Luther, Liturgy, Identities: A confessing tradition

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Abstract: This paper explores the transformative potential of Lutheran liturgy through an in-depth examination of the theological and practical dimensions of the sacrament of the altar. Focusing on the concept of real presence, the author argues that while the doctrine may be divisive, its lived experience in liturgy can be reconciling. By emphasizing the communal and incarnational aspects of the sacrament, the article contends that Lutheran liturgy, rooted in the juxtaposition of Word and sacrament, challenges believers to engage in a continual journey of transformation and communion with the absent, suffering bodies in the world. The dynamic of real presence, as encountered in the sacrament, serves as a profound source of identity redefinition, urging faith communities to reconsider their ritualized practices and embrace a more inclusive, transformative celebration.

Keywords: Luther; Liturgy; Sacrament of the Altar; Identities; Transformation

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most defining markers of "Lutheran" identity in the early reformation period (even if the expression is anachronistic) is the debate of real presence in the sacrament of the altar. Luther himself clearly defined, drawing a circle on the table in Marburg, "this is my body." To confess, for Luther, was to uphold this simple biblical statement against all forms of two extremes, both rationalization and magic. The circle on the table clearly defined a "Lutheran" position, one which was also developed in the Small and Large Catechisms of the same year, and then, in the following year, 1530, in the Augsburg Confession.

Some of course may say that the debate concerning real presence is a strictly theological question, not relating directly to Lutheran worship or as I would prefer to say Lutheran liturgy. My

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response is always the same: the liturgy is inherently theological. The renewal of liturgy – and Luther's reform of practice – is an inherently theological task.

"Our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body"

The Words of Institution (Verba) – "Took bread, gave thanks, broke it… this is my body" – is enacted or literally embodied theology. We know of course that in subsequent generations this theological debate was also fought out in ritual practice (see for example the contentious debate about the fraction of bread in Brandenburg[2]).

The Lutheran Confessional writings (whether the corpus is narrowly defined as containing only the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism or whether more broadly defined as the entire *Book of Concord*) are a testimony to this unique, identifying characteristic of the Lutheran communion: the juxtaposition of Word and sacrament, the interplay, the intimate connection between theology and body.

Since the Marburg Colloquy, a division ensued within the growing reform movement. Luther's position at Marburg, on Melanchthon's insistence, was perhaps more strident than Luther wanted (Bainton 1949, 397) because Melanchthon was more concerned about agreement with the Catholic Church, which he was about to present in just over 7 months at Augsburg. In the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon (with Luther's blessing of course) argues for real presence in the sacrament, though not according to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. In fact, Article X of the AC received approval from the Catholic side in the Confutation.[3]

The question of Christ's real presence in the sacrament led, as noted, to centuries long division with the Reformed branch of the Reformation, a division that was only overcome with the Leuenberg Agreement in 1973. Unfortunately, on the other side, the desired reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church, the possibility of convening a Council in the 1530s, never materialized though in 1999, with the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, a differentiating consensus was reached on one of the divisive theological disputes of the 16th century. Curiously,

2 Bodo Nischan, "The 'Fractio Panis:' A Reformed Communion Practice in Late Reformation Germany in *Church History*, Vol 53, No 1 (March 1984), 17-29.

3 Roman Confutation, Pt I, Art. X.

remaining differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics concerning the sacraments do not pertain to the real presence but to ministerial authority and ecclesiology.

Among churches of the Reformation, the question of real presence became a confessional position and was a distinguishing mark that defined an identity over and against another approach. Real presence became an identity-marker, a closed circle, a separation, a dividing line within the reformation movement.

And yet, it is precisely this question of real presence that I believe needs further study in order to reveal what I believe to be its potential to be transformational and reconciling. Real presence as doctrine can be dividing. Real presence encountered liturgically, as living practice, can be reconciling. For identity in its most articulated form can only be identifying in reference to another, that is, it cannot sustain a closed system or circle. The act of confessing itself – also an intrinsic identity marker – is not inherently church dividing but rather, as the Augsburg Confession demonstrates, deeply ecumenical. Confessing generously is to open a way for transformation and reconciliation.

