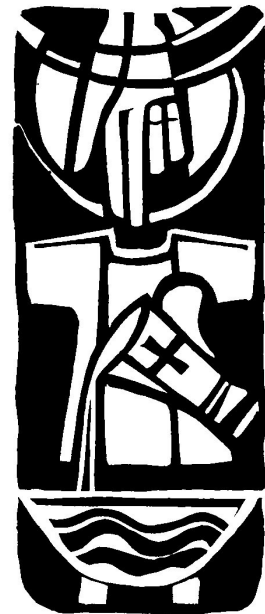


Cleansed

and

Fed



The
Sacramental Life

The Sixty-First Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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By Pastor Jon F. Zabell

God Has Poured His Love upon Us

1. *Baptism saves.*
2. *Baptism sanctifies.*
3. *Baptism deserves our careful attention.*

God Feeds Us Jesus

1. *Holy Communion is a mystery beyond comprehension.*
2. *Holy Communion is a gift beyond compare.*
3. *Holy Communion deserves our careful attention.*

The Sacraments Promote Good Theology

1. *The Sacraments celebrate God's mysteries.*
2. *The Sacraments preach gospel certainty.*
3. *The Sacraments inform what we do in worship.*

Abbreviations

LW = Luther's Works

SC = Small Catechism

LC = Large Catechism

AC = Augsburg Confession

Ap = Apology

SA = Smalcald Articles

FC SD = Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration

Congregations are like people. Each one has a personality. Some seem to be busy all the time; others just plod along. Some seem happy and confident despite abundant problems; others seem heartbroken and discouraged despite abundant blessings. From time to time, we all need a good pep talk. If my congregation suffers from low self-esteem, then maybe it's time to get busy and start new programs of ministry. If we're sailing along, then it might be time to get more members involved. Every congregation can benefit from this kind of common sense thinking and hard work, and a good pep talk works like a strong cup of coffee. It gets everyone moving.

Just as long as none of it draws our attention away from what we always desperately need. The Church is the bride of Christ. Our relationship with him depends upon his daily expressions of love and forgiveness, the forgiveness he won for us by his death and resurrection. We need more than a cup of coffee to get us moving. We need him.

In other words, we need the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. We know that. Our church body is magnificently blessed to know what a treasure his Means of Grace are. We are not ashamed of the Gospel. Every member is baptized. Communion has a regular place on our church calendars. The phrase "Word and Sacraments" regularly rolls off our tongues.

Still, what rolls so easily off our tongues might not always be so readily playing in our hearts and lives. Even though each of us is covered daily in the offensive stench of our sin, weak with hunger for the love and forgiveness only our Savior can give, we still kid ourselves into thinking all we need is a cup of coffee. We don't go running to the Lord's Table; we shuffle our feet. We don't dive into the waters of our baptism; we dip our toes to test the water.

The people of the WELS, our pastors, teachers, and synod leaders, and the presenter standing before you today regularly need encouragements toward sacramental living, not because we are teaching God's Word incorrectly, but because we are by nature always getting it wrong in our hearts and lives.

Herein lies one of the wonders of God's profound grace. He uses the very doctrine we forsake in our hearts and lives to bring our hearts and lives back in line with his doctrine. He uses the very Word and Sacraments we by nature despise to bring us back to a godly appreciation and godly use of his Word and Sacraments.

So let's dive in!

God Has Poured His Love upon Us

1. Baptism saves.

In Old Testament times, baptisms were purely symbolic. God used certain kinds of baptisms, ritual washings, to teach his people that the only way to get close to him is with *clean hands and a pure heart* (Exodus 30:17-21; Psalm 24:3-4). God was showing people pictures of forgiveness and saying, "Let this remind you of the Savior you need. He's coming to wash away your sins!"

When Jesus arrived, the time for Old Testament symbolism came to an end. Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples a new kind of baptism. He established a connection between baptism and the saving name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he told his disciples to use this ritual as a means for making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul calls Baptism "a washing with water through the word" (Ephesians 5:26). Jesus wants us to use this word from God

(God's name) together with the water as a means or vehicle for him to deliver to us the blessings and the power of his saving love.¹

New Testament Baptism is no mere symbol or picture. In his first letter, Peter says, "Baptism now saves you" (3:21). In his letter to Titus, Paul calls Baptism a "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (3:5). "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by men, but by God himself" (LC IV, 10).² As the water of Holy Baptism touches your skin, God washes you, heart and soul.

Baptism saves because of Jesus.

Baptism saves because Baptism connects you to the Savior. At the cross, Jesus paid the price for the sins of the whole world. At your baptism God poured that forgiveness on you. There is an unbreakable connection between your baptism and the death of Jesus. Paul says, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3). In a manner of speaking, the water of Baptism is "colored with Christ's blood."³

Baptism also connects you to the resurrection of Jesus. Peter says, "Baptism saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). Paul says that in Baptism you have been "raised with him" (Colossians 2:12). Baptism is powered by the death and resurrection of Jesus and it connects you to him.

We receive Baptism's benefits through faith.

