

The Lord's Supper in the Dialogues – A Horizontal Look

[at US Lutheran Dialogues with Episcopalians, Roman Catholics,
and Reformed Theologians]

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“We want to remind our readers of the real issue,” says Melancthon in Apology 24 on the Mass. “Both parties...must deal only with the point at issue and not wander off into side issues, like wrestlers fighting for their position. In the same way our opponents should be forced to discuss the point at issue. Once the real issue of the controversy is clear, it will be easy to evaluate the arguments both sides have presented.” (Tap. 251) And what is that “point at issue” in the LC/RC dialogue of 1530/31? “That the Lord's Supper does not grant grace *ex opere operate* and does not merit for others, whether, living or dead, forgiveness of sins or of guilt or of punishment *ex opere operate*. This position is established and proved by the impossibility of our obtaining the forgiveness of sins *ex opere operate* through our works and by the necessity of faith to conquer the terrors of sins and death and to comfort our hearts with the knowledge of Christ; for his sake we are forgiven, his merits and righteousness are bestowed upon us. ‘Since we are justified by faith, we have peace’ (Rom. 5:1). This is so firm and sure that it can prevail against all the gates of hell.” (Ibid.)

What is the “point at issue” across the board in the Lutheran bilaterals? Whatever else we shall find that is the “point at issue” in the bilaterals regarding the Lord's Supper, it is my

observation that Melanchthon's point at issue it is not. I think that is a defect. Whether it is, by contrast, "wrestlers fighting for their positions" remains to be seen. The data on the Lord's Supper in the bilaterals is found only in the Lutherans' conversations with Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and the Reformed. All the other dialogues are mute on the subject.

Dialogue with the Episcopalians

LED I produced no extensive document on the Lord's Supper beyond the "Summary Statements Derived From The First Four Dialogues:"

1. We agree that the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist constitute the distinctive and central act of Christian worship. We discovered, however, that more attention should be given to precisely what the Eucharist means and how it is to be celebrated.

2. In viewing our several Eucharistic traditions in perspective, we agreed that unity in Eucharistic practice is to be found more in the "shape" of Eucharistic liturgies than in fixed texts.

3. We agreed that further discussion as to just what is meant and not meant by the phrase "Eucharistic Sacrifice" would be generally helpful. [Then come bibliographic references to Lambeth 1958 and L-RC III .Eucharist as Sacrifice.

4. We agreed that some measure of pulpit and altar fellowship between our communions is desirable.

The LED I volume concludes by including the full text of the Pullach report from the international LED. That report has three paragraphs on the Lord's Supper. Paragraph 67 says that the church obediently performs the acts commanded by Christ and

“receives in this way the body and blood of Christ, crucified and risen, and in him the forgiveness of sins and all other benefits of his passion.” In Paragraph 68 “both communions affirm the real presence of Christ, but neither seeks to define precisely how this happens,” and in Paragraph 69: .i

“Both traditions affirm that Christ’s sacrifice was offered once and for all for the sin of the world. Yet without denying this fundamental truth both would recognize that the Eucharist in some sense involves sacrifice. In it we offer our praise and thanksgiving, ourselves and all that we are, and make before God the memorial of Christ’s sacrifice. Christ’s redemptive act becomes present for our participation. Many Anglicans and some Lutherans believe that in the Eucharist the church’s offering of itself is caught up into his one offering. Other Anglicans and many Lutherans do not employ the concept of sacrifice in this way.”

LED II produced a “Joint Statement on Eucharistic Presence,” but nothing on Eucharist as sacrifice. Its six paragraphs say;

1. There are similarities and differences in the Reformation and early post-reformation eucharistic theories of Lutherans and Anglicans. Regarding “presence” the Anglicans “followed the Reformed emphasis on the spiritual eating by faith, thus denying that...unbelievers partake of Christ” (pace FC 7!). In more recent times there is a “growing convergence on the essentials of eucharistic faith and practice.”

2. The eucharistic celebration of Word and Sacrament is the heart and center of the life and’ mission of the Church as the body of Christ in and for the world.