In this lecture, I will consider real presence through embodied practice, notably Lutheran sacramental practice. First, the sacrament as the locus or epitome of real presence and the crucial role of the body is considered followed by a reflection on how the sacrament shapes a faith community. The communal experience constitutes one of the foremost characteristics of the sacrament, always pushing the individual believer beyond the private to an encounter with the neighbor. The final section will consider the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion as the locus of real presence, asking: in what ways is the sacrament continually disruptive of our communities and therefore transformative? Martin Luther's sacramental theology and the Lutheran confessional writings will be a guide in this exploration.

This reflection on real presence hopes to demonstrate that, in a changing world, and with the changing face of Lutheran worship occasioned by many factors, least not COVID-19, there is a certain dynamic in Lutheran liturgy that requires attention, that has the potential to transform community in gospel-like ways. Real presence does not need to be a divisive identity marker, real presence, as experienced in the liturgy, opens up a way of generously confessing and transformation.

The Body and presence

Sacrament is an odd word to the contemporary ear. For church goers, it is both known and unknown. Some might call it a "churchy" word, certainly not used in daily life (and sometimes not even a lot at church). Participants in worship on a Sunday morning may ask something about the sermon or comment on it, but very few ask each other: how was the sacrament today? A pastor may hear many thanks for a good sermon at the end of worship, but very few have heard 'that was a good sacrament, Pastor'!

And yet, sacraments point to a particular dynamic in both worship and faith. The argument could be made that when Luther sought to reform the church, he began with reforming liturgical and sacramental practices. The Reformation is, perhaps first and foremost, a reform of practice – penance, confession, the sacraments, and prayer. In the ensuing reforms, one characteristic of the liturgy that Luther maintained and strengthened was the relationship between Word and sacrament. The "and" is critical; there is not one without the other. The celebration of the "mass" was not to be solely focused on the celebration of the sacrament with people only watching, nor was it to be the opposite extreme, which started emerging with the Reformation, that is, worship centered around preaching where the sacrament was subsumed to the sermon, if not eliminated.

To underscore the centrality of both Word and sacrament, Luther and the early reformers defined the church as a gathering or assembly of people where the Word 'and' sacrament are rightly celebrated; that is, where they communicate the gospel, proclaim and distribute the gospel. Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession* notes that "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel".[4]

But how is sacrament to be understood? The word "sacrament" itself and its history in translation is extraordinarily complex.[5] It is employed with a variety of meanings. In North Africa, Tertullian used *sacramentum* to translate the Greek word *musterion*. One particular instance is found in Mark 4:11. In that passage, Jesus tells his disciples that "to you has been given the *musterion* of the kingdom of God."

4 Kolb and Wengert, Book of Concord 2000, 42. Hereinafter cited as BC.

5 Mohrmann, Christine. 1954. "Sacramentum dans les plus anciens textes chrétiens" in *Harvard Theological Review* 47 (3): 141–152.

Given the variety of meanings, what is the word "sacrament" indicating in this particular passage? Over the past few decades, there has been renewed debate among biblical scholars concerning the referent for *musterion*. A shift has expanded the possible interpretations beyond the all-encompassing Markan "Messianic Secret" motif. Long before the establishment of the motif in 20th-century exegesis, the choice of the word *sacramentum*, knowingly or unknowingly, proposed a unique approach. The mystery or secret of the Kingdom is revealed in Jesus as the one living or practicing the Kingdom here and now. *Sacramentum* or *musterion* refers then not to something that can be understood as such (secret teaching) but to the recognition of God's way in the world (Haacker 1972), God's often hidden way, reclaiming the world to God's self. *Sacramentum* translates a trace of God's way, a way which is incarnational.