Some might think that the application of water and the speaking of God's Word are like a magical incantation. They treat Baptism superstitiously, as though God were casting a saving spell upon us. But God doesn't speak his words into thin air. He speaks to our hearts. Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16, emphasis added).

God doesn't ask us to come up with this faith on our own. We couldn't do it, even if we tried (Ephesians 2:1). Faith is "not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). In Baptism, God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38b). The Holy Spirit puts God's saving name on us, and gives us faith in that name. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).⁴

Forgiveness

One key blessing of Baptism is divine forgiveness (Acts 2:38a). We tend to think of our sin as though it were a small thing, an occasional problem in our lives. We tend to define our sin according to how badly it hurts someone else. Since most of us do our best not to hurt people, we tend to think that our sin is only a minor flaw. If this is how we think of sin, then Baptism will never matter much to us.

¹ In Luther's Small Catechism he says, "For without God's Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit" (IV).

² Since God is the one doing all the work, the person who performs a baptism is merely a steward of God's gift. So also the one who is baptized simply receives what God gives "That baptism is a gift of God, not a work of ours, we confess most incisively in our practice of infant baptism. We baptize infants because they too need the Savior. We baptize infants because Jesus invited them to come to him. We baptize infants because Jesus said that these "tiny ones" believe in him." Theodore Hartwig, "Sacramental Piety in Lutheran Worship: Benchmarks of Lutheran Theology." (*WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts*, 1996), 8.

³ Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper (1610)*, (Malone, Texas: Repristination Press, 2000), 82.

⁴ See Appendix A for more about Baptism and faith.

God's Word reveals the ugly truth about your sin and mine. All humankind is born in sin (Psalm 51:5). This sin is the absence of even the tiniest bit of goodness (Romans 7:18, Ephesians 2:1). We have no ability to change our sinful condition (Romans 7:21). Our sinful condition comes with a death sentence (Romans 6:23; Romans 5:12). Sin's punishment, death, is not only a physical, earthly punishment, but also a spiritual, eternal one (Revelation 20:14-15). Our sinful condition leads to sinful actions, which also condemn us (Matthew 15:19).

In Baptism God washes all of this sin away (Acts 22:16). This doesn't mean that a baptized person no longer sins (1 John 1:8). It means that God doesn't condemn us for our sins (Romans 8:1). For Jesus' sake, he forgives the sin you were born with, the sins you've committed, and the sins you will commit. No sin is left untouched by the forgiveness God gives us in Baptism.

"Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him" (Psalm 32:2).

A baptized believer is a New Testament Noah.

Where would you be without this forgiveness from God? When God sent a flood to destroy nearly every living thing in the world, Noah witnessed firsthand just how serious our holy God is about sin (Genesis 7:21). But God had not given up on his plan to send a Savior. By rescuing faithful Noah, God was preserving his promise in this world. From Noah's perspective, the destroying water of the "sin-flood" was also a water of rescue that lifted him and his family above the death and destruction of sin.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Peter says, "In [Noah's ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also" (1 Peter 3:21). Your baptism is both a drowning and a rescue. It is God's picture of the person you are by nature, filled through and through with wickedness and sin, and it is a real drowning of that person, as real as the flood water that swept wicked unbelievers away in Noah's day. At the same time it is a real rescue, as real as the ark God provided for Noah.

In Baptism, God robes you in the righteousness of Jesus.

In John's Revelation of heaven, he sees multitudes of people in white robes, holding palm branches, and praising God for saving them. One of twenty-four elders tells John how these particular people happened to arrive in such a glorious place. He says, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14).

Jesus' death on the cross covers the filth and wretchedness of our sin, so that when God the Father considers everything we are and everything we've done, he chooses to see only his holy, innocent, sinless Son. Like Noah after his sin of drunkenness (Genesis 9:20-23), we lie naked and helpless in our shame, but God refuses to look. He carefully drapes the righteousness of Jesus over us, so that every inch of us is covered. It happened on the day we were baptized. Paul says, "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). And not even death can rob us of Baptism's blessings.

All of this defies human understanding.

When all is said and done, it doesn't look like the one baptized has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. All we see is some wet skin and maybe some tousled hair. How can this external, physical action produce internal, spiritual effects, like forgiveness, life, and salvation, even in the hearts of infants? We can't see it happening. We can't fully explain how it's possible. All we have to go on is what God's Word tells us.

We wouldn't have it any other way. We're happy to let our confidence in Baptism rest on God's Word, and not on our own feelings or opinions. God is incapable of speaking a word that isn't true. Our feelings and opinions change; God's Word never will.

2. Baptism sanctifies.

You were crucified with Jesus.

Sometimes a person who has been declared medically dead is revived a short while later. What kind of story can such a person tell us? People want to know: "What was it like to be dead?" One thing is certain about being dead. Being dead means you're done with sin. In Baptism, God declared that you were dead. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (6:3). He explains this by saying that we are no longer "slaves to sin - - because anyone who has died has been freed from sin." (6:6, 7)

If you hadn't died with Jesus, you'd always be looking for ways to get away with things. You would think of God's forgiveness as though it were a free pass to commit all kinds of sins. If your sinful flesh still held sway after God raised you to spiritual life, God's forgiveness would actually drive you away from him, because you'd always be using it for your own purposes instead of his. When you died, so did your desire to live apart from God.

