

How it is possible for us to receive Jesus himself, his true body and blood, when we receive the bread and the wine, we will leave to him. He hasn't asked us to turn the Sacrament into a physics lesson. All he asks us to do is to receive it with humble and believing hearts. Unseen and miraculously he keeps his word.

Once we accept the simple truth about the essence of the Sacrament, it is easy for us to see its benefit. If Jesus gives us himself in the Sacrament, then, of course, there is

the forgiveness of sins there! For when God looks at us, what does he see? He sees Jesus who is ours by faith and who is now ours also in this special way with the gift of himself, of his true body and blood in the Sacrament. Yes, he sees in us the very price of our salvation! For it was with his true body and blood that he paid the price for our forgiveness. If we have in the Sacrament the price of our salvation, then surely we have the salvation that price paid for!

Nor does any of this contradict in any way the necessity of faith. Again, the Sacrament is not a substitute for faith; rather it confirms faith by giving us in yet another form what the gospel gives when it declares that Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and who therefore has taken away also my sin and yours. And just as with the gospel, so with the Sacrament - - for it is the gospel - - the one who rejects the message in unbelief rejects also its saving benefit. That's exactly what St. Paul said in the passage cited above: Woe to the one who receives it in the unworthiness of unbelief! Such a one sins against the body and blood of Christ! Could there be a greater crime?

Ah, but for those who hear the gospel, who hear the gospel in this Sacrament, and who by its power believe what Jesus said, for them the Sacrament is filled with blessing as a means of grace. Jesus has told them in their baptism: *I have adopted you and washed away all your sins and you are now a dear child of God.* Jesus has told them again and again in his Word as they have read it, remembered it, heard it proclaimed in church: *My perfect life and innocent death on the cross has paid for all of your sins and won for you an eternal inheritance in heaven.* And now in the Sacrament he tells them: *Here I am for you, with you, in you, by the power of the gospel with my true body and true blood. Now surely you will not doubt it that in days of joy and sorrow, in life and in death, I am closer to you than any human being could ever be. I know all that you are, all that you have done and will do, all of your good works and all of your sins, and do not despise you; no, I want to be with you and live in you forever and ever!* Could there be a greater incentive for Christian peace and joy? Could there be a stronger motivation for the Christian to strive to live a Christian life than his knowing this, that Christ is always in him, with him, for him? Little wonder that we love this Sacrament! Little wonder that the sick and the shut-ins and those near death look forward to and long for the Sacrament! Little wonder that we want to receive it often! For it is a means of grace. The promise of Christ in the Words of Institution are powerful; they move us to trust that he gives us what the Sacrament promises and then to enjoy its blessed benefit. For just as we believe the gospel message because of the power in the message, so we trust that Christ is present in the Sacrament and gives us what he promises there because his Word moves us to believe it.

Given the wealth of comfort offered in the Sacrament, it should not surprise us that the devil throws so much dust in the eyes of so many to keep them away from the Sacrament and its faith confirming benefit! In the guise of *Prof. Yabut* he objects: *But if you have received it once, does Christ's body and blood go away, so that you have to receive it again?* As noted before with the gospel as a means of grace in general, so we note with this form of the means of grace: If he wants to tell us again and again that he loves us and forgives us, we most gladly will receive him and his forgiveness as often as we can. *But if his body and blood are really present in the Sacrament, do we chew him and digest him?* Jesus never asked us to bother ourselves with such blasphemous

considerations; he bids us eat and drink and promises to give himself to us as we do; we will be content with what he says and what he promises and what he gives us thereby. *But if we are already forgiven because all sin has been forgiven by his sacrifice on Good Friday, why do we need to look to the Sacrament for forgiveness? Does it mean that we are not forgiven when we are away from it?* Again, the doctrines of objective justification and subjective justification (cf. chapter 12) are not two separate doctrines, but two aspects of the same doctrine; the gospel of objective justification creates the faith which trusts that I too have been redeemed, justified, forgiven; the sacraments apply that doctrine to me as an individual. The gospel says: Christ died for all! The sacraments say: Christ died for you! It's the same message, the same gospel, the same forgiveness, the same peace and consolation. But who would say that it is useless redundancy? Indeed it is difficult to understand why it is that so many Christians have to be urged to receive the Sacrament often, given the wealth of blessing offered to us in it. Each day we have reason to rejoice in the sum of the gospel that Jesus died for the sins of the world and therefore also for me. Each day we have reason to rejoice that he has assured me of that individually in the Sacrament of Baptism. Each day we have reason to rejoice that he promised it all to me by grace and has given and pledged to give me again the price of my salvation in this Sacrament. Therefore we delight to receive him in this Sacrament often!

