

The Lord's Supper in the Way of Church Growth

by Rev. Dr. Ronald Bogs

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Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Dr. Norman Nagel

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Introduction

The Lord's Supper is a basic doctrine in the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod). It is a means of grace, a sacrament. It is a focal point in worship. It blesses and condemns those who partake of it. As such, the Lord's Supper, from an LCMS view is basic to church growth. But what about the churches that do not share the LCMS view of the Lord's Supper? How is it viewed in the churches involved in the Church Growth Movement?

Because the Church Growth Movement comes in various forms and levels of adherents, we will look at the ways several different groups view the Lord's Supper in church growth. We will first look at the ways in which the Lord's Supper is seen in the eyes of "non-sacramental," or Reformed churches. From there we will move to a look at the Lord's Supper through the eyes of the World Council of Churches, that is from an ecumenical point of view. Then we will take a glimpse at what American Protestantism says about the Supper. Finally, we will look at the specifics of what is called the Church Growth Movement, that is one of the institutions giving us the Church Growth material. After looking at these we will look at the LCMS response to the World Council of Churches, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry," paper for a reaction. And we will complete this paper with some concluding thoughts, tying it all together and trying to make sense of it.

The Lord's Supper Through the Eyes of Non-Sacramental Churches

In the category of non-sacramental churches there is very little written about the Lord's Supper, obviously. What is written shows a distinct misunderstanding of the Sacraments in general and the Lord's Supper in particular. In an article titled, "Emerging Ecumenical Issues in Worship," Horace T. Allen, Jr. says,

What of the emerging ecumenical shape of the eucharistic liturgy? There appears to be a general and widespread consensus that Gregory Dix's four-fold "shape" is normative: offering, blessing, breaking/pouring, and giving. But large debates remain as to the meaning of 'offering,' and the form of the blessing is by no means entirely resolved. The growing use of a classically structured Eucharistic Prayer, which includes the Words of Institution, is by no means an ecumenically acceptable conclusion. Many Protestants resist any suggestion of a prescribed text for such a prayer; some Reformed Christians resist the requirement that the Lord's 'words' be included in such a prayer; and many Lutherans doubt the necessity of a prayer at all. And underneath this whole battle lies the volatile theological matter of a theology of sacrifice on the one hand or of proclamation on the other.¹

¹Horace T. Allen, Jr., "Emerging Ecumenical Issues in Worship," Word and World (Theology for Christian Ministry), Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1989), p. 21.

The big problem here is the misunderstanding of the offering: who is doing the offering? And because the Supper is not seen as a means of Grace, are there any blessings? The Supper seems to be seen as a focal point in worship, but for unknown reasons.

In an article on worship, Henry E. Horn writes, ““Some time ago, Heiko Oberman demonstrated that Protestants actually used a sort of sacramental understanding of the preached Word as a substitute for the Eucharist”². Therefore, Lutherans have taught people to expect more from a service of the Word than have other Christians. If that teaching has been effective, then we should hold on to this fact even while we are also emphasizing the Eucharist. Some evidence of this tradition should bring forth a service of the Word with standing by itself, especially needed as an evangelical tool.”³ Again, one can see the misunderstanding of the Word and Sacraments as a Means of Grace. If faith came from within a person, there would be no need for Word and Sacrament (*externum verbum*).

The Lord’s Supper Through the Eyes of the World Council of Churches

The following are some notes and observations from Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. Paragraph 1 (P1) “Christians see the eucharist prefigured in the Passover memorial of Israel’s deliverance from the land of bondage and in the meal of the Covenant on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24). It is the new paschal meal of the Church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to his disciples as the *anamnesis* of his death and resurrection, as the anticipation of the Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).” “Consequently the eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God’s love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved his own ‘to the end’ (John 13:1).”⁴ They seem to be getting it right, but from this one is left with the impression that this is only a symbolic meal in which the participants act out the Passover meal in order to see God’s love.

P2 “The eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ This begs the question, who is giving the gift, the Church, or God?

P4 “The eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise by which the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation.” “The eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become.”⁶ In this instance one is to believe that the eucharist is the sacrifice of the Church.

²Heiko Oberman, Harvard Divinity School Bulletin, quoted by Henry E. Horn in Word and World (Theology for Christian Ministry) (Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1989)), p. 35.

³Henry E. Horn, "Whence and Whither in Worship: A Reflective Attempt," Word and World (Theology for Christian Ministry), Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1989), p. 35.

⁴Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Copyright World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

P7 “The *anamnesis* in which Christ acts through the joyful celebration of his Church is thus both representation and anticipation.”⁷ Here again one gets the idea that the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic act “representing” what has been and what will come.

P13 discusses the issue of real presence, but the ideas presented are best summarized in the Commentary of paragraph 13.

Many churches believe that by the words of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine of the eucharist become, in a real though mysterious manner, the body and blood of the risen Christ, i.e., of the living Christ present in all his fullness. Under the signs of bread and wine, the deepest reality is the total being of Christ who comes to us in order to feed us and transform our entire being. Some other churches, while affirming a real presence of Christ at the eucharist, do not link that presence so definitely with the signs of bread and wine. The decision remains for the church whether this difference can be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself⁸.