God raised you with Jesus.

On the Last Day, God will raise all people from the dust of death, and he will bring believers to live with him forever in heaven (John 5:28, 29; Matthew 25:34-40). We will spend all eternity with all the saints and angels, offering perfect praises to our Triune God (Revelation 7:9-17). We can't see our future life yet, but we know it's coming. God has promised it.

In Baptism, God has raised us from spiritual death so that we can serve him in perfect righteousness *in this life*. As it is with our future life in heaven, we can't yet see this reality, but that doesn't make it less real. God says that it is so, and so we believe him. Because we were raised with Jesus, we are saints through faith in him, and we live that way. "You have been buried with (Christ) in baptism and raised... You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 2:12; Colossians 3:3). "By placing his name on us, Christ pulls us onto the cross, carries us into his tomb, and quickens us with his resurrection."⁵

Baptism may take less time than it takes to wash your hands before supper. But when God baptized you, he baptized your whole life. Your baptism covers the day of your birth into this world, the day of your departure from this world, and every other day in between. Don't think of your baptism as though it were only a distant event in your past. Your baptism is a present reality. "Baptism is a bath of renewal; it is begun in Baptism, but it endures for a lifetime."⁶

You are a saint and a sinner.

Some might wonder why we need our *whole life* baptized. They think that after you've been brought to saving faith in Jesus, living a God-pleasing life is up to you. They'll agree that if you slip into sin from time to time, God will be there to forgive you. But they don't think you should spend all your

⁵ Troy Dahlke, "Hidden in Christ: A Baptismal Perception of the Imperceptible." (*Logia*, Vol. IX, No. 2, Eastertide, 2000), 11

⁶ Gerhard, *ibid*, 109

time thinking about your sin and God's forgiveness. At some point they'd suggest that you move on to other topics. You need to get out there and *do* something, don't you?

It's true that we need to live according to God's will. But we need to remember that in this life, we never move past the cycle of sin and forgiveness. Saint Paul called himself the "chief of sinners" and a "wretched man." He said, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature."

A Christian is, at the same time, a saint and a sinner (Romans 7:22-23). This means that a Christian loves God above all things. It means he wants always and only to listen to him, pray to him, and serve him. It also means that he hates God, wants nothing to do with his Word or with prayer, and wants to serve only himself. One Christian is two people at once.

Where, then, do we stand with God? Which person defines us in his eyes? Baptism answers that question loudly and clearly. We are sons of God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27). Baptism makes us saints in God's eyes.

But because of the continuing presence of our sinful nature, we have a battle on our hands. Every saint is called also to be a soldier. Think of how simply we confess this truth in Luther's Small Catechism:

Baptism means that the old Adam (a.k.a. "old sinful nature") in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever (SC IV).

There is no fiercer battle than this one, and it lasts your whole life long. According to our sinful nature, we don't want to live by faith. We don't want our lives to be hidden with Christ; we want God to lay out our successes and victories in full sight. "Does the old Adam really have to be drowned?" we wonder. "Can't the new person come forth without the old Adam dying?" But there isn't room for the both of you. Paul says "put off your old self which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires," and "put on the new self which was created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Your baptism is a daily rescue operation.

The battle rages on, day after day. When it comes to fixing what's wrong with ourselves on a daily basis, we are our own worst enemies. We tend to treat spiritual renewal like it's a diet program. We think it's about will power. Sinful thoughts and attitudes beckon like an open refrigerator door at midnight, and we think: "Just say no." "Try harder!" That might work when it comes to losing weight, but it will never power your Christian living. Spiritual renewal doesn't start inside of us. It can't. We are no match for our wicked, God-hating, sinful flesh.

That's the beauty of Holy Baptism. Your baptism is from God.

Temptation comes knocking. Devil, world, and flesh rise up in mutiny against us. They're out for blood, and we're in danger of being overrun. There's no negotiating with this vicious mob. There's no help to be found from inside ourselves. Baptism is like a fire hose at a prison riot.

Our consistent failure to measure up to God's expectations takes its toll. The memory of sins past and present plagues us. Our utter inability to improve our wicked sinful flesh shames us. How easily we let ourselves be ruled by a squirming conscience! By all outward appearances we may be doing our job and fulfilling our callings, while in truth we are dying of thirst. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Your baptism is your Rephidim

(Exodus 17:6), your oasis in the desert; a divine pool of pure forgiveness that satisfies your thirst and puts you back to work with a clean and happy conscience.

Every enemy to your sanctified living meets its match in Holy Baptism.

“Baptism is, in short, so full of consolation and grace that heaven and earth cannot understand it. But it requires skill to believe this, for the treasure is not lacking, but this is lacking: people who grasp it and hold it firmly” (LC IV, 39, 40).