We might note at this point if only in passing how especially kind Jesus is in his choice of earthly elements as the external vehicles of his grace in the sacraments. He bids us use water in the Sacrament of Baptism, water which with the Word washes away our sins. We instinctively like to be clean. We automatically wash when we are dirty. Each time we do so, we have a gentle reminder of the real dirt of our sinful nature and our actual sins; and in washing we have the gentle reminder of the real washing away of all of the filth of sin in the water with the Word in the Sacrament of Baptism. Likewise we have in nature constant pointers to the Sacrament of the Altar. Every time we are hungry in body, we may call to mind the longing and the hunger of the soul for peace with God. And each time we eat and drink to satisfy physical longing we may call to mind Jesus, the living bread from heaven, who always satisfies by giving us himself with all his grace and mercy, with forgiveness and eternal life.

It is sad that with such beauty and so many rich promises in this Sacrament that we have to note the many terrible errors by which the Sacrament is attacked. As already noted Protestants deny the doctrine of the means of grace. And so they deny that this Sacrament is a means of grace too. Indeed it is difficult to think that they even have this Sacrament at all. For a sacrament requires both the Word and the prescribed elements. But the Protestants have removed the Word from the Sacrament by denying everything that the words say. Jesus says: This is my body and this is my blood. The Protestants say: No it isn't. Jesus says: It is given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. The Protestants say: No, not in the Sacrament! What's left then is a shell without any content. What's left is not faith but a rejection of the Word that creates and confirms faith. As with the Sacrament of Baptism, so with the Sacrament of the Altar, Protestants turn it from a form of the gospel into a work of the law. If asked why they bother at all with this ceremony, about all they can answer is: Jesus said, "This do!" and so we do it in

obedience to his command. Again as with all false doctrine and with this one so obviously and so blatantly, Christ is robbed of his honor, his Word is contradicted, and the Christian is left without a rich consolation from the gospel in this Sacrament.

Roman Catholic errors are more numerous and more complicated than those of the Protestants. Roman Catholics do not deny that Christ is truly present with his body and blood, nor do they deny that God gives his grace in the Sacrament. But they are not content to leave it at that. Rather they add a host of errors that turn the Mass into an abomination.

- 1) They teach that it is not only a sacrament but even more important a sacrifice. That in fact is the name they give to it: The holy sacrifice of the mass. In it the priest offers in an unbloody manner the body and blood of Christ to God in payment for the sins of the living and even of the dead. Thus law and gospel are horribly mixed with the law receiving the emphasis. But where in the Words of Institution did Jesus command that his gift to us be turned into our sacrifice to him? He already made that sacrifice once and for all. And his once and for all sacrifice was perfect and complete; no repetition of it is either needed or possible. Nevertheless the priest prays at mass and asks those present to pray that his sacrifice may be acceptable to God; moreover he calls on the saints, the apostles, the martyrs, an especially the Virgin Mary to assist him in making so great a sacrifice acceptable to God. If we think about it, Christ must share his work with the priest! The glory that belongs alone to Christ is transferred to a mere mortal, and the faith of the faithful is to rest in the value of this mortal's work as necessary for their faith.
- 2) Inseparably connected with the first error is the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation*. According to that doctrine, the priest by the special power given to him from the pope through the bishop who ordained him changes the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood; no longer are bread and wine on the altar after the priest has spoken the Words of Institution to them, but only the appearance (the *accidents*) of bread and wine. Once this *transubstantiation* has occurred through the priest's power, they are fit to be offered to God as a sacrifice. Indeed they are fit to be adored wherever the elements are kept. So the faithful are encouraged to come and pray before them even apart from the use commanded by Christ, when he said: Take and eat; Take and drink. People kneel before them in adoration. On special occasions the consecrated bread turned into the body of Christ is even put on parade around the church and through the streets of the city in the *Corpus Christi (Body of Christ)* festival. But again, where did Jesus ever ask for or command such a thing? He invites us to receive the Sacrament, not to venerate its elements or to separate them from the use he intended for them. Hence we follow the principle of *Extra usum, nullum Sacramentum!* (*Apart from the use, there is no Sacrament!*). All of this too, the adoration of the elements, the parades, put emphasis on man's works, not on Christ's gift.
- 3) As bad as all of the above is, perhaps worst of all is the teaching that the Sacrament can be bought and sold as an indulgence. That is, those seeking God's favor for some special need (a marriage problem, unemployment, a sickness, alcoholism et al.) are encouraged to purchase a mass in order to seek