3. Christ’s presence is proclaimed in a variety of ways in the eucharistic liturgy. “It is the risen Christ himself who presides at each assembly of his people...who is represented in

a special way by the ordained ministers...who gives himself in his body and blood as both our sacrifice and our feast.”

4. “The Church’s celebration rests upon the Word and authority of Christ, who commanded his disciples to remember him in this way until his return. According to his word of promise, Christ’s very body broken on the cross and his very blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins are present, distributed and received, as...fruits of that atoning sacrifice... It is not our faith that effects this presence of our Lord, but by the faith we have received, the blessings of the Lord...are sealed to us until he comes...”

5. This encounter with the Lord enables and empowers his people to be the Body of Christ in and for the world. Therefore frequent congregational celebration is commended (including the sick and homebound) along with “true use of the sacrament [viz.,]...to eat and drink the body and blood in the faith that our Lord’s words give what they promise.”

6. “In recent years, through biblical scholarship, there has been a growing appreciation of the eschatological dimension of the Lord’s Supper.” Therefore proleptic “unity of the Church in Christ here and now...is to be sought wherever sufficient agreement can be reached.”

In the 1982 Helsinki report of the Anglican-Lutheran European Commission, the core assertions of Pullach 1972 are reaffirmed garnished with flavors from the herbarium of BEM: *anamnesis*, the Kingdom, pneumatology, and service to the world.

Except for the proleptic tiff between Henry VIII and Luther there has, to my knowledge, been no tradition of Lutheran/Episcopal debate (agreement or disagreement) on the Lord’s Supper. Thus the LED was analogous to characters in search of a playwright, conversationalists in search of an

agenda. It appears that the agenda they chose was in some sense “borrowed”—the “presence” question from the Reformed/Lutheran side of things, and the “sacrifice” item from the Roman/Lutheran side. Or was this the natural spinoff of a protestant/episcopal (sc., Geneva/ Rome) matrix that is at the center of the Episcopal ethos? If that is even half true, it might offer Lutherans a way to pursue, ala Melanchthon, the “real issue” behind the “side issues” of presence and sacrifice. For there does not seem to be any real issue in the LED materials. The reader cannot escape a sense of “ho hum” in, with, and under the ecumenical *lingua franca* of the LED statements from both sides of the Atlantic.

The 16th century sacramental issue re sacrifice was the *sola fide*, says Melanchthon. A generation later the Formulators saw the same *sola fide* to be “the point of issue” in the new controversy with the Sacramentarians about presence. Can Lutherans in 20th century dialogues afford to ignore even looking for such a “real issue” when discussing these other sacramental issues today? They did in the LED, thus corroborating Reumann’s observation re both Biblical study and ecumenical dialogue on the Lord’s Supper nowadays: “the tendencies in recent years have probably been more in the direction of eucharistic objectivization than in a stress upon faith.”

That is clearly the case in LED. How different are the next two “big ones,” the Lutherans in dialogue with the Reformed and with the Roman Catholics? Will they too reinforce the Reumann rule of thumb?

Dialogue with the Roman Catholics

The 1985 publication Facing Unity from the RC/L Joint Commission describes the present status this way in Paragraph 76:

“A great deal of progress towards a common understanding and celebration of the eucharist has been made in recent years as a result of numerous dialogues between our churches at various levels. In the course of these dialogues it proved possible to reconcile positions with regard to the understanding of the eucharist that had previously been thought to be in conflict and were therefore seen as divisive (sacrifice of the Mass, eucharistic presence); many of the remaining differences are within the common sphere, thus depriving them of their divisive force. Regarding liturgical form, both churches are moving towards growing consensus in the basic elements of eucharistic celebration.” (p.38f.)

The detailed agreements on presence and sacrifice referred to by the RC/L Joint Commission were the product of the USA LC/RC dialogue group. LCD III is the document for this. In the concluding statement of the “growing consensus” they say that these two issues dominated their agenda. On sacrifice they enunciate two agreements never denied by either confession and four items of past divergences that now converge. The agreements are: 1) Christ crucified and risen is “the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world who gives himself to the faithful...in the Lord’s Supper.” 2) “The celebration of the eucharist is the church’s sacrifice of praise and self-offering or oblation.”