3. Baptism deserves our careful attention.

Ceremonies and symbols

We Christians love to be reminded of our baptism.

At the start of worship, we hear our pastor invoke the name of the Triune God, and we see him form the sign of the cross that was made over our head and our heart when we were baptized. In the corporate confession of our sins, the whole congregation binds up the old Adam and throws him into the sea. In the pastor’s absolution God raises us all from the dead. Think of all the other ways we hear and proclaim the work of Father, Son and Spirit in church, in our prayers, our hymns, our creeds, all the way to the Trinitarian blessing at the end. It’s all a return to Baptism.

Even before a word in church is spoken, the baptismal font speaks for itself. Since we know what Baptism means, it makes sense that we would want to give our font a place of prominence, together with the altar and the pulpit, or “ambo.” These visual symbols remind us of God’s powerful Means of Grace. Baptism occupies a central place in the life of a Christian and the life of the church. It wouldn’t be out of place to treat the design and the placement of our baptismal fonts with the same degree of careful diligence that goes into the creation and promotion of a company logo.

On special occasions when we are privileged to witness a baptism, we have double reason to give thanks, first for the person who is being baptized, then for our own baptism, which is a daily reality.

If you’d like to see a visible connection between the baptisms in your church and the resurrection of Jesus, light a Paschal⁷ candle on the Sundays of Easter, and then again whenever there’s a baptism or funeral. Use a baptismal candle, too. This candle is lit from the Paschal candle, sent home with the person who was baptized, and relit on baptismal anniversaries as a remembrance of Holy Baptism’s continuing comfort and power.

To impress on people the way Baptism clothes us with Christ, you can create a simple white garment to be placed over a person’s head after Baptism.

One of the great baptismal treasures of the Lutheran church is Martin Luther’s Flood Prayer (See Appendix B). Luther takes a page from the Apostle Peter’s book when he casts this prayer for the one baptized into the imagery of the great flood (1 Peter 3:20-21).

In *Christian Worship Supplement*, you can find a *Gathering Rite on Baptism*, which uses words and music to connect the opening hymn, confession and absolution, and the song of praise all under one baptismal theme.⁸ There was an intentional effort to include a good number of good baptism hymns in *Christian Worship Supplement*, to add to the good number already present in our hymnal. Like

⁷ “Paschal” relates to the Passover and to Easter. When early Christians celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, the Paschal (Passover) Lamb, they called that day “Pascha.” A Paschal candle may be placed near the baptismal font.

⁸ The rite includes this instruction: “This alternate beginning for worship is intended for use not only when there is a baptism but may be used on any occasion to remind God’s people of Baptism’s continuing blessings” (*Christian Worship Supplement*, p.8)

the *Gathering Rite on Baptism*, these hymns beg to be used even on Sundays when there is no baptism, because we live in our baptisms every day.

When it comes to the rite of baptism, simple is good.⁹ We need to continue to examine our baptismal practice to make sure that none of our accompanying ceremonies and traditions draws people's eyes away from the washing with water through the word.¹⁰ On the other hand, good ceremonies and meaningful traditions can communicate and affirm for us the blessings of Holy Baptism as well as testifying to our connection to Christians around the world and from days past (See Appendix C).

Making the sign of the cross

Luther teaches in his Catechism that each day we should "make the sign of the cross" and say "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Some people cross themselves because they are superstitious. They treat this personal ritual as though it were a good luck charm that will help them sink a free throw or pass a driver's exam. Others try to make the practice of crossing yourself mandatory by suggesting that if you don't do it, then you are not a true Christian. This treats the ritual like it's more important than the message behind it. The outward sign of the cross has no divine power in itself. But it can be a powerful, personal reminder of who you are and whose you are.

In the morning or at night when a Christian is confessing his sins to God in prayer, the mind is often occupied with many things. The action involved in making the sign of the cross can work like a sheep dog to corral our thoughts back to where they belong: every day we die with Christ, and every day God raises us to new life by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. When done in Christian freedom, crossing yourself in the name of the Triune God can be a good way to help you remember your baptism.

Encouraging others

It makes sense that in church, at home, in our hearts and minds we would want to surround ourselves with this glorious certainty that comes not from us, but from God: *I am baptized!* So also it makes sense that we would want to use this treasure in our loving admonishments and encouragements to others.

When a fellow Christian is caught in a sin, you're right to dig through Scripture to find a passage that will fit him and his situation personally. But don't forget to preach what God has already made personal for him: "You died to sin, how can you live in it any longer?" When a Christian friend is growing discouraged in her daily struggle against sin, you can preach divine comfort that is both objectively true

⁹ In 1523, Martin Luther published a rite of Baptism in German in which he retained many of the ceremonies of the medieval church for the sake of weak consciences, but he added this commentary as part of an epilogue to the rite: "Now remember, too, that in baptism the external things are the least important, such as blowing under the eyes, signing with the cross, putting salt into the mouth, putting spittle and clay into the ears and nose, anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with the chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand, and whatever else has been added by man to embellish baptism. For most assuredly baptism can be performed without all these, and they are not the sort of devices from which the devil shrinks or flees" (LW 53, 102). In a later revision of this rite (1526), Luther did indeed excise many of these ceremonies. But he kept, among other things, his *Sintflutgebet* and the practice of vesting the baptized person in a white garment.