The mystery or secret to which Jesus refers in Mark 4:11 is his *praxis*, that is, his embodied presence, his own corporal presence acting in the world. The body, the human body of Jesus, reveals the presence of God. In Jesus, this presence or way has been given to the disciples and invites them into that sacramentum, into that mystery, into discipleship. The body of Jesus is the *musterion*. In other words, God has disclosed God's self. God practices God through "means" of the created order.

As a liturgical act, the sacraments are therefore deeply incarnational. God comes to human beings in what can be seen, touched, heard, tasted, and sensed. God reveals Godself through the body, through a praxis, in-the-flesh (incarnation). The sacraments bear witness to the incarnation. They proclaim without words but in practice that God has come down to earth. God has come in Jesus, in human form, bodily form, earthy form, lived and suffered with us. Ate and wept with us. Washed and taught with us. The liturgy embodies this witness when it understands "God" as present in the washing at the font, in the reading and preaching, healing, praying, and the meal-sharing.

Holding Word and sacrament together underlines the created reality. Human beings are not simply minds or cognitive entities. They know, think, imagine, decide, judge using their five senses. Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession builds on this fact. "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacrament as through instruments [means] the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God" (BC, 2000, 41). The Holy Spirit is given through words and body.

Proclamation is not only aural – it is not just about hearing the Word – but it also receives the Word in the body.

Proclamation of the Gospel (justification/liberation) is defined as both the gospel preached (spoken and heard) and the gospel distributed (sacraments). Here is one of the major premises of the Reformation and one to which Luther constantly refers. Gospel is not only the Word spoken, but it is also the Word distributed – touched, tasted, seen, etc. It is perhaps most succinctly defined in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article 13:

> God moves our hearts through the word and the rite at the same time so that they believe and receive faith just as Paul says [Rom. 10:17], "So faith comes from what is heard." For just as the Word enters through the ear in order to strike the heart, so also the rite enters through the eye in order to move the heart. The word and the rite have the same effect (BC, 2000, 219).

As word and rite, as a full enactment in the midst of a collective body, the liturgy points to this *musterion* – the one person of Christ, human and divine. In the bread and wine and promise, the community encounters not the historical Jesus nor an imaginary Christ but God who calls a community into an exchange. This dynamic of the sacrament is perhaps most vividly portrayed in the Gospel of Luke and the Resurrection story of the Emmaus disciples.

The disciples were walking along the road, discouraged, dismayed, hopeless. The one whom they had hoped would redeem Israel was crucified. He was taken away and destroyed. Suddenly, there is another one walking with them and explaining the Scripture to them. They did not recognize Jesus. Their eyes were closed perhaps by their imagination, by what they thought had happened or whom they had hoped Jesus to be. Their eyes were closed by their own expectations. However, as Jesus walked and explained, preached, and prayed with them, their hearts were burning inside of them. "Where two or three are gathered…" Jesus is present. Nevertheless, even his presence is transitory. As the story unfolds, Jesus prepares to walk on his way. The Emmaus disciples stop and beg him to stay.

Inside their dwelling, they share a meal. Jesus, as a guest, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, but then he vanished. Just as he tells Mary Magdalene: 'do not hold on to me'. Jesus moves on. The disciples cannot hold on to him. They cannot enshrine him. As Michel de Certeau writes: "Jesus passes over them and thereby invites them into a continual

exodus" (Certeau 1957). The sacrament – Christ's presence – is a dynamic inviting us into a continual journey on God's way.

Jesus' presence is known not as a body on a cross but as a body given, poured out in praxis, with others, in a communal action that always points beyond itself. His presence is known in the act of sharing a meal, bread, and wine. The notion of real presence – that communion which constitutes Christ's own being, human and divine – is not an object to be adored or contained (whether in a tabernacle or in a small group of friends) but a praxis that is called to seek always new beginnings, new possibilities.

Sacramental approaches

Real presence pulls the believer ever deeper into God's way, into the praxis of new beginnings. However, the Christian community too often prefers to protect itself from the risks of such a practice. The growing reform movement in the 1520s thrust Martin Luther into the debates of real presence and sacramental theology and practice.

