

God in the Dance

Making Sense of Communion and Baptism in the
Lutheran Church

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I. Communion - The Dance

I'll never forget the wonderful expression of love and sacrifice that I witnessed at a Girl Scout father-daughter sock-hop. It was a while back when my oldest daughter was a Daisy Girl Scout. Here she was, in Kindergarten, nervous about her first dance, and a little shy about the whole 50's dress up thing. We walked into the school gym, and what a sight it was! Grown men with hair slicked back, wearing white t-shirts with sleeves rolled up, black shoes on with white socks shining from beneath their rolled up jean cuffs. The only thing that could get a guy to dress up like that was the little girl in the poodle skirt that gave him that "daddy I've got you in the palm of my hand" smile.

Throughout the night these dads were shimmying and shaking, doing the hand jive, and twirling their precious partners on the dance floor. Love led them to be in the dance.

If a dad didn't have time or didn't care or didn't want to be embarrassed, he wouldn't be there. When there is no love or love that is lacking, there isn't going to be much participation or presence. In the Bible, on the night Jesus gave the gift of communion, Judas was the man of separation and betrayal. The Bible shows how Judas was not in the dance. He went out into the darkness on his own.

This rejection of Jesus, of God Himself, by Judas is just one ripple in the pond that started back in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve went off on their own in sin. And the ripples continue today when you go off on your own without the love of Jesus, without His leadership.

So what is God's reaction? Well, to His fragile, hurting, broken, rebellious and, yes, even ornery, children, God stretches out His hand and says, "I want to be with you in the dance of life." The Bible makes it clear that He's always had this love, this heart, for His children. From day one God expressed His love through participation and presence. During the good days before the fall into sin, God was in the dance, walking in the garden and talking with His dear children. After people strayed, God was in the dance, appearing to Moses and delivering His people. When the people were in the wilderness, God was in the dance, guarding them with a pillar of fire and pillar of cloud. When they worshipped, God was in the dance, filling the tabernacle with His glory, showing them that He was with them. When the people rebelled against God, He was in the dance, speaking and acting through prophets. At the right time, for the sin of the whole world, God was in the dance, sending His one and only Son Jesus to live for you and to die on the cross for you. And when Jesus was getting ready to leave this earth after His death and resurrection, He told His disciples that He would stay in the dance. So they gathered for the Passover meal. Jesus took the bread and said, "Take and eat, this is my body." He took the cup of wine and said, "Drink from it, all of you, this is my blood." Jesus let the disciples know that the next time they would feast together would be in heaven. But for now, He was in the dance.

God's love and commitment to your life have always meant His participation and presence. Holy Communion is an extension of what He has always done. Some people say, "How could Jesus really be present when you eat and drink the bread and wine? How can the infinite God take up such lowly forms here and now?" Well, it was God's idea. It was His idea to slick His hair back, roll up His jeans, and dance with His children—always there, always forgiving you, always strengthening you. What would cause a grown God to do a thing like that? It's love that leads your Lord and Savior to be in the dance with you.

God's M.O.

"M.O." stands for Modus Operandi or Method of Operation. If you've seen any police shows on television, you know that it's a police term that refers to the way a criminal works. Certain criminals always had certain ways of doing things. A bank robber would always wear a mask that looked like a U.S. president. A burglar would always eat a few goodies from the refrigerators of his victims. An arsonist would always leave traces of the same chemicals. That was the M.O.

God has an M.O., too. If you read through the Bible you see that He has always been PRESENT for THE PURPOSE OF LIFE AND SALVATION. Let's look at a few examples.

In Exodus chapter three you read about Moses encountering the burning bush:

*3:1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.
2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.
3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up."
4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."
5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."
6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.
7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.
8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--*

If you were to stop the action that day, tap Moses on the shoulder, and ask what was going on, what do you think he would say? Would he respond, "Well, I'm just interacting with a symbol of the God I love and trust. This moment provides me with an intimate spiritual unity for my personal growth and strength."? Is that what Moses would say? Or would he say, "See that bush? It's God! He's right here. You better take off your shoes and fall on your face in the presence of the Holy Lord."?