The four past items of divergence are: 1) Though Trent did affirm this, Lutheran doubts were never resolved that the sacrifice of the cross is “unrepeatable.” Today no Catholic theologians dispute that *hapax* claim. 2) The allergenic language (for Lutherans) of “offering Christ” in the mass does not detract “from the full sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. The members of the body of Christ are united through Christ with God and with one another in such a way that they become participants in his worship, his self-offering, his sacrifice to the Father.

Through this union...the eucharistic assembly 'offers Christ' by consenting in the power of the Holy Spirit to be offered by him to the Father." There follows a footnote where Luther is cited as saying the same thing:

"not that we offer Christ as a sacrifice, but that Christ offers us"; but he also holds that this involves a sense in which "we offer Christ": "Through faith (emphasis added), in connection with the sacrament, we offer ourselves, our need, our prayer, praise and thanksgiving in Christ, and thereby we offer Christ...I also offer Christ in that I desire and believe (emphasis added) that he accepts me and my prayer and praise and present it to God in his own person."

It is not insignificant that for Luther's "standard" soteriological *sola fide* grounding for such "offering of Christ" the consensus statement reformulates "consenting in the power of the Holy Spirit." Is this a signal of faith-fugitism? I think so. 3) No longer is "propitiatory" a conflict point, for Roman Catholics today say that Christ's cross is the unique propitiatory sacrifice "efficacious for the forgiveness of sins and the life of the world." Lutheran allergic response to "sacrifice offered for the living and the dead" did not get tended in these discussions. 4) There is significant convergence in the actual practice of eucharistic worship. E.g., Vatican II pushes practice away from private masses to congregational celebrations.

On the conflicted point of presence there are areas where both partners speak with one voice: 1) Christ's manifold presence in the world; 2) His presence "wholly and entirely" in the Lord's Supper; 3) The variety of formulations to describe that presence along with a common rejection of Copernaitic realism and commemorative or figurative manner of presence, coupled with a new appreciation of the term "sign" for speaking of Christ's

presence; 4) Christ's presence is not generated by the faith of the believer, nor the power of the celebrant, but by the Holy Spirit through the Word; 5) Christ's presence perdures throughout the eucharistic action; 6) Communion under both kinds is recognized by Rome as the better practice.

On the transubstantiation issue Roman theology's reworking of it sounds OK to the Lutherans. Both partners are persuaded that no single framework or vocabulary can be adequate, exclusive, or final. Their concluding sentence: "We are convinced that current theological trends in both traditions give great promise for increasing convergence and deepened understanding of the eucharistic mystery."

The faith agenda does not surface in the official statement, and only via the footnote claiming Luther's support for our "offering Christ" in the Lord's supper does it get mentioned. But its import is not noticed. And that is a bit strange really, for the citation comes from one of the papers published in the volume. The author is, ironically, a Roman lay theologian, James McCue, whose article "Luther and Roman Catholicism on the Mass as Sacrifice" exegetes Luther's A Treatise on the New Testament (NT = Lord's Supper) and finds some juicy quotes about the mass as sacrifice. But McCue sees how all the pro-sacrifice statements are grounded by the *sola fide*, with its Christological corollary of the Lord's Supper as Christ's New Testament, the Jeremiah "new covenant," the promise of forgiveness.

Though not totally absent from the Lutheran/RC dialogues as far as I have tracked them, these terms (faith, promise, testament, and sign) never get central attention, though they occasionally do get mentioned. One might deduce that *sola fide* is a given and thus irrelevant to settling the remaining sacramental sore spots. But that was hardly the case in 1966f., as witnessed to

by how many years it took to get the convergence statement on justification by faith.

McCue brings the *sola fide* into the sacrifice discussion by introducing an item from Luther that did not make it into the Book of Concord. So it is not confessionally canonical. Nevertheless, why didn't the Lutherans do something with this gift offered by "the other side?"