Luther was confronted with two extreme approaches to sacramental practice. On the one hand, a mystical approach envelops the sacrament, communicating grace by the mere (and correct priestly) performance of the rite (*ex opera operato*); on the other, the sacrament becomes merely a sign, a memorial, recalling a moment in history, nothing more. The vestiges of the former continue to exist in children's games: hocus pocus – *Hoc est corpus meum* – so deep was the popular perception of the "magical" moment in people's minds. The latter example turns into a play, a piece of theatre or film, reenacting an event. Both extremes ignore the body, the created or earthly element in the sacrament. The "bread" becomes a little white wafer (that resembles neither bread nor Jesus' body) and is either adored or, very rationally, just stored away for next time or even thrown out.

Today, Christian communities encounter a similar situation. In the case of many Protestant communities, the sacraments are side-lined; they are not celebrated regularly or fully. In some cases, as with the baptismal font, it is stored in a closet until there is a baptism. The primary sacrament is hidden away. The connection between the sacraments and daily life, between meal-sharing and feeding the neighbor, is lost. In the other case, the sacrament is adored, reserved but the reality of Jesus' body – the suffering one crying in the street – is often not heard.

Today, a third extreme manifests itself. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in many Protestant churches, the sacrament is celebrated online, sometimes under the rationale of renewing the "house church" concept. Once again, the sacrament is brought under the restrictions of a community (family or a group of friends). Perhaps, the sacrament is not locked up and reserved in a tabernacle. Nonetheless, it is meant to serve the "needs" of a particular group of people gathered around bread and wine. It is even, in some cases, claimed as a right or privilege of every believer to celebrate it and thereby "own" it. It is locked up in the tabernacle of the community.

These various and sometimes contradictory practices of the sacrament are not surprising. The reasons are simple. For most people, the sacraments are obtuse. Real presence – and its implications – is difficult to grasp. Many churchgoers engage the ritual action but remain confused about the sacramental meaning. When something is not easily understood, typical reactions are to either invent a rational and straightforward meaning, dismiss outright that which is not understood (in this case, the sacrament), or construct a self-serving misrepresentation.

Yet, the sacraments, in a Lutheran approach, are meant to resist all such reactions. The sacraments are never something that the believer possesses. They stand as a sign of human vulnerability, of human need. In fact, they witness to the inability of human beings to hold them. The sacraments cannot be understood or rationalized. They are meant to oppose our reason.

In the preface to the Small Catechism, Luther admonishes pastors to preach in such a way that people come demanding the sacrament (BC, 2000, 350). What does he mean? Luther understands the sacrament not as an empty memorial or as a quasi-magical ritual. The sacrament is not something that the believer or the community watches or only half-heartedly engages. Rather, the sacrament is a place of encounter where a community recognizes its deep inability and its deep need but also a place where the community knows certainly that God continually returns and calls. The sacraments invite conversion and active participation. They invite kenosis and transformation. They practice or exercise the incarnation.

The sacraments break open the faith community. They broaden and re-orient it. They confront and disrupt the community, continually pointing to another, to someone, not present. As a dynamic, real presence continually points to an absence, the absence within each person to hold on to God, the absence within each community, and the absence of the other, the neighbor, without whom the community is never complete.

Community and presence

The focus up to this point has been on the necessary "sign", that is, the body as part of the sacrament. Whether it is full immersion or a full meal with bread and wine, the sacrament is constituted of and engages the body. The historic extremes tended to ignore the body, either relegating the rite to the word or the word to the rite. The third approach, which has arisen today in response to COVID-19, also risks dismissing the body as a communal body. It risks dismissing "Christ existing as community" (Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, 1930/2009).