Here we get into one of the main issues, is the Lord’s Supper a sacrament and a Means of Grace, or is it merely a symbolic act, an act of obedience? Is it merely an issue that each church must decide upon for themselves?

P14 “The bond between the eucharistic celebration and the mystery of the Triune God reveals the role of the Holy Spirit as that of the One who makes the historical words of Jesus present and alive.”⁹ So, who is doing what? Does there need to be a certain “magic” formula, or is Jesus doing what He said in His Word? P14, the Commentary on paragraph 14 adds to the confusion as to who is doing the sacrament. Is it the prayer of the congregation, is it the congregation, or is it Jesus?

A couple more notes and observations, this time from Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. “That’s what the Bible calls memorial: to recall before God what he has already done for his people so that he may grant us today all the benefits thereof. Memorial is the actualization of the work of God and at the same time the recalling in prayer to the Father of what he has done, in order that he may continue his work today.”¹⁰ From this we are left with the question, is it we who are the ones who set the eucharist in motion?

“The eucharist is the liturgical presentation of the sacrifice of the Son, by the Church, to the Father. This liturgical presentation is the act of recalling to God the Father the unique sacrifice of his Son, eternally actual, and to beg him by this sacrifice to grant his people graces

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Max Thurian, "The Eucharist Memorial, Sacrifice of Praise and Supplication," in Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper 116, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1983, p. 94.

and blessings.”¹¹ Again, we are left with the question, is it our doing this sacrificing in order to beg the Father to grant us his graces and blessings?

The attempt by the World Council of Churches to ecumenize the Lord’s Supper fails because it tries to please all sides. By using at times vague and at other times freighted language without defining its terms they defeat their purpose.

The Lord’s Supper Through the Eyes of American Protestantism

“For most of American Protestantism the sacrament of the Altar is primarily a way to arouse memories of Jesus or a fellowship meal which the congregation shares in an act of Christian hospitality.”¹² In other words, the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic event used to remind us of Jesus’ last supper with His disciples. The bread and wine are merely symbolic. The meal is an act of obedience to Jesus command to “do this in remembrance of me.”

The Lord's Supper Through the Eyes of the So-Called Church Growth

The following is a presentation from The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples (TMP), a “how to” book from the Institute for Church Growth. From chapter five, “How to Reach Your ‘Extended Family,’” we have a list of six ways to help one reach their “extended family.” Under suggestion number four, “4. Enhancing Your Witness,” the following “common denominators of the Gospel presentation” are listed (Note that each of these is a heading which is explained in more detail). “The assumption—man’s sinful nature. . . . The focal point—Jesus Christ. . . . The target for witness—responsive people. . . . The starting place—the person’s need. . . . The instrument of God—people. . . . The proclamation—The *kerygma*. . . .The *kerygma* (a Greek noun meaning “proclamation” or “preached message”) was the earliest Gospel Christ’s apostles took out to their world. . . . The basic elements of the *kerygma*—The message—were proclaimed with the goal of persuading the hearers to repentance, faith, and baptism. The motivation—Love. . . . The method—dialogue and interaction. . . . The goal—repentance/conversion. Repentance involved a change of mind and heart; a turning “from.” The result—baptism and identification with the church.”¹³

One of the first problems with this model for witnessing is the mistaken instrument. TMP states that the early church grew through what it calls the *oikos* model, that is, through households, through people. The instrument of God for conversion and salvation is not people, but is His Word. This is where we come upon one major weakness of the Church Growth movement, that is its fundamental precept that the church grows through people. The church grows through the Means of Grace, the Word and Sacrament, not people.

¹¹Ibid., p. 99.

¹²Harold L. Senkbeil, Sanctification: Christ in action (Northwestern Publishing House, Copyright 1989), p. 160.

¹³Win Arn and Charles Arn, The Master's Plan for making disciples (Church Growth Press, Pasadena, CA, Copyright 1984), p. 109-113.

Continuing on we read, “In the New Testament the rite of incorporation into the Body was baptism. . . . Baptism was the accompanying act of obedience and confession, and without baptism, a believer did not enter the early community of faith.”¹⁴

And still further, he writes, “What is the Gospel? . . . How can I be made fit for God’s presence? Being made acceptable to Him has to do with what Jesus Christ did when He took my guilt and shame and made it His own. He received on Himself the judgment I deserved. The Bible calls this the redemptive, atoning work of Christ and it leads to ‘justification by faith.’ By this we mean God accepts me ‘in His Son,’ cleansed by the blood of His sacrifice and clothed with the righteousness of Christ. I am thereby declared righteous and am fit for God’s presence and fellowship. *All this is God’s response to man’s quest for acceptance.* (Emphasis added)¹⁵

Taking our cue from the above presentation from Church Growth Press and Drs. Win and Charles Arn, we may summarize that: 1. Salvation is attained by man taking the first step toward God, then God accomplishes salvation as a response to man’s first step; 2. Baptism is a mere rite or act of obedience to show man’s faith or his acceptance of God; 3. The means or instrument of God and of coming to faith are people, especially people motivated by love.