Moses was talking to God—God who was PRESENT for THE PURPOSE OF SAVING HIS PEOPLE.

What about later in Exodus when the people of Israel were freed? Take a look at Exodus chapters 13 and 14:

*13:18 So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle...
21 By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.
22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

*14:19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them,
20 coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.
21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,
22 and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.
23 The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.
24 During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion.*

What if you were able to interview an Israelite during these exciting events? What if you asked him or her, "What is that pillar of cloud? And what about that pillar of fire?" Do you think they would reply, "Oh, those pillars are representations of the infinite and eternal God. When we see them, we connect with God with spiritual depth and fervor. We are brought closer to Him because of those symbols."? Is that what an Israelite would say? Or would they say, "That's God! Look, He's saving us from the Egyptians!"?

Once again, God's M.O. Those pillars were God—God who was PRESENT for THE PURPOSE OF SAVING HIS PEOPLE.

Let's fast forward to the tabernacle, that portable place of worship for God's people. Check out what Exodus 40 says after the tabernacle is in full use for God's people:

*40:34 Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.
35 Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.
36 In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out;
37 but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out--until the day it lifted.
38 So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.*

Shall we interview Moses or an Israelite again? I think you get the idea. The cloud was not looked at as a symbolic representation of God. It WAS God—God with His people! It was God's M.O.—His PRESENCE for THE PURPOSE OF SAVING HIS PEOPLE.

We can talk about God's constant action of being present with His people for their salvation. The prophets were not just men who spoke about God and His will. They were the embodiment of God's message. Hosea chapter three is a good example of the unique role of the Old Testament prophet. Hosea actually lived out the God-Israel relationship. Hosea demonstrated God's action; Hosea's wife was a living demonstration of Israel's on again, off again relationship with God. Look at this short chapter of the Bible:

*3:1 The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."
2 So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley.
3 Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you."*

4 For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol.

5 Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.

The prophet acted as God's visible presence. Why? For purpose of saving His people.

God continued His Method of Operation as referenced in Matthew chapter one:

1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, "God with us."

Jesus was THE PRESENCE OF GOD for THE PURPOSE OF SALVATION! Jesus was consistent with God's M.O. that He established at creation.

Then, on the night Jesus was betrayed, as He was getting ready to leave the earth, Jesus said something to the disciples that is recounted four times in the Bible. Take a look at Matthew's account:

26:26 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."

27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.

28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

29 I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

There it is again, God's M.O.! Before Jesus left the earth, He made sure that God's method of interacting with His people would continue. He gave us His body and blood in communion. He promised that it was given for the forgiveness of our sins. It is THE PRESENCE OF GOD for THE PURPOSE OF SALVATION! What if you walked up to Jesus during the last supper and asked, "Isn't this really just a symbolic tool to connect us to you spiritually?" Wouldn't Jesus say, "Did you hear what I said? This is my body. This is my blood. It is my presence with you until we are reunited in heaven. That is how my Father has always worked. And that is how He will continue to work until the last day."?

Communion seems strange in our day and age, but when you see God's track record, when you realize the way He has worked, when you see that He wants to continue working in our lives as He has throughout history, then communion makes much more sense. God is gracious enough to be tangible in our world. He refuses to be merely an idea. Beyond our cognitive apprehension of God, He gives us His tangible PRESENCE for THE PURPOSE OF OUR SALVATION.