¹⁰ For an in-depth study of the ceremonies and traditions that have accompanied Baptism since the earliest days of the New Testament, see Charles Cortright's essay, "Ego Te Baptizo...The Church's Liturgy as Instrument of the Baptizing God" (*Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium*, 2002), available online at www.wlsessays.net.

and also wonderfully personal: "You're clothed with Christ; you've been raised from the dead with him. You can do this!"

Reaching out

Baptism can serve well in our conversations outside the church. Even among the unchurched, most have heard of it, and many already have a positive opinion about it. Some have already been baptized; they just don't know what it means. Some have the wrong idea; they think Baptism is something we do to show how committed we are to God. If you're looking for a way to tell someone about the gracious love of God, who forgives all sin and gives us saving faith as a gift, talk Baptism.

In short, it is good to give yourself as many reminders of your baptism as possible, all the while keeping in mind that your baptism is more than a reminder. Baptism is your daily resurrection from the dead. In Baptism God clothes you with Jesus, so that you can face the struggles under your cross without waving the white flag. However bloody the battle, you'll always come out victorious, because Jesus has risen. Baptism is useful. So let's use it!

We must think this way about Baptism and make it profitable for ourselves. So when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, "Nevertheless, I am baptized. And if I am baptized, it is promised to me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body." (LC IV, 44)

So a truly Christian life is nothing other than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. (LC IV, 65)

At the intersection

Part Four in Luther's Small Catechism is *The Sacrament of Holy Baptism*. Part Six is *The Sacrament of Holy Communion*. Between them comes Part Five: *The Use of the Keys and Confession*.

To help us live in our baptism, and to help us prepare for Communion, the New Testament Church can use the Keys Jesus gave us. Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus "breathed on (his disciples) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'" (John 20:22-23).

We can confess our sins in private before God, and receive his absolution (pronouncement of forgiveness) in the Word of God we read and hear and remember. The Keys are God's way of taking this absolution and putting it in the mouth of a flesh and blood human being. Every believer has the Keys; pastors are called to use the Keys on behalf of the congregation. After the general confession of sins in our church services, when a pastor says, "I forgive you," he is speaking on the authority of Jesus, in his place. Through his called servant, Jesus is saying to you what he said to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection: "Peace be with you."

A pastor's absolution is available on an individual basis, too.¹¹ "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts" (SC V).¹²

¹¹ One form for Private Confession is available in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, p.154.

The practice of private confession and absolution has fallen largely out of use in our circles, partly, perhaps, because legalistic admonishments from days past have left a bad taste in our mouths. (“No Communion for you until you face the pastor and come clean!”) But when offered freely, the practice of private confession and absolution can offer great benefits.

Overall this writer thinks we are the poorer for the death of private confession. It was a rare opportunity to personalize Law and Gospel, in private, with no hurry, where there was no danger of one’s dozing off or daydreaming. To judge from the writings of our German forebears, they had a deeper sense of their own sinfulness, as well as a corresponding gratitude and relief at hearing the Good News.¹³

Even in secular circles this kind of personal contact between listener and counselor is considered beneficial, but when the content of such an exchange is a return to Baptism, so that by God’s Law the sinful flesh is nailed to the wall and by the absolution of God’s mouthpiece the new person is raised from the dead, the benefits are divine!

The pastor needs absolution, too. He needs a clean conscience. He needs outside help. Who pastors the pastor so that his work will be a joy? When his sin troubles him, let him find another pastor he trusts, to whom he can confess and be absolved.¹⁴

Freely offered and freely received, in public or in private, confession and absolution is another way of saying, “I am baptized!” So then, it is also one helpful way for the baptized to be prepared for the reception of Holy Communion.

God Feeds Us Jesus

1. Holy Communion is a mystery beyond comprehension.

What is the Sacrament of Holy Communion? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink (SC VI).

Such simple words! Such profound truth! Jesus’ body and blood are really present under the bread and wine of Holy Communion. How can the Son of God who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:23) be with us, here and now, fully and completely, delivered through the vehicles of bread and wine, so that we are eating and drinking his true body and blood?

The question we might ask about the Real Presence was the same question facing the shepherds when they first saw their newborn Savior: *How?* How can He who never sleeps sleep? How can He who needs nothing need food? How can He who never changes change? The shepherds might well have asked, “How can the Son of God who fills everything in every way be with us, here and now,

¹² Private confession and absolution is encouraged in our Lutheran Confessions. See AC XXV; SA III, VII; and LCV, An Exhortation to Confession.

¹³ Mark Jeske, “The Practice of Confession and Absolution in the Lutheran Church,” (August, 1979), 10

¹⁴ Taken from a video presentation by John Kleinig entitled *Pastoral Care of Pastors*, presented at *Doxology: the Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel*, a pastors’ institute offered by Harold Senkbeil and Beverly Yahnke.

fully and completely, in this manger, in the flesh?" But they had the word of God's angel, and that was enough. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20).