From this we may conjecture that for those who share this belief the Lord’s Supper would also be an act of obedience, we do it to show our obedience to God. The Lord’s Supper would be a totally symbolic act with no benefits.

One Reaction

In a response to the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry paper, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of the LCMS noted the following concerns: the ambiguousness of the usage of the phrase, “sacrament of a gift,” the usage of the word “Eucharist” only in that it may suggest a shift in the accent from God’s gift to what the church does, the description of the eucharist as a “sacrifice,” the idea that the traditional “memorial” might become only a “representation,” “the clarity about the relation of the Spirit to the Word, and to the dominical words of institution,”¹⁶ the ambiguity concerning the nature of Christ’s presence in the sacrament, and “possibly the most serious deficiency of this section is the almost complete absence of discussion about what we regard as one of the major benefits of the eucharist, namely, that in it God graciously offers ‘forgiveness of sin, life and salvation.’”¹⁷ The LCMS response is clear in its view of BEM. One can see how these concerns of the LCMS are valid as we have earlier taken a look at the BEM paper.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁶The LCMS Response to the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches to the Text of 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry

¹⁷Ibid.

A Second Reaction

Dr. Kent R. Hunter, president of the Church Growth Center, being a Lutheran pastor, brings with him a more Biblical view of Church Growth. In the workbook for his growth seminar he brings across the truth that it is God through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, who brings growth to the church. He brings across the truth that people are brought to faith and kept in faith through the Word, Scripture, and the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁸

In his Bible Study on Baptism he explains that, "No one can make himself or herself a child of God. God does that. Jesus' death on the cross has made forgiveness available to all. That forgiveness becomes personal as the Spirit works faith in individual hearts—in Baptism by the power of the Spirit through the Word people are born again of water and the Spirit. Baptism is not just an event. It's a way of life—a life filled with the power of God's grace."¹⁹

He continues in the Bible Study to present the truth that we are baptized once, but daily we need to be reminded of our baptism or as he puts it, daily we need to "exercise" our baptism.

If we continue to follow Hunter's thought pattern, then we can say similar things about the Lord's Supper. It is a means of grace, produces faith in our hearts, brings forgiveness, brings strengthening of faith as well as life and salvation.

The Lord's Supper, A Lutheran Perspective

The Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) holds and maintains to the truth that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament²⁰, that is, a sacred act, instituted by God, with visible elements, bread and wine, connected with God's Word, and offers forgiveness of sins, faith, life, and salvation. In this understanding, the Lord's Supper is a Means of Grace, that is, a means whereby the recipient is brought to faith and kept in faith. It is a gift, given to us by God. It is given to us to be used only in the way in which it was given. The way in which we are to use it is to recite back to the Lord what He has given to us.

Conclusions

From this research on the Church Growth movement and its view of the Lord's Supper we have six conclusions. First, because of a lack of information, writing about the Lord's Supper in Church Growth material it could be concluded that it is not an issue, or not made to be an issue because as an issue it could be conflictual rather than unionistic, divisive rather than growing.

Second, in the instances where the Lord's Supper is discussed the same language is used, but it is used with different freight. This came clear in the discussion of the Supper as a gift, as a memorial, as a re-presentation, etc. in the BEM paper. So, although there might seem to be

¹⁸Kent R. Hunter, Catching the Great Commission Vision, An Introduction to Church Growth Workshop (Church Growth Center, Corunna, Indiana, 1985), p. 5-12.

¹⁹Kent R. Hunter, Life Power! Baptism in Daily Living (Concordia Publishing House, 1985), p. 7.

²⁰Cf. *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, Questions 236-238, (Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

agreement on the exterior, because of the difference in meaning of terminology there is a definite difference of meaning on the interior.

Third, in most, if not all, churches involved in Church Growth, the Lord's Supper is seen merely as symbolic, an act of obedience, not a sacrament. Dr. Hunter suggests that, "One of the reasons that you don't find a lot about the sacraments in Church Growth literature, in general, is because many of those who have been involved in the Church Growth Movement historically have not been sacramentally oriented in their place in Christianity. However, since Lutherans have been involved in Church Growth, you see the sacrament being incorporated as God's means of grace."²¹

Fourth, when the Supper is seen as merely symbolic, an act of obedience, it follows then that it is seen as something for instruction. Through the Supper we are instructed as to how Jesus did the last supper. We learn about the passover as a Jewish feast, and so on.

Fifth, again, when the Supper is not a sacrament, it becomes merely a memorial, or a fellowship meal. It is a way to share in a religious act or experience.

Sixth, when the Lord's Supper is seen through the eyes of the Lutheran Church rather than through the eyes of the Church Growth Movement, it regains its rightful place as a sacrament, as a Means of Grace, as a growth factor of the church. Therefore, we should not merely throw out the baby with the bath water, but search for the good stuff, keep it and rework the rest to conform to Scripture.

²¹Personal letter from Dr. Kent R. Hunter, President of Church Growth Center, Corunna, Indiana, Oct. 22, 1991.

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