The Death Principle

Is there anything else in the Bible that teaches the real presence of Christ in communion? What if you're still stuck on the possibility of Christ being present as you eat and drink the bread and wine? St. Paul ran into these doubts, too. They weren't expressed in a theological argument. Instead, they were expressed in carelessness in the administration of communion. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul expressed dismay at what was happening during the worship services of that congregation:

- 11:17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.*
18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.
19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.
20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,
21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.
22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

Paul then went on to describe exactly how the Lord's supper should be approached:

- 23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,*
24 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."
25 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."
26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
27 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.
28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.
29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

What follows is an amazing statement that shows the Lord's real presence in communion. It is what I call "The Death Principle." Remember in the Old Testament when coming into the presence of God as an unprepared, unconsecrated, or unrepentant sinner meant death? Take a look at an example from Exodus 28. These are instructions for Aaron's priestly garments and his entry into the Holy Place of the tabernacle:

- 28:33 Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them.*
34 The gold bells and the pomegranates are to alternate around the hem of the robe.
35 Aaron must wear it when he ministers. The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the LORD and when he comes out, so that he will not die.

Notice that if Aaron comes into the presence of God unprepared, he will die! Now take a look at what happened to believers who received communion in an unrepentant and unprepared way:

11:29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

Falling asleep meant that people died! They did not come into the presence of a mere symbol in communion. Symbols do not cause death. Only the presence of God—HIS PRESENCE for THE PURPOSE OF SALVATION—could cause such results. These results happened in the lives of the believers in Corinth. They came into the presence of God in an unprepared and unrepentant way. The presence of the true and Holy Savior affected them negatively—sickness and death was happening!

The Bible's teaching is very clear. The death principle shows that Holy Communion is no symbol. It is the presence of Jesus Christ—just as He said!

How Communion Works

Okay, you now have the historical background about how God works. He is present for the purpose of salvation. You see that the power of an encounter with God is in communion. The question you may be asking is: How does communion work? How in the world can Jesus be present in the bread and wine?

Jesus doesn't disappoint on this one. You know something is important in the Bible if it is repeated over and over again. The Old Testament themes of repentance, remembering God's promises, God's steadfast love, the call of the church to be the light for the nations, the promised messiah, and more are repeated over and over again. In the New Testament, the Gospels converge at one point—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The reason? It is important—a central truth for your life.

Take a look at what happens with talk about communion in the Bible. In Matthew chapter 26 we read:

- 26 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."
27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.
28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.
29 I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."*

In Mark 14 you hear again:

- 22 While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."
23 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.
24 "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.
25 "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."*

In Luke 22 it happens again:

- 19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."
20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."*

Then in 1 Corinthians we hear the Apostle Paul teach new believers about one of the most important gifts Jesus gave:

- 23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,
24 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."
25 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."
26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

In the chapter before he lets his fellow believers know:

*16 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?*

The emphasis of the importance of communion is clear. Did you notice the content of that emphasis? Jesus' own words were quoted: *"This is my body...This is my blood."*

How does communion work? The simple answer is: Because Jesus said it does. It is part of the miraculous revelation of our Heavenly Father. It is part of the remarkable reach of God into our lives. It is God doing His faithful and saving work until we eat and drink this feast with Him in heaven.

Knowing Jesus means trusting the miraculous. Communion is another miracle of our Savior designed just for us.

Where, When, With Whom?

So, you're on vacation in scenic Idaho. It's Sunday so you hunt down the nearest little church. Inside you notice the quaint appointments, the rustic feel, the presence of God as vacationers lift up their voices in praise and thanksgiving to Jesus. You didn't notice the denomination of the church, but they're having communion that day. Should you participate?

Or, you are enjoying your friend's wedding service. The church is beautiful. The music is moving. The vows bring tears of joy to your eyes. Then comes communion. Everyone is invited forward. Should you participate?

Peer pressure might say "yes" to each situation. But does God offer any guidance?

Notice in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 Paul says to believers:

- 16 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?*
17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.
18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?
19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything?
20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons.
21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.
22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?
23 "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"--but not everything is constructive.
24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Later, Paul adds:

- 31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*
32 Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God--
33 even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

These verses address two issues. One is clearly about living a divided life—the participation in pagan acts along with Christian confession. That just can't happen. In Corinth it was causing other believers to stumble and weaken in their faith.

