

## LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS.

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In reading the religious, and even the political, literature of Reformation times one is struck with the extraordinary prominence given to the discussion of the sacraments of the Christian church. Allowing fully for the prevalence of the spirit of controversy and the strength of the polemical interest of those times, one can see, nevertheless, that the struggle over the nature and worth of the sacraments arose mainly from a deep concern for the preservation of the Christian religion, as it was then understood, in relation to the church and the state. Both to Catholics and to Lutherans the doctrine of the sacraments was central to the Christian faith and the right of the sacraments was vital to its continued existence. Therefore they must be preserved in their true character at all costs. But the Lutheran Protestant mind of that day is so far removed from the mind of the modern American Protestant that the only interest we feel in those discussions is the historical. It is difficult to bring oneself to wade through this controversial literature with its unedifying sophistry, its extravagance of assertion and its bitterness of tone. In respect to these things, Luther was surely no less a sinner than his fellows.

To understand and appreciate his views of the sacraments it is well that we should keep in mind such considerations as the following: First, he had received his religious and intellectual culture directly from the Catholic Church, and of that church he was a loyal member and an orthodox priest and teacher up to thirty-five years of age. Though he was possessed of great originality and initiative the Roman Catholic habits of thought were thoroughly ingrained in his nature. This is particularly manifest in his inability to hold to a spiritual reality apart from its embodiment in an objective reality, apprehensi-

ble to sense, through which it is presented. Luther's religion was essentially sacramental in character.<sup>1</sup> He might correct the Catholic interpretation of the sacraments and reform the practice of them, but to repudiate them altogether was a psychological impossibility for him.

Second, his controversy with Catholicism arose primarily from his sense of having been freely forgiven for his sins and from his attempt to carry out the Augustinian view of the grace of God more thoroughly and consistently than the Catholic Church, which professed it, had ever done. This led him to the repudiation of the Roman Catholic corruption of that doctrine in teaching and practice. It was particularly in its use of seven sacraments that this corruption was manifest.

Third, his views on this subject passed through several changes and his statement of them was developed through controversy with the Catholics and with reformers whose views did not accord with his own, with the result, not only that they were not wrought out in systematic or completed form, but also that they bear the marks of the subtleties and make-shifts which the controversies demanded. In consequence, such important terms as *the word*, *the church*, *faith* have an equivocal meaning at times. *The word* may mean the actual written words of scripture or a supra-rational divine communication to the heart. *The church* may mean the ecclesiastical institution or a spiritual communion. *Faith* may mean doctrine, or a conscious trust or an unconscious inner state or potency which is implicit trust. A consistent interpretation of Luther throughout seems impossible.

Fourth, this religious and doctrinal reform he sought to bring about became so complicated with ecclesiastical and political issues that the natural outworking of his principles was prevented and a union of his evangelical

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Note: All references to Luther's collected works are to the Erlangen edition, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>1</sup>Werke, Erlangen Edition, XXVII. 148.

views with traditional Catholic doctrines and practices was the inevitable outcome. The Lutherans became from an early date a political church party. Under such circumstances a radical reform as respects the sacraments was out of the question. For Luther's followers in that case would probably have gone the way of the Anabaptists.

The dominating characteristics of Luther's mind were religious in the sense that he cherished as his dearest possession a sense of relationship with the divine whether this sense were intelligible or not. It bore sway in him over the demand for loyalty to fact or consistent thinking. So far were the rights of this religious "faith" maintained by him in contrast with the claims of rational intelligence that he hesitated not to call reason a harlot when it attempted to adjudicate upon religious matters.<sup>1</sup> At the same time he did not shrink from making vigorous use of the power of logic when confuting the arguments of opponents. In all this he reflected the spirit of mediæval Catholicism. Then, too, it must be said that, notwithstanding the fact that he maintained against the ascetic and the monk the dignity and sanctity of the natural relations of his family, the state and business, he never overcame entirely the spirit of the cloister—for it was to the cloister<sup>2</sup> he fled when he sought in terror to escape from his sins; and he never succeeded, as did Zwingli and Calvin, in maintaining the unity of the religious life with the normal conditions of the ethical and social life. For the religious life was to him an experience by itself and not amenable to any power but its own. Whatsoever nourished this inner life thereby justified itself.