God's help for their special need (*votive masses*). Indeed one can even become part of a mass union for a price; for a one time gift, usually to a monastery, the donor and their wish/intention will be remembered at mass every day until the end of time. Nor are the benefits that can be thus purchased only for this life; Catholics are encouraged to buy masses for the dead, to shorten the stay of their loved ones or their own stay in purgatory.<sup>2</sup>

- 4) Added to all of this is the withholding of the cup from the laity. Only the priest drinks from the Sacrament. The practice of withholding the cup came from the error of *transubstantiation*; there was a fear that the wine in the chalice might be spilled and then trampled underfoot. So from a pious wish that such would not happen, the priest alone drank from the chalice and the theory evolved that if the laity were receiving Christ's body, they were also at the same time receiving his blood - - for where is there a body without blood? But again the words of Christ have been set aside; he said both, "Take eat" and "Drink from it all of you." To be sure these days in some instances and in some Roman Catholic parishes the cup has been restored to the laity. But the restoration is not because of Christ's command; it is only because of the permission granted by the church - - so that the will of the church is more important than the command of Christ!

There are other errors that are somewhat more subtle than those listed above. But just from the ones listed it should be easy to understand why the Lutheran Confessions charged that all of the abuses introduced apart from and contrary to Christ's institution of the Sacrament had turned the mass into an abomination.<sup>3</sup>

Is it not a wonder that something so simple and so beautiful as Christ's gift of this Sacrament could be so abused and corrupted by those who wish to love and serve him? Protestants deny its beauty and its benefit altogether, and Roman Catholics turn it into an abomination. And then those who are lost in the confusion of errors about the Sacrament try to find a way out of their confusion by declaring: "Well, it's all really just a matter of interpretation. Protestants interpret it one way, Catholics another, and Lutherans in still a third way." But listen to what Jesus said: "Take eat and take drink, my body and my blood for the forgiveness of sin." Confessional Lutherans teach that Christ's true body and blood (the doctrine of the Real Presence) are present with the bread and wine, given for us for the forgiveness of sins. Where is there an interpretation there? That is nothing but a virtual repetition of Christ's own words. There is only a trust that he meant what he said, that he can be present with his body and blood wherever he promises to be, and that he can impart the benefit of his payment for our sins by his real presence in the Sacrament. Anything less or more than that is (mis)interpretation, a corruption of his Word, and faithless rejection of his promises.

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<sup>2</sup> Purgatory is that mythical place between heaven and hell where, according to Catholic teaching and without one word of support from the Scriptures, souls go to suffer for a time, to be purged of their remaining sinfulness or guilt until they are fit for heaven. The bizarre aspect of this teaching is that one should want to go to purgatory to be thus purged, while at the same time the church provides no end of ways for getting out of there early! Heresy is always contrary to the Scriptures and ultimately also contrary to reason, as this heresy demonstrates more dramatically than most.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., The Formula of Concord, S.D., Art. VII, par. 109 (Tappert, p. 612).