The other issue talks about the nature of communion. In addition to being a personal and restoring communion with the real presence of Jesus, it is also a communion with fellow believers. It is a living out of community—an expression of the oneness of faith. Communion is called "communion" because it has a corporate element. These days we want to individualize everything we do. We devalue community. The Bible makes it clear that participating in communion impacts the faith community. That's why Paul emphasizes seeking the good of others and trying not to cause anyone to stumble.

So, when you receive communion with others, you are also confessing a common faith.

That's where the issue gets tricky. Are you compromising the confession of a faith community if you commune with them but believe differently about the person of Christ, or the

truth of miracles, or the authority of the Bible, or the nature of Holy Communion? Should you commune with other denominations? Historically, the Lutheran Church has answered “no.” Is this to be snobbish? Not at all. It is simply to recognize that Holy Communion is a culminating point of oneness. “Altar fellowship” is the result of agreement in the confession of faith. One loaf happens when there is truly oneness.

Well then, what about those scenarios above? Here are two words of advice. First, remember to respect the confession of others. Participating in communion might disrupt the unity of another Christian denomination. Second, remember to respect others who may be weak in faith. Your participation in communion in another denomination’s church may cause confusion in the life of a fellow believer. We are called to love one another as fellow believers. We do not want to shun each other or be haughty. But we must remember that the distinctions we have do make us different. We must respect one another.

Are there exceptions to this principle? Of course. During World War Two, military chaplains communed all Christians who needed the strength of the sacrament. At Ground Zero, after the attacks on the World Trade Center, chaplains reached out to all people. These are exceptions, however. Holy Communion is a blessing, but it is a blessing that brings responsibility.

Reformed churches (non-denominational, Baptist, etc.) typically practice “Open Communion.” This means that all who believe in Jesus Christ are invited to commune. If I am worshipping in a reformed congregation, I pass on communion. I do not want to assume that I have a grasp on their teaching about the sacrament, and I do not want to presume that my participation won’t cause a believer to stumble. I still worship with joy and rejoice in our Savior, but I try to respect the oneness of that community of faith.

Roman Catholic churches practice (at least officially) “Closed Communion.” This means that only Roman Catholics should commune at Roman Catholic altars. The intent is not to be mean. It is simply to maintain the integrity of the confessing community.

Lutheran churches practice “Close Communion.” This means that individual preparation for communion takes place, and a common confession of faith is desired. The “Close” part means that believers who are prepared and who confess our common faith are welcome to participate. The journey of faith is recognized in this practice. “Close” Communion has a caring approach. It values the unity of the Body of Christ and it allows for new participants.

Holy Communion is a mystery of God that we carefully steward. It is also the blessing of God that the Holy Spirit opens to people and situations that we could not anticipate. Biblical principles and Spirit-led exceptions are recognized in the practice of “Close” Communion.

2, 4, 2

What is the bottom line about communion and the different denominational beliefs? The numbers above offer a simple summary.

The first number two in the title above can refer to the Roman Catholic teaching about communion. Two elements are present after the bread and wine are consecrated: the body and the blood of Jesus. The bread and wine have changed. That's why the bread and wine are locked up in the tabernacle after the mass is finished. That is also why the Roman Catholic church used to allow the lay people to have the bread only. If the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Jesus, it would not be good to spill or drop those elements! Communion in the Roman Catholic church, or the celebration of the "mass," is said to be an unbloody sacrifice for sin. Lutherans view communion as the presence of the risen Christ, imparting His blessings of life and salvation. The Lutheran Church has held onto what the Bible says in verses like these:

*Romans 6:10 The death [Jesus] died, he died to sin **once for all**; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*

Hebrews 7:23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;

24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

26 Such a high priest meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

*27 Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. **He sacrificed for their sins once for all** when he offered himself.*

*1 Peter 3:18 **For Christ died for sins once for all**, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*

The number four in the title above can refer to the Lutheran teaching about communion. When people receive the bread and wine, they receive four things: bread, wine, body and blood. The Bible makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 10:16:

16 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?