Through his personal experience as a man and his experiences as a priest and confessor of the people he was able to apply this test to the sacraments of the church.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>XVI. 144; Briefe VII. 728.

<sup>2</sup>Köstlin Theol. of L. I. 47.

<sup>3</sup>XX. 22.

Baptism, Repentance and the Lord's Supper had established themselves by this practical test but the other sacraments of the Roman Church had proved themselves a source of corruption and damage to the life of faith.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Confirmation, Marriage, Orders and Extreme Unction are valueless or harmful in themselves as Christian practices, but they lack the essential quality of a sacrament and when so treated yield themselves to evil designs. He held that a sacrament was, as Augustine said, "the visible sign of an invisible grace."<sup>2</sup> In a sacrament there are two essential elements, namely, the mysterious communication of that heavenly good to an undeserving sinner, which is called grace, and the visible sign of that communication. Where either is lacking there is no sacrament.<sup>3</sup> This might seem to permit the recognition of the four rejected Roman sacraments and to lead to the rejection, as it really did at length among the Lutherans, of the view that Repentance is a sacrament because it lacked the visible sign. It becomes necessary, therefore, that a fuller statement be made as to what constitutes in reality a sacrament. On this question Luther's position is not uniform but it is fairly clear in general.

In the first place, a sacrament is divinely given and its efficacy follows solely from its divine source. But it is given to faith, and apart from faith on the part of the recipient it is not saving to the individual to whom it is outwardly offered.<sup>4</sup> At the same time it will not do to say that its efficacy is dependent on a human act, for that were to make grace conditional on human works, which was the pit of error from which Luther so violently shrank. A double difficulty arose here: is the power of a sacrament nullified when the recipient is destitute of faith? and if it is received through faith whence springs

<sup>1</sup>XXI. 137; XXX 371.

<sup>2</sup>XXI. 131, 143.

<sup>3</sup>IV. 71; XVI. 45; XIX. 80.

<sup>4</sup>XI. 58; XXVI. 255; Briefe P. 154, 378.

that faith if not from the human heart? To the first of these questions Luther's answer is not clear. He cannot deny that the efficacy of the sacrament flows solely from the divine grace and yet where there is no faith no benefit is received. The only escape would seem to be found in the Roman Catholic answer, that in the case of unworthy recipients the grace offered in the sacrament turns to condemnation. As respects the second difficulty there is much more to be said. We shall take up the point more fully in a moment.

In the second place, a sacrament is constituted by a visible sign. An outward phenomenon apprehensible by the senses is essential to its efficacy. This is in response to our human limitations, since we are men of flesh and blood and not angelic spirits. Without this external reality the sacrament would be ineffective to us men since it could not appeal to us.<sup>1</sup> But the sign, again, is not a mere sign or mere form. The grace is not given before or after the sign but in and with it. Otherwise the sign might be dispensed with, as Carlstadt held. On this point Luther is at times gloriously inconsistent, but in general he holds firmly to the contention above stated. The sacraments are, therefore, necessary to salvation because God has ordained that His grace be bestowed through them. This we know simply because the Word of God has so declared.<sup>2</sup> At this point we see that the validity and worth of the sacrament have their source entirely in the Word. This is also the answer to the difficulty, referred to a moment ago, as to the source of the saving faith without which the sacrament is ineffectual for salvation. This is a vital point in Luther's whole doctrine, for it is intimately related to the religious experience that formed the true basis of his reformatory career.

It is the Word in the sacrament that imparts to it the sacramental character.<sup>3</sup> The sacraments are really

<sup>1</sup>XVI. 48.

<sup>2</sup>XVI. 87, 66; XXI. 17; XIX. 81.

<sup>3</sup>XVI. 48; XXI. 133; XIX. 81.

the visible Word. The term Word seems to stand for the mysterious communication to the heart, the very divine grace itself as the utterance of God himself to men. But this self-utterance of God is Christ. Then it is Christ who is communicated in the sacrament. Indeed, to Luther there is, strictly speaking, only one sacrament, namely, Christ.<sup>1</sup> The three sacraments are signs, rather, of this sole and sufficient sacrament. This would seem to lead to mysticism and the discrediting of all outer sacramental forms. But Luther cannot go on far. For the word of forgiveness that came to him from his confessor's lips was a spoken word and without the spoken word no message could have come to Luther. This word is, again, the word of the written Gospel, the Holy Scripture, and in fact it is the Gospel, the sole revelation of God, the inspired Bible. The word is that which is spoken whenever the Gospel is preached in public or in private.<sup>2</sup> In it is conveyed the grace of God to sinners.