So it is with the mystery of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper. Every step we take toward human reason and logic to solve the mystery is a step away from God's Word. God doesn't invite us to solve the mystery. He invites us to take him at his word. Note how beautifully our post-Communion prayer ties the mystery of the incarnation to the mystery of the Real Presence, and then invites thankful Christians to remember what it all means:

O God the Father, source of all goodness, in your loving kindness you sent your Son to share our humanity. We thank you that through him you have given us pardon and peace in this sacrament (*Christian Worship*, p.24).

Scripture is clear.

The Sacrament goes beyond our ability to comprehend it. But there's nothing mysterious about the way Jesus explains it to us. "Take and eat," says Jesus, "this is my body. Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:26, 27).

Many have tried to turn these words into a metaphor or a parable. They say the bread isn't actually Jesus' body, nor the wine his blood.¹⁵ But these words of Jesus are his last will and testament. When we write our own last will and testament, we choose our words carefully and we speak as clearly as possible, so that there may be no misunderstanding among our heirs. It seems strange to think that Jesus would deliver his last will and testament in a metaphor or parable without clearly explaining what he means. Interestingly, those who force their own figurative interpretation onto Jesus' words find themselves at constant war with one another, like heirs fighting over an inheritance. "What sort of a parable can it be when even learned exegetes cannot say with certainty what it actually means!"¹⁶ In his treatise, *The Lord's Supper*, Martin Chemnitz asks, "What is the difference between no testament of the Son of God or an uncertain one?"¹⁷ But Jesus' words are certain and clear. The bread is Jesus' body. The wine is Jesus' blood.

What's more, we need to remember who is speaking these words.

If an ordinary man had taken bread and said, "This is my body," we might regard him as a madman, deceiver, or abuser of language, and we might reject the simple, natural meaning of the words as impossible nonsense. But the Speaker here is the Son of God, who is utterly truthful and reliable and has the infinite wisdom and power to back up what he says by making his body truly present.¹⁸

¹⁵ Some say that the bread and wine merely symbolize Jesus' body and blood. Others say that Jesus' body and blood are "spiritually present," received by faith "in a spiritual way," but this is just another way of saying that his body and blood aren't really present (FC SD, VII, 3). At one point, Andreas Carlstadt, one of the radical reformers, actually believed that when Jesus said, "This is my body," Jesus was pointing at himself.

¹⁶ Hermann Sasse, "The Lord's Supper in the New Testament," *We Confess Anthology*, translated by Norman Nagel, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 69.

¹⁷ Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, translated by J.A.O. Preus. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 86. Chemnitz (1522-1586), known in history as "the second Martin" for his importance as a Lutheran theologian, was a key figure in the writing of the Formula of Concord (1577).

¹⁸ Joel Fredrich, "The Lord Jesus Institutes Holy Communion." (*Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium*, 2003), 8.

If people still want to question the simple, natural understanding of Jesus' words, let them look again at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he so clearly gives apostolic testimony to the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper: "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?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Jesus' body and blood were truly present under the bread and wine he gave his disciples in the upper room on the night he was betrayed, and they are present in our use of the Sacrament, too. "Do this," Jesus tells us. So we do. We consecrate the elements, we distribute them, and we receive them. Jesus has given us these words to say, and Jesus doesn't lie. Luther says, "When he said, 'Do this,' by his own command and bidding he directed us to speak these words in his person and name: 'This is my body'" (LW 37, 187). So we know that together with the bread and wine of Communion we receive the body and blood of our Savior, just as the disciples did when they were with Jesus in the upper room.¹⁹

What our senses could never reveal to us, God's Word makes perfectly clear. Hermann Sasse said, "[The Real Presence] was for Luther, and it is still today, the great test whether we are able to found our faith on the Word of our Lord alone, or whether we still have need of some support from human sources."²⁰ Luther wrote:

With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and say, "If a hundred thousand devils, together with all fanatics, should rush forward, crying, 'How can bread and wine be Christ's body and blood?' and such, I know that all spirits and scholars together are not as wise as the Divine Majesty in His little finger" (see 1 Corinthians 1:25). (LC V, 12).

The Real Presence of Jesus' body and blood in his Supper matters. Remember who this is. This is the Word of God, made flesh, true God, begotten from eternity, and true man, born of the virgin Mary. "In Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). This is the true Passover Lamb who willingly shed his blood for the sins of the world. And it's not just *that* he is present in his Supper. In Holy Communion, Jesus Christ is really present, intimately present, incarnationally present, *for you*. You can think of the doctrine of the Real Presence when you hear the opening words of the Communion liturgy: "The Lord be with you."

2. Holy Communion is a gift beyond compare.

What happens in Communion runs counter not only to sinful reason, but also to sinful pride. The world wants nothing to do with talk about a divine blood sacrifice for sin. Our old Adam is still offended, too. I don't want to hear that my sin makes me ugly, and wretched, a son of Satan. I don't want to hear that the worst day of my life in this world is still better than the eternity in hell I deserve. I don't want to hear that my sin costs infinitely more than what I can pay. But it's all true, and it's true each day.