In 1520, Martin Luther added an addendum to his treatise, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ* (LW 35), entitled "The Brotherhoods". This addendum perhaps comes as no surprise considering Luther's multifaceted struggle against what he understood to be the captivity of the sacraments and, in particular, the sacrament of the altar. The "brotherhoods" exemplify a form of captivity: they required a certain number of prayers and masses said at appointed times, but their devotion only served themselves. Such brotherhoods benefit only their members. In these brotherhoods (or fraternities), people "learn to seek their own good, to love themselves, to be faithful only to one another, to despise others, to think themselves better than others, and to presume to stand higher before God than others. And so perishes the communion of saints, Christian love, and the true [fellowship] which is established in the holy sacrament, while selfish love grows in them" (LW 35:69).

In the main body of this treatise, Luther explains the "true significance" of the sacrament not as the "forgiveness of sins" but as a true fellowship flowing from the forgiveness of sins. Luther places emphasis on communion. Forgiveness is broadened beyond the individual experience and reality, beyond the personal relationship with God (though never denying that relationship) to the communal. At the table, believers are drawn into God's reconciling activity.

Luther writes, "The significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints. This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again, all sufferings and sins also become common property and this love engenders love in return and [love] unites" (LW 35:50-51).

In the sacrament, something happens. Christ comes with the whole company of believers. The community participates in the "happy exchange": all spiritual possessions of Christ – God's immeasurable goodness – is shared with all, and in exchange, Christ and the community take up all sufferings and sins. Misery and tribulations are laid upon Christ and upon the community of saints (LW 35:54). A praxis of burden-bearing is established.

It is clear that the holy sacrament is nothing else than a divine sign, in which are pledged, granted, and imparted Christ and all saints together with all their works, sufferings, merits, mercies, and possessions, for the comfort and strengthening of all who are in anxiety and sorrow, persecuted by the devil, sins, the world, the flesh, and every evil. And to receive the sacrament is nothing else than to desire all this and firmly to believe that it is done (LW 35:60).

The sacrament of the eucharist imparts Christ and all saints together. In his sacramental treatises, Luther will almost never mention "Christ" without adding "and all the saints." Christ becomes Christ in the saints and the believer (and faith community) is once again directed to that other mode of existence, that dissemination of Christ, the dissemination of Christ's presence in the other. Incarnation and community are inseparable. The neighbor and the believer are both caught up in the gift of God's continual dissemination through liturgical repetition, through the celebration of Word and sacraments. Through the participation in the eucharist, believers are made one with Christ and all the saints in their works, sufferings and merit (LW 35:60).

Union with Christ is not the inception of individualistic piety (Jesus and me) or a new spirituality. When believers are "conformed" to this disseminated Christ, they are conformed to the neighbor in suffering and need. "Again, through the same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity" (LW 35:58).

The keyword here is not "take upon ourselves" but "through the same love." This love first took upon itself all need; this love revealed itself through death; through dissemination, this love draws the faithful to take upon themselves the sufferings of others. What the believer receives in the celebration of the eucharist is Christ with all his saints, that is, what continually returns in the

movement of the liturgy, is Christ, human and divine, Christ and community, Christ and neighbor in need and in blessing.[6]

Christ's presence – real presence – in the sacrament confronts and disrupts the ideas believers may make of God. When the bread and the cup are shared, in that quiet, cozy moment of reception, the individual may imagine a special communion with Jesus, but the real presence disrupts that imagination. Not a white sparkling Jesus returns to commune, not a Jesus of our own invention, but the neighbor greets us in all shapes, sizes, and conditions. The real body of Christ draws us into a unique communion.

Real Presence, Liturgy, Identity

At the heart of a confessional understanding of the liturgy is both this communion and confrontation. In the sacrament, the community encounters the presence of Christ's body on earth, that is, it encounters (or is confronted by) Christ's unique, real presence in the body of the community and the neighbor.