Herein we find Luther's answer to the question whether in making the efficacy of the sacrament for salvation dependent on faith in any individual instance he does not after all make it dependent on the human will and thereby reintroduce the value of the human works he had repudiated. The answer is, that in and with the Word the faith is created in the heart by the same gracious act that gives the message.<sup>3</sup> Faith itself is the fruit of grace. Now, the sacrament, being the Word, is saving, for it creates faith in the heart of the recipient. In fact it does so in the case even of infants. The sacrament is therefore necessary for salvation because God has willed that his grace be united with it.

At this point we observe a transition in his thought from the mystical to the formal and legalistic conception of the word of God. To the question, How do we know

<sup>1</sup>XXX. 270.

<sup>2</sup>XXVI. 100.

<sup>3</sup>XVI. 207.

that there is any such thing as a saving sacrament? it was not open to Luther merely to say, as he should have said, that the church's tradition had given it to us, for that is the thing against which he was fighting. He was forced by the exigencies of controversy and by the demands of ecclesiastical necessity to say, that in the Holy Scriptures, which are the Word of God, it is so declared.<sup>1</sup> He finds scripture proof that his three sacraments were declared to be such by divine authority but the other four Roman usages were only so-called "sacraments" because they lacked an authoritative grounding as such.

Having gone so far, it was necessary to go farther. How should the sacraments be observed? According to the instruction prescribed by apostolic word or practice.<sup>2</sup> Here he falls back upon the scholastic view of the Bible as a book of the statutes of heaven for the church. "The word of institution" is essential to the sacrament, that is, the very words of scripture in which the sacraments were originally given are necessary to the true celebration of the sacraments. Their efficacy is dependent on the Word, not of the administrator, but of God, which the administrator utters. It follows, as Luther himself at times admitted, that if the word accompanying the deed be uttered even in sport the sacrament was validly observed and produced the intended effect. It is plain to every modern reader that this is nothing more nor less than heathen magic surviving in Luther. His Catholic inheritance was too heavy for him to cast it off. Moreover, had he done so, there was no stopping place short of Anabaptism, and that would have meant disaster to the project of a Lutheran state-church.

There is space for but a word or two respecting Luther's view of the different sacraments. The first sacrament and the foundation for the others is Baptism.<sup>3</sup> It is

<sup>1</sup>Briefe I. 378.

<sup>2</sup>XVI. 58, 59; LXV. 215.

<sup>3</sup>XVI. 17.

the sacrament of the forgiveness of sins and by its sign, dipping of the body in the water, accompanied by the word of the promise conveys to the believing recipient, an absolute remission of all sins,<sup>4</sup> embracing the promise for the future. Thus it is to be observed only once by the recipient, for its repetition amounts to a denial of the validity of the promise for all time. Faith is essential in all cases. This naturally excluded infants from its benefits, but Luther could not admit their unfitness without endangering his whole movement. He maintained their right to it at first on the ground of the faith of the parents<sup>1</sup> and counted it as taking the place of the sacrament of circumcision under the old Covenant.<sup>2</sup> Then he held that infants themselves possessed faith and challenged proof to the contrary,<sup>3</sup> and at length he urged that inasmuch as the prayer of faith was, according to the scriptures, efficacious on behalf of others, it must be acknowledged that the prayer of the parents in connection with the baptism of the children would secure for them the faith necessary to the sacrament<sup>4</sup>—which is, of course, just another way of accepting faith by proxy. It throws an interesting side-light on the character of Luther's view of the nature of the religious life to observe that he held that children "just because they are without reason, are better adapted for faith than old and rational persons, with whom reason is always standing in the way." His final ground for maintaining the truly Christian character of infant baptism is found in the unanimous approval of the church and even of heretics to his day<sup>5</sup>—a remarkable position for one who had set the word of God against the church. It must be added that Luther trusted that

<sup>4</sup>XXI. 17.