In a miraculous way, as Jesus said, we receive His body and blood. But as Martin Luther said, the body and blood of Christ are received "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. The real presence of Christ is in you as you eat and drink the bread and wine. It happens because Jesus said it would, promised it would!

The second number two in the title above can refer to the Reformed teaching about communion. Reformed churches teach that only two things are really present in communion: the bread and the wine. John Calvin, a creator of reformed doctrine, said, "For as the signs are present in this world and are perceived with the eyes and touched with the hands, so Christ, as man, is nowhere but in heaven and is to be sought in no other way than by the mind and the understanding of faith. For this reason it is perverse and impious superstition to enclose him

under the elements of this world.” (*Consensus Tigurinus, translated by Ian D. Bunting in The Journal of Presbyterian History, Volume 44, 1966, pp.44-61*)

Reformed theology states that “the finite is not capable of the infinite.” It is therefore impossible to believe that Christ is present in communion. This teaching is fairly new in the history of the church. One reason it was formed was in reaction to the perceived empty ritualism of the Roman Catholic church during the time of the Reformation. Martin Luther did not depart from the Catholic church enough, some claimed. So John Calvin, along with other reformers, took the emphasis in the church off of mystery and put it on cognitive understanding and confession of faith. Disillusioned by hypocrisy, Reformed theology oriented itself toward a rational and outwardly discernible faith. Some reformed churches went as far as burning church organs and artwork. The first commandment was divided into two parts. “You shall have no other gods” and “You shall not make any graven images” became commandments one and two. Commandments nine and ten were combined to form one statement on coveting. This was done to reinforce the aversion of reformers to statues of saints, paintings of Jesus, etc. Reformed theology claimed that these items gave the impression of an “easy,” ritual based, faith rather than a willing and active trust in Christ.

The Reformed leaders had good reason to react the way they did. Unfortunately, they went too far. Knowledge and rationalism pushed aside the mystery of God’s presence and the life-penetrating work of the Holy Spirit. In the section on baptism you will see the further implications of this movement that began in the 16th century.

How Do You Get Ready for Communion?

The first step is to note the Biblical mandate to confess your sins and to trust in Jesus as your Savior. This happens in two ways. First, in every communion worship service, we confess our sins as a congregation before we receive communion. The pastor then pronounces the absolution, or the forgiveness of sins, to the congregation. This is a Spirit-filled time of the worship service. Jesus promised that when we forgive the sins of those who repent, they are truly forgiven (John 20). Second, you are given the opportunity to prepare personally. You may pray silently as you confess your sins to Jesus, ask for forgiveness, tell Him of your trust in Him, thank Him for all He is doing in your life, and bring your cares and concerns to Him. Some churches have questions for communion preparation in the worship folder. These questions might lead you through confession of sin, affirmation of your faith in Jesus, and teaching about what communion is. Questions Martin Luther asked went like this:

“Do you believe that you are a sinner?

Yes, I believe it; I have failed God and others in my life. I am a sinner.

Are you sorry for your sins?

Yes, I am sorry that I have sinned.

Do you need God's help and forgiveness?

Yes, I need the gift of life He gives through Jesus Christ.

What has Christ done for you?

He died for me and shed His blood for me on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins.

Do you believe that in communion you receive the true body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine?

Yes, I believe it because of His Word and promise.”

After your preparation, you are invited to approach the altar in prayer. The time devoted to communion in church is ideal for prayer and praise. In your approach to receive communion, when you return to your seat, and when you wait for others to commune, you can talk with God and praise Him with singing.