¹⁹ Our Lutheran Confessions quote John Chrysostom (c. 349-407): "The declaration 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28) was spoken only once. But it is ever effective in nature, so that it is fruitful and multiplies. So also this declaration, 'This is My body; this is My blood,' was spoken once. But even to this day and up to His second coming it is effective and works so that in the Supper of the Church His true body and blood are present." (FC SD, VII, 76).

²⁰ Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 368.

So also, divine forgiveness isn't pretty. It hinges on the bloody suffering and death of God's Lamb, the Word made flesh. Every blood sacrifice of the Old Testament pointed ahead to his cross-shaped altar. New Testament worship is no less bloody. True worship of God has always been connected to the shed blood of God's Son. We know this isn't pretty, but we still call him *Beautiful Savior*, because we know what his blood means. His death puts God's new covenant into effect: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). And we approach the Lord's Table eagerly precisely because of what Jesus tells us: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Medicine of immortality

God's Son took on human flesh and died on the cross to redeem us, body and soul. By his physical resurrection from the dead, Jesus has made it clear we, too, shall rise, bodily from the dead, and live with the Lord forever, body and soul, in heaven. "I know that my Redeemer lives... Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God... How my heart yearns within me!" said Job (19:25-27).

In his Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, the Lord serves the whole person, both soul and body. Nowhere has God promised that his Means of Grace will cure us of our diseases in this life. But if you doubt that God's help for your soul is also help for your body, read David's words in Psalm 32: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away.... You forgave the guilt of my sin... Rejoice... Be glad... Sing!" Luther says, "For where the soul has recovered, the body also is relieved" (LC V, 68).

Because of the earthly elements of Communion and the physical action involved in eating and drinking, it's easy to see why many Christians through the ages have compared this Sacrament to "medicine."

The Lord is speaking to flesh and blood sinners, inviting them to use hands and mouths and giving them forgiveness of sins. As sin is not a "spiritual" matter alone, but one that brings the most radical consequences to the body—death—so forgiveness of sin does not come to naked souls, but to human beings who use hands and mouths to eat and drink.²¹

Just like the Word of God and Baptism, Communion is for body and soul, for this life and the next. In heaven some day, forever cured of all sickness in soul and body we will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us" (Isaiah 25:9). Until then, our Lord Jesus invites us to eat and to drink his true body and his true blood, which is like a "medicine of immortality."²² When we come to church and see that the altar has been carefully prepared, we can remember that the Great Physician is in.

"Increase our love for one another."

Perhaps the mystery of Communion seems so other-worldly and heavenly that we miss the help it gives us here and now.

²¹ David Schoessow, "Medicine of Immortality," *Logia*, (January 1995), 40.

²² This phrase traces as far back as Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35 – ca. 107) who used it in reference to Communion in his letter to the Ephesians (20:2).

The problems we face each day always stem from the problem of sin and its effects in us and others. Together with God's Word and Baptism, Communion is an incredibly *practical* gift from God. It's exactly what you need, not only for a clean conscience, but for strength and wisdom to carry out your roles in life, for the glad willingness to carry your cross, for comfort in time of grief, for the desire to forgive and love the people who are hard to forgive and love, and for the eagerness to be Jesus' witness to the world. Crises of youth, mid-life, and golden years all find resolution at the Lord's Table.

More than that, Communion preaches the unity we share as fellow Christians. It connects Christians to Christ and to one another. Among like-minded Christians, Communion is a good way to strengthen family bonds and friendships. Communion is good for your marriage. Communion is good for healing divisions in your congregation. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble (Hebrews 12:3). Therefore, the Sacrament is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself (Psalm 23:1-3) so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger (LC V, 23-24).

Words and faith

How can eating and drinking do such things? It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such things, but the words "Given" and "poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. These words are the main thing in this sacrament, along with the eating and drinking (SC VI).

Without Jesus' words, we'd go searching for something else. Without Jesus' promise, we might instead latch on to our own actions, so that we think the blessings of Communion come as a reward for our participation. Or maybe we'd focus upon the sacramental rite apart from Jesus' death and resurrection: "*Hocus pocus*²³, my sins are forgiven." As important as it is to recognize that Jesus' body and blood are truly present in the Lord's Supper, it is equally important to believe the words he attaches to this meal.

"Since this treasure is entirely presented in the words, it cannot be received and made ours in any other way than with the heart" (LC V, 36).²⁴

²³ This famous magical incantation is a play on the words of institution in Latin: *Hoc est*, "*This is*" my body, etc.