Precisely because of the importance of Christ's Word in the Sacrament, our churches have consistently practiced what is called "Close Communion." That is, we offer the Sacrament to and receive it only with those who have the same confession of faith. For the Sacrament is indeed a "communion," a communion with Christ and also with one another. We do not want to encourage the false doctrine of those who hold to false doctrine by sharing this bond of faith, this communion, where there is not unity of confession. That does not mean, as some have charged, that we think everybody else is an unbeliever and going to hell. We do not judge anyone's faith, only the confession of faith. We cannot judge someone else's faith; for it is in the heart, and we cannot read hearts. But we can, indeed the Bible tells us often, that we should judge what people say they believe, i.e. their confession of faith (Matthew 7:15, Romans 16:17). Membership in a church body is a confession of faith. We may take it as a given that the individual accepts the teaching of the church he belongs to; if not, why does he belong to a church whose confession he does not share? Indeed St. Paul when correcting the errors that had arisen already in his own day urged that the Sacrament be given only to those who could examine themselves; such examination, of course, was to be on the basis of the Word of God, an examination in which the one desiring the Sacrament could see his need for it, as well as Christ's supplying of his need in this precious means of grace (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). Where someone comes to us from another confession of faith, we are at a loss to know whether he can make such an examination or not. Thus for his own sake we want to wait to offer the Sacrament until there is confession of faith that comes from the Scriptures and that includes separation from false doctrine. In our own churches too we would withhold the Sacrament if a person's words or life were a flat contradiction of the union that otherwise should be assumed by his membership in our church. Thus if a member persisted in holding to false doctrine or if a member refused to repent of sin and insisted that he was free to continue in sin, we would refuse to give such a one the Sacrament. The Sacrament is intended to comfort the penitent, not to encourage the obstinate, be he a persistent heretic or an unrepentant sinner.

May Christ out of his abundant grace and mercy grant that we stick with his simple and beautiful Sacrament as he instituted it! Our reason and our emotions and our will we are happy to subject to his Word. And all the more so we want to do that because of the rich blessings that he has promised to us in that Word. For what could be more beautiful and consoling than this: Christ who has left behind the sorrows and the pain of his earthly life and has ascended to heaven has not abandoned us; he stoops down from heaven and comes to us poor sinners again and again to give us himself and all that he gained for us by his holy cross and passion, by his glorious resurrection and ascension!

Therefore we go to receive the Sacrament where the Words of Institution are repeated as the elements are set aside and distributed for our reception. We prepare to receive the Sacrament, perhaps with fasting as was often the custom, but certainly with repentant and believing hearts. For that is how the gospel is always to be received, no matter the dress that it wears. We remember Christ's sacrifice for our salvation on the altar of the cross. We most thankfully and gladly receive him and his saving benefit according to his promise. We leave his altar consoled that he is still the Christ who is for us and now in this special way also with and in us. Could there be a better reason to rejoice in him and to want to live with him and serve him until at last we see him face to face and serve him perfectly in heaven?

In sum the means of grace is the gospel message that comes to us in the Word and in the sacraments. By that gospel the Holy Spirit creates and preserves in us the miracle of faith which trusts the promises of God in the message. We believe that Jesus is our Savior from sin because his Word has brought us to believe it. We believe that in the Sacrament of Baptism God promises to adopt us and offers us the forgiveness of sins because the gospel in baptism has brought us to trust his promises in baptism. We believe the Jesus' true body and blood are offered to us along with the elements of bread and wine and that we receive forgiveness of our sins in the Sacrament of the Altar because Jesus' gospel in the Sacrament has brought us to believe his promise in the Sacrament. So everything depends on the means of grace, and our faith happily looks outside of itself to its source in the gospel, most gladly receives Jesus again and again in that gospel, and delights to live with him through the gospel means of grace.

Finally, Jesus in John 15:15 calls his disciples, and by extension all believers his friends. It is the essence of friendship that friends share with one another. Is it not an amazing thing: Jesus our Creator and Redeemer calls us friends. He proves it preeminently by his sacrifice for us on the cross. He chooses to share with us all the treasures of his grace. But what do we share with him? He bids us share with him all of our need for those treasures, our sin and guilt, our persistent weakness and remaining inclination to sin. Friends also need one another. Our need for him is certainly obvious. But what does he need us for? He chooses to need us. For it is not to the angels that he entrusts the powerful, the saving, the precious means of grace. It is to us that he entrusts his precious gospel in the Word and the sacraments. What greater wealth is there than to have him in that gospel and then to be chosen to share the priceless treasure whenever and wherever the opportunity presents itself. The mother tells the stories of the gospel to children on her knee. The father strives to imitate the fatherhood of God in his dealings with his family - - they should know from him what a beautiful thing it is to pray every day: "Our Father who art in heaven." The man finds a way to share his joy in Christ with his co-worker or his golfing buddy. The woman talks to her friend about the wedding banquet of the Lamb. And on and on it goes, from one person to another, from this generation to the next. It's all about the means of grace. And it just doesn't get any better than that!