The third step is to be ready to receive communion. Each church has its own method for communion. Typically, you will extend your open hand to receive the bread. You may eat it right away. You will then be able to receive either an individual cup of wine or the common cup. Some people value the symbolism of the common cup as it shows the oneness of God's people in communion. Others prefer an individual cup—primarily for purposes of health and hygiene. Both practices are God-pleasing and consistent with Christ's mandate in the Bible. Many churches also offer non-alcoholic wine for special need situations.

There are many different communion distribution methods. Some churches gather at the altar; some form a continuous line to receive the elements; some pass the elements from row to row. Each method accomplishes Christ's purpose of gathering the body of Christ together so that He can dwell in His people. Distribution methods vary based on a variety of church needs and traditions. Flexibility is important as the worshipper experiences the variety of distribution methods. It should always be remembered that communion is a time to rejoice as the body of Christ, and as a loved child of God in whom Jesus has chosen to dwell.

II. Baptism - The first "Infant" Baptism Documented in the Bible

It happened very quickly. As he traveled to Damascus, a Christ-hating man named Saul was knocked over by Jesus. Blinded, Saul was led to the city to await further instructions. Ananias, a believer in Damascus, was called upon by Jesus to do some special work for Saul. Even though Ananias was afraid, Jesus commanded him to heal Saul's blindness and to fill Saul with the Holy Spirit. This is how Acts nine completes the account:

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized...

Notice that both jobs were done. Ananias laid hands on Saul and scales fell from his eyes. Saul could see again. Then for job number two. Saul got up and was baptized. In other words, he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

True, Saul wasn't an infant. But the work being done in baptism was GOD'S work, not Saul's. Saul didn't even have any confirmation classes!

It is important to realize that the Lutheran Church does not hold "infant baptism" as a key point in its doctrine. It simply confesses belief in baptism, the baptism taught by the Bible. Whether it is infants or adults, the Bible teaches that baptism is an act of God, work of the Holy Spirit, a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3). The Bible shows over and over again that God is at work in baptism. Here is a sampling:

Acts 2:36-39

36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

38 Peter replied, "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."

39 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 22:12-16

12 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there."

13 He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him."

14 "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth."

15 You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard."

16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Romans 6:3-5

3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Colossians 2:9-12

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,

10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,

12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

1 Peter 3:18-22

18 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison

20 who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,

21 and this 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,

22 who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Note that, in each set of verses, baptism is never the confessing action of a human being; it is the Holy Spirit giving, life cleansing, sin forgiving, work of God. It is His divine action.

So, upon whom can God choose to work? To whom can God give new life? In whom can God choose to dwell with His Spirit? Does God have to wait for a person to have certain qualifications, a certain amount of intelligence, or a certain command of the language?

Or, can God choose to pour out His gifts as He pleases?

The radical difference between the Reformed and Lutheran teaching about baptism is exactly at this point. Reformed doctrine teaches that baptism is an act of public confession on the part of a person who has already accepted Christ. Baptism is a rite of public commitment and profession of faith. It is a symbol of the cleansing of the Holy Spirit that has already been accomplished through faith. The question to ask about all that is: does the Bible teach that?

Lutherans call a public profession of faith confirmation. But baptism is no symbolic demonstration of a believer. It is a means by which the Holy Spirit enters a life, hands filled with the merits of forgiveness that Jesus earned on the cross and through the grave. It is God's work.

Therefore, Lutherans baptize adults and babies. The gift of the Spirit is poured into the lives of all people.

What About Teaching? What About the Word?

The question that comes up is: Well, what about people who grow up and reject Jesus? Did the baptism not work? Centuries ago, church councils debated about the effectiveness of sacraments. If a person of ill repute gave communion, would the sacrament be invalid? Christians answered with a resounding no. God was working. We don't foul up His giving of gifts just because of a personality flaw. The same principle applies to baptism. If a person rejects Jesus, it doesn't mean that their baptism was ineffective. It means that they have decided to push the Holy Spirit away.