<sup>1</sup>XI. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Briefe II. 202.

<sup>3</sup>Walch XVII. 2557ff.

<sup>4</sup>Comm. and Vol. II. 258.

<sup>5</sup>Köstlin op. lit. 53, 54.



unbaptized infants might come under the mercy of God.

The sacrament of Repentance has its basis in Baptism and continues throughout life the forgiveness bestowed in Baptism. Inasmuch as Baptism, while conferring remission of sins, including the guilt of original sin, does not remove original sin, it is necessary that there be continuous contrition for the sins which break out later and that the word of forgiveness granted in baptism be repeated continually thereafter in order that the purification begun may be continued. There are thus two principal parts to the sacrament, namely, contrition on the part of the penitent and the pronouncement of the absolution on the part of him who receives the confession. It makes no difference who hears the confession and pronounces the absolution, for the word that is uttered is God's word of forgiveness and always effects the desired result.

The Supper occupies a larger place than either of the other sacraments in consequence of the central place given to it in the Roman church and because of the incessant controversies to which the Roman theory and practice gave rise. A very few words will suffice in the present connection to set forth Luther's position. While Luther sees in the Lord's Supper a thank-offering<sup>1</sup> on the part of the communicant and while it is a communion of the saints,<sup>2</sup> it is rather an utterance of the word of the Gospel, the last will and testament of the Redeemer.<sup>3</sup> It is God's gift to men, not a sacrifice on the part of men to God.<sup>4</sup> Christ is not offered to God in it but he offers himself to us in order that our bodies and souls together may receive the fulness of his blessedness. In it we feed upon

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<sup>1</sup>XXI. 131; XII. 215.

<sup>2</sup>III. 207, 247.

<sup>3</sup>XI. 167.

<sup>4</sup>II. 209.

<sup>5</sup>XXIII. 185; XXVII. 155.

him into whom we have been baptized. There is a real impartation of Christ's body and blood in the Supper.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say, as Rome does, that in the very act of eating and drinking there is an actual impartation of Christ savingly even if there be no faith exercised by the communicant (*no opus operatum*) but he is actually imparted to the believer. Not that the believer's faith, by construing the elements as Christ himself, constitutes Christ as present, but, as in the case of baptism, Christ's word of institution carries with it the efficacious presence of Christ. The words, "This is my body," are the all-powerful Word of God and by virtue of that Word Christ is present under the visible elements. Here, again, we see Luther's legalism and hatred of reason in matters of religion. The word of scripture settles it that Christ's body and blood are present.<sup>6</sup> The words are not to be symbolically understood. Luther will listen to no arguments from analogy by Zwingli or others. The *ipse dixit* of the letter of scripture settles the matter. All difficulties of a rational kind are contemptuously brushed aside. If he cannot make Christ's presence in the bread and wine intelligible that matters not. He is there because he said so and his words when repeated today produce the same result for the believer. Christ is divine, his resurrection body is ubiquitous and may be present where he wills. Luther seeks to distinguish his view from the Catholic view—and to this extent he makes a concession to reason—by denying the actual transubstantiation<sup>1</sup> of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and he postulates in place of that doctrine a consubstantiation. The bread and wine remain what they were before the words of institution are uttered but by the almighty power of Christ he is now present in them. To eat worthily is to

<sup>5</sup>XXX. 93, 96-101.

<sup>6</sup>Köstlin Op. cit. II. 70.

<sup>1</sup>XXV. 137; XXXI. 402.

have communion with him, to eat unworthily is to bring upon oneself condemnation.

There is no room for a statement in detail of the controversies into which Luther was drawn, or for a discussion of the merits of his doctrine at length. But it is fitting to make two remarks. First, the sacramental view of salvation is alien to the whole trend of Protestant religion, to the spirit of modern philosophy and to the world-view of science. It is not possible to regard a special portion or particle of the universe as set apart from the rest and as having special saving value. The conception is immoral and irreligious in the end. The question of the place of sacrament in religion must drop out of sight. Second, the legalism and literalism that underlie Luther's use of scripture are equally foreign to the Christian Gospel. Revelation is not authoritatively promulgated by law, but the communication of a conscious, moral, intelligent personal unity of will with God.