Luther sometimes described the neighbor, the one outside the faith community, as the "beggar." Today, the neighbor is known in many ways, people known and unknown, persons from a minority group, marginalized and excluded groups, and still as beggars and homeless persons. The sacrament of Holy Communion will always direct the community gathered to those who are not present. The sacrament as the bearer of the real presence of Christ will challenge our understanding of community; it will disrupt and transform liturgies and gatherings as Jesus steps into a community's midst as a beggar. Yes, the beggar for Luther is also God. God will always stand outside closed and privileged circles and knock at the door (LW 22:519-520).

The sacrament is not celebrated to sustain an inner circle rejoicing in good and holy feelings of togetherness, nor is it celebrated so that people can simply fulfill a spiritual longing, as if the sacrament were something like a commodity. The sacrament of the altar invites into a radical community with its center continually opened up toward the neighbor who is not present. Real presence disrupts the community. As Luther already argued in the 1520s, the significance of the

6 Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), chapter 6.

sacrament can quickly be diminished if not lost if it becomes the privilege or even "right" of a small group that identifies "real presence" with its community or its own form of worship.

The dynamic of real presence – turning us towards absent bodies – is a profound source of transformation within Lutheran sacramental practice. "The body is the locus: how we treat needy bodies gives the clue to how a society is organized" (McFague 2001, 174). The needy body is everybody. The faith community, with its careful and deeply respectful attention to the body (and especially the body of the most vulnerable), can help society re-envision its relationship to the body. In terms of the sacrament of Holy Communion, a fully participatory meal is important. Real bread and wine and people eating and drinking *together*, with enough food for everyone, with enough food to feed all peoples. A community is formed around this proclamation of God's immeasurable goodness, and this formation, even within a small faith community, can in turn shape society.

The sacrament is a radical witness to the presence of Christ's body, to Christ's real presence, in the midst of a faith community. The body – the material elements – with the Word added to them, with the promise added to them, pushes the believer and the faith community out of a comfortable and self-focused spirituality. The sacraments practice disruption upon the community, exercising it in the work of the Holy Spirit, engaging it in transformation, in a praxis of transformation that is deeply embedded in God's act of reclaiming, reconciling the world to God's self. In this perspective, Lutheran liturgy, and the Lutheran insistence on "this is my body" is deeply ecumenical for the body is the world.

"For in [Christ], the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him…" (Colossians 2:9 NRSV). Christ's real presence is the fullness of deity dwelling bodily, given to the community in the sacrament. God and human in a unique communion that opens up towards a fullness, towards a unique communion that is deeper than any community, where all are so "united that a closer relationship cannot be conceived" (LW 35:70).

From a Lutheran perspective, the challenge or the call of the sacrament is not to be diminished, serving only individual or communal spiritual needs; nor is the radical nature of the entire ritual/liturgical action by the entire assembled community to be diluted by new forms of celebrations, without asking if these forms, these changing faces of worship, continue to translate the Gospel. Present, at the heart of this communion, is the one Christ, not a Christ of glory but Christ distributed in the meal, Christ disseminated in the world, Christ who is one with the suffering

ones in the world. Real presence, Christ's presence, is continually directing the community to both God and to absent, suffering bodies, to bodies on crosses.

To consider liturgy and identity is to consider not a set of practices or a particular way of doing things. Liturgy and the Lutheran witness – and therefore faith communities – have suffered already too much from the imposition of certain ethnic interpretations of the liturgy stemming from the northern hemisphere as if there were "one proper way" to celebrate (defined by northern Europe or North America). To consider liturgy and identity is to consider a presence, Christ's presence, at the heart of all our words and rituals.

In this changing time, in this time of what some have called "long COVID", in the midst of a slowly emerging and unfamiliar landscape, with new and different parameters for gathering in worship, perhaps we now have an opportunity to reconsider how faith communities have ritualized if not domesticated the sacrament. A reconsideration of real presence has this transformational potential: it continually invites faith communities to reimagine sacramental celebrations that would open up towards the neighbor, finding new ways to include all those not currently at the table. Identity itself is redefined as a path, as walking together, on a journey ever deeper into communion.

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