A related issue that surfaces is: What if a person totally ignores their life in Christ? Will they go to heaven just because they got a "free ticket" in baptism? This question points to a key reason why Reformed theologians got away from the practice of infant baptism during the reformation era. They were disillusioned by the abuses in the church, especially the belief that a person can go through motions in worship or in sacraments, get the benefit, but live any way they pleased (*ex opere operato*). People were making grace very cheap. Reformed theologians reacted to this by emphasizing the apprehension of Christ through reason and understanding.

The Bible addresses this fear as it teaches about Baptism and the will of God for our lives. When Jesus gave the Great Commission He told his followers how to make disciples: baptizing and teaching. After Paul was baptized, he went immediately into Arabia for three years to study and learn what God wanted to teach him. He was disciplined! Over and over again the Bible urges us to grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and to grow in lives that are conformed to His image. Baptism is not a "free ticket" to heaven in the sense that once you get that stamp of approval you can do anything you want and still hold on to your heaven guarantee. But it is a free ticket in the sense that the fullness of the God grace is poured into your life in Baptism. You have the certainty of the life and salvation that the Holy Spirit gives. The calling that remains is to live in your baptism—not apart from it.

Miscellaneous Questions

In any discussion about baptism, several questions come up. Let's go down the list and see where the Lord leads.

Do you need to use water? The word "baptize" means "to apply water." It was a term used with the washing of pots and pans, feet, sacred items, etc. The people knew about the importance of washing—for cleanliness and for setting apart something for God. If water wasn't used in a washing, it wouldn't be a washing. If paint were not used to paint a wall it wouldn't be painted. So also in baptism. If water isn't used it isn't a baptism.

Is Immersion necessary? The mandate for immersion baptism took hold during the time of the reformation when believers were rejecting the Roman Catholic practices. Reformed theologians who believed that baptism was only a symbol, started to demand that immersion was the only true baptism. Martin Luther even preferred that immersion take place because it showed the radical nature of God's forgiveness. The Reformed demand, however, was made because immersion was a clear and visible symbol of the drowning of sin and the coming forth of a new person. If baptism is only a symbol, immersion is treasured as a visible demonstration. If baptism is God's work, the method of applying water is not as essential.

What about the issue of repentance before baptism? Peter declared to the crowd in Acts 2:38, "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." Did this statement mean that a person must first be able to repent of their sins before they are baptized? This issue is called a "believer's baptism." The contention is that all baptisms in the Bible involved repentance first. The question we're dealing with is about the nature of repentance. Was Peter telling the crowds that baptism would be the outward demonstration of their repentant and believing hearts? 2 Timothy 2:24-25 says:

24 And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

25 Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,

Note that God is the one who grants repentance. Repentance, or returning to God, is an act of His Spirit on the hearts of His people. Martin Luther said in his explanation to the third article of the Apostle's Creed, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ may Lord or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith." Repentance, Baptism, faith, all of it is God's work of grace. These works of God return us to Him.

Is baptism necessary for salvation? Yes and no. God doesn't need baptism to save people. The classic example is the thief on the cross. Jesus didn't say, "Let's climb down and get you baptized because the Father won't let you in without it." No. He said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." On the other hand, Jesus did command baptism. He made it an essential tool of His grace in the lives of His people. He knows that we need His tangible, saving work. God doesn't give us just a concept, or idea, of being saved. He gives a concrete, demonstrable action of filling His people with the Holy Spirit and washing their sins away. Baptism gives us the certainty of God's saving action in our lives. The world and our sinful flesh fill us with nagging doubts about God's presence and salvation. Baptism is a tangible point of confidence. Martin Luther said that in the midst of doubts about God's grace in our lives we can

proclaim, "But I've been baptized!" So, the disciples actively proclaimed baptism. In Acts chapter eight Philip proclaimed the Gospel to the Ethiopian. There is no question that the complete message included baptism. Read what happened:

35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

Baptism is a critical means of grace. God calls us to embrace this gift, to use it, to hold it precious, and to rejoice in the new life it brings.