²⁴ Luther also said: "If the mass (i.e., Communion) is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is to be gained, not with any works, or powers, or merits of one's own, but by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man. It is plain therefore, that the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of the promising God, who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy takes the initiative and offers us the word of his promise. ... Promise and faith must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith. From this everyone will readily gather that the mass, since it is nothing but promise, can be approached and observed only in faith. Without this faith, whatever else is brought to it by way of prayers, preparations, works, signs, or gestures are incitements to impiety rather than exercises of piety." (LW 36:38, 39, 42)

A proclamation of Jesus' death

A young father returned to his pew after receiving Communion. His five-year-old daughter had been observing him from her place in the pew. She asked him, "How was the true body and blood, Dad?" Her father had been doing more than receiving something. He'd been *proclaiming* something, and not just to his daughter, but to everyone else gathered at the table and assembled in church that day. Paul says, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Paul is explaining what Jesus meant when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." To remember Jesus is to proclaim his death.

In Communion, Jesus the Bridegroom proclaims his vow of love to his bride, the Church. His love and faithfulness far exceed that of any other husband. Jesus' love is real rescue from sin, death, and hell. He has made our reception of the Sacrament a part of his proclamation of love. Together with him we are proclaiming his love by proclaiming his death.

Proclaiming Jesus' death is saying more than, "Jesus died."

But now the entire Gospel and the article of the Creed – I believe in... the holy Christian Church, ... the forgiveness of sins, and so on – are embodied by the Word in this Sacrament and presented to us (LC V, 32).²⁵

Since our reception of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of everything we believe about Jesus, we pay careful attention to the public confession of those who join us in that proclamation by their participation in Communion with us. We invite only those from within our church fellowship to join us at the table. To do otherwise would not only preach false unity; it would preach something other than the whole Gospel of Christ. (See Appendix D: Close Communion). But the exclusiveness of this meal and this love shouldn't lead us to set it aside.

In fact, one of the key reasons we're eager to see the Holy Spirit grow our fellowship is so that many more may become a part of Christ's proclamation of love in his Holy Supper, and fellow recipients of all the Supper's blessings. We want to stand together with many others, marveling at the mystery of the incarnation of our Savior and his Real Presence in his Sacrament. We want more and more people to be able to join us in this prayer:

We give you thanks, O Lord, for the foretaste of the heavenly banquet that you have given us to eat and to drink in this sacrament. Through this gift you have fed our faith, nourished our hope, and strengthened our love. By your Spirit, help us to live as your holy people until that day when you will receive us as your guests at the wedding supper of the Lamb, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever (*Christian Worship Supplement*, p. 37)

²⁵ As an example of the Gospel used in the broad sense, Joel Fredrich points to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Fredrich writes: "Paul used a comparable expression, 'Christ . . . crucified,' to refer to the whole message he preached and taught during the eighteen months when he founded the church in Corinth... Both phrases, "the death of the Lord" and "Christ crucified," sum up the plan of salvation culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ and what it all means ("The Lord Jesus Institutes Holy Communion." *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium*, 2003), 18.

3. Holy Communion deserves our careful attention.

In his Large Catechism, Luther says, "Since we now have the true understanding and doctrine of the Sacrament, there is also need for some admonition and encouragement. Then people may not let such a great treasure – daily administered and distributed among Christians – pass by unnoticed" (LC V, 39).

Preparation

When Jesus instituted Baptism, he said, "Go and baptize all nations." But he gave Communion only to his disciples and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." The Lord's Supper is only for believers. In fact, Paul says, "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" (1 Corinthians 11:27). And he concludes: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."

Luther cites Scripture and says, "Those who are lewd and morally loose must be told to stay away (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). They are not prepared to receive forgiveness of sin, since they do not desire it and do not wish to be godly" (LC V, 58).

All communicants must be prepared before they approach the table. Through the ages there has been a good deal of misunderstanding about what it means to be prepared. Luther says that under the papacy, "we tortured ourselves to be so perfectly pure that God could not find the least blemish in us. For this reason we became so timid that we were all instantly thrown into fear and said to ourselves, 'Alas! we are unworthy!'" (LC V, 55). What does one need to be properly prepared to approach the Lord's Table? No more and no less than this: faith.²⁶

So we prepare. Saturday isn't too soon to start thinking about Sunday. We treat an approaching trip to the Lord's Table like the event that it is. It's time to drop all pretenses. Our record of faithless worrying and selfish pride is only the tip of the iceberg. It's time to remember what it means that we are by nature sinful: not a moment passes when we don't desperately need the forgiveness Jesus won. Yet our preparation is filled with joy! At this meal God will provide us his antidote for sin's poison. Here he will serve real food for starving sinners. The Lord is about to bring the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus into the here and now, and he's going to make it personal: "for you."

Outward actions can remind us to prepare our hearts. Fasting certainly isn't necessary, but if intentionally foregoing breakfast on a Communion Sunday helps you think about the rich banquet waiting for you at the Lord's altar, then, by all means, leave your corn flakes in the cupboard.²⁷

Even a simple thing like filling out a Communion registration card can spark our anticipation for what we're about to receive. We appreciate every practical reminder to prepare our hearts: the bulletin blurbs, the church calendar posts, the hymnal in front of us bookmarked to page 156. Better still are

²⁶ "Fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but he is properly prepared who believes these words: "Given" and "poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" (SC VI).

²⁷ Pastor Richard Krause writes: "Here in America we've renounced almost all traces of past practices -- the sign