Of course the same material is there in the confessional documents. The Melanchthon citation at the beginning of this paper (the conflict with Rome on eucharist is a *sola fide* conflict) introduces his own theological construction for eucharistic theology built with the same building blocks that McCue's Luther uses. Twenty-five times in Apology 13 and 24 he uses "New Testament" as his key term for the eucharist. Not at all is he talking about the 27 canonical books. He is talking about the "New Deal" that has come in Christ and that is "offered" in the Lord's Supper. For Melanchthon the Lord's Supper is not Christ's sacrifice at all. The focus is not on the first Good Friday. It is on the first Easter Sunday. Thus Maundy Thursday is proleptic Easter Sunday. The Lord's Supper is the distribution of the benefits of the sacrifice. It is not a re-visioning of the Good Friday sacrifice in any significant sense at all.

Here is a fundamental difference with the Roman adversaries. The Lord's Supper for Melanchthon is a consequence of Good Friday, not a recurring to it. That is why he prefers sacramentum as his *terminus technicus* in place of *sacrificium*, even if the sacrifice would be clearly designated as Christ's own. "Sacrament is a ceremony or act in which God offers us the content of the promise [of Christ's sacrifice]." Thus sacrament is the consequence of the sacrifice. He claims that this definition is not his own. "The theologians make a proper

distinction between sacrament and sacrifice.”

All of his labor later on to distinguish propitiatory and Eucharistic sacrifices are, he feels, pressed upon him by the *Confutatores* not allowing the discussion to run on the sacrament term. But if he must “chop logic” with sacrifice, he can, of course, do so. And the way he does it is to make New Testament, faith, promise, and sign his rhetoric for “the Mass as sacrifice.” If the Lutheran dialogists did invoke this resource from our tradition, it never got much play in the published results.

To say that the “real issue” “is the *sola fide* is to nuance the controversy of the 16th century away from the formal doctrine of the sacrament to the *usus*. For the Lord’s Supper the doing of it has priority over the teaching about it. And thus the *usus* question, not primarily the “how do you celebrants do it,” but the communicants’ *usus*, the “how do you use/receive it” is the “point at issue.” That, however, is the *sola fide* question.

Is that not the fundamental ecumenical question in eucharistic matters today—the use/uselessness of the Lord’s Supper in the lives of Christian people today? I think so.

The Dialogue with the Reformed

Marburg Revisited (1966) in two of its 10 summary statement paragraphs rings the changes on the faith-factor in the Lord’s Supper. Even more faith-“full” were the Arnoldshain Theses of 1958. I cannot track the flow from Arnoldshain to MR, but the former must have impacted the latter. Leuenberg also articulates its “common understanding of the gospel” throughout with the fundamental corollary of faith and promise, and its statements about the Lord’s Supper are no exception.

Not so the 1983 Joint Statement (1983) from Series III of the US

dialogues. Here the language of Lima is not only the new Gesprächspartner, but it almost nudges the language of promise/faith off the page and does so while all the time “reaffirming these agreements, in particular...Marburg Revisited ... and Leuenberg.”

Let us begin with Arnoldshain.

4. Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us, as his words promise to those who believe in his promise, the victory of his lordship, forgiveness, life, and blessedness.

8. Faith receives what is promised to it and builds on this promise... All members of (the Lord's) church are invited to his meal, and the forgiveness of sins is promised to all who desire God's righteousness.

Marburg Revisited begins with an affirmation of gospel-grounding as it attempts a “re- examination of our theological formulations in the light of the word of God.” In talking about the Lord's Supper they therefore say, “the sacrament...arouses faith through its presentation of the gospel.” Or again, “the presence of Christ in the sacrament is not effected by faith, but acknowledged by faith. The worthy participant is the one who receives in faith and repentance the Christ who offers himself in the sacrament.”

Leuenberg confesses a “common understanding of the gospel” that begins with the message of justification *propter Christum sola fide* and then moves to preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

15. In the Lord's Supper the risen Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins, and sets us free for a new life of faith.