Should I get baptized more than once? When baptism is considered a symbolic profession of faith, some church bodies encourage a second, third, or more baptism. Reformed church bodies teach that a baptism as an infant wasn't really a confession of faith in Jesus (they are right). In order to make that public confession, they encourage a public (usually immersion) baptism. The Bible teaches that baptism, as God's work is effective. If a person has been baptized, and is certain of it, he or she can take comfort in that Christian Baptism. If a person is not certain that they were baptized, however, baptism should take place—even if it ends up being the second time. God wants us to rejoice in the certainty of the new birth He gives in baptism. No doubts are desired!

Can you baptize? Yes. Typically the church designates pastors to baptize so that things are done "in a fitting and orderly way"(1 Cor.14:40). But each Christian can follow the Lord's bidding to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The 1941 Lutheran Hymnal has "A Short Form for Holy Baptism in Cases of Necessity" on one of the back pages. It says:

In urgent cases, in the absence of the Pastor, any Christian may administer Holy Baptism. Take water, call the child by name, pour or sprinkle the water on the head of the child, saying: "I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." If there is time, the baptism may be preceded by the following prayer and the Lord's Prayer.

The hymnal then has a prayer that asks God's promised blessings of forgiveness and eternal life would be poured into the life of the person involved.

It is highly desirable to have a baptism take place in the community of believers. Each believer can remind a baptized person that the Holy Spirit is in them and that Jesus washed their sins away. There is no doubt. If a private emergency baptism takes place, a public affirmation of that baptism is fitting.

Conclusion

Both baptism and communion are really very simple things. They use the most common elements in the world. They are uncomplicated actions that bring miraculous benefits and blessings.

You may wonder why God gave these sacraments to us. Why did He give us these means of grace that cause questions and confusion? Do we really need Baptism and Communion? Well, they are gifts. Do you remember opening your Christmas presents when you were a child? We opened ours on Christmas Day. My brother and I shared a room. We couldn't sleep a wink all night as we anticipated what we might discover under the tree. Time would pass slowly. We would lay in our beds with eyes wide open in the darkness. Sometimes we ventured into the living room trying to get a glimpse of the packages under the tree. Finally, when mom and dad said we could get up, we raced into the living room, turned on the lights and stood there in amazement. There were wrapped presents of all shapes and sizes. They seemed to fill the room. Do you think we thought at that moment, "Hey, mom and dad went overboard in this whole gift-giving thing. I wish they wouldn't complicate life so much. One present would be plenty."? Is that what we were thinking? No! My two brothers and I dove into the package pile with delight! We tore open the packages and feasted our eyes on what new toys and surprises we were given. These were gifts! They were there because of love. We oohed. We aaahed. And we said, "Thank you."

God's Word, Baptism, and Communion are gifts! They bring us His grace in unique and wonderful ways. Should we question His rationale in being so generous? Should we scold God for making life too complicated? Should we play one gift off against the other and tell Him what we don't appreciate about some? No! God wants us to rejoice in these gifts of His. He wants us to use them for their full benefit. True, the miraculous nature of these gifts can become a stumbling block. True, we may try to overspiritualize them or rationalize them or complicate them. But God's real desire is that we ooh, we aaah, and we say, "Thank you." God just wants us to give thanks for them and live with their benefits. He wants us to receive the gifts and realize that they work so well because He said so.

So, where should you go from here? Having read the words of this booklet, it's time to dig into the Bible. Read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Note the importance of baptism and communion. Read Acts. See how baptism and communion were used in the early church. Pay close attention to who is working in these gifts. Read Paul's letters (starting with the book of Romans and continuing through the book of Philemon). Study his references to these sacraments. See how these gifts of God are truly His actions to bring His grace and strength to His beloved people.

Then, keep talking, learning, and growing as you let the Spirit lead you to a better understanding of baptism and communion—and definitely a hearty THANK YOU! After all, for your life, through these amazing means of grace, your Father in heaven stays in the dance with you.