Vis-a-vis the past condemnations between Lutheran and Reformed Leuenberg says: "We take the decisions of the Reformation fathers seriously, but are today able to agree on the following in respect to these condemnations:

18. In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgment.

19. We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

20. Where such a consensus exists between the churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions are inapplicable to the doctrinal positions of these churches.

The closest that the 1983 Joint Statement comes to this Lutheran trajectory is in a footnote where Prenter makes the case for such sacramental theology.

In every sacrament there is a divine *promissio* expressed in the Word which accompanies the sacrament. This *promissio* is the decisive factor. It is what makes the sacrament a sacrament. By virtue of understanding the word of the sacrament as *promissio* faith enters into the concept of the sacrament in the sense that it thus forms the real connection between the Word and the external element. For the external element is the confirmation of the promise. But only faith in the promise can receive the confirmation.

The Joint Statement begins its first article (Gospel) affirming “fidelity to the gospel as the fundamental norm” for all theology. Thus “it is from the gospel that we understand the Lord’s Supper...The Supper is itself a particular form of the gospel.” When, however, it comes to saying just what this particular form actually is (article 2), a reticence to say anything particular surfaces. Whence this agnosticism? Answer: “all of us need continually to grow” (repeated several times), and above all “the Lord’s Supper is inexhaustibly profound and awesome.” (Cave californiensem!). This much they are able to say: they “concur” with the Lima statement (BEM) and its pentagonal proposal for the “fullness of the Lord’s Supper.”

The third article (The New Community) does make reference to “the community of faith,” “the fellowship of believers,” who “trust in God’s faithfulness.” The one sentence that still echoes the Lutheran memory states: “As we participate in the Holy Communion we receive the benefits of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation through our trust in God’s faithfulness.” Although that is the first of four benefits arising “as we participate in the Holy Communion,” it does not assume any constitutive role for the ones that follow. The laundry list of Lima’s “five-for- fullness” is paralleled in these “four-for-those-fed-at-Christ’s-table.”

The last two articles of the Joint Statement (Doctrine, Practice) “affirm that the Lutheran and Reformed families of churches have a fundamental consensus in the gospel and the sacraments.” Therefore “remaining differences should be recognized as acceptable diversities within one Christian faith.” Their conclusion thus is the same as MR, AT, and Leuenberg, but “the road to that river is a mighty long way” away from the other path taken by the pioneers. Is it a better way? I think not.

Was it ecumenical etiquette post-Lima that urged this less-than-Lutheran and less-than-Reformed avenue? Surely ecumenical etiquette no longer requires that the conversation partners “hide it under a bushel.” No, nowadays the way to confront pluralism is to confront it and not shilly-shally in developmental agnosticism. But to confront pluralism head-on is itself an act of faith, specifically faith in the promise that we will survive the ordeal, that, as he said, the gates of hell even shall not prevail against us.

I can, of course, not address the “faith-factor” or its absence in the heart of the dialogists. And to do so in their absence is gossip. My assignment is to address what they put down on paper. About that my thesis is that Melanchthon is correct: the *sola fide* is the “real issue” in the dialogues about the Lord’s Supper. Measured by that thesis the dialogues reviewed are a mixed bag. The LED never touch it. Very likely the Episcopalians would never have brought it up. But did the Lutherans? If so, wha’ happened? If not, why not?

For the Lutheran Reformed dialogues we have been served the reverse of the Cana menu. Instead of saving the best till the last, the last was the worst.

In the dialogue with Roman Catholics the *sola fide* gets in by a footnote from James McCue’s masterful essay, but doesn’t play any major role in the joint statement coming from that time. But in the case of this dialogue, it has now finally surfaced. I think it was not merely ecumenical caution that placed the justification-by-faith item almost twenty years down the road in these dialogues. The dialogue partners were finally pushed into it by the very topics they addressed beforehand. Even if Carl Braaten is unhappy with the results (see his essay for this weekend), he surely rejoices that they (finally?) saw that the *articulus stant/cadent* had to be addressed. Is that a sign for

other bilaterals? I hope so. Both today's church and today's world has no higher priority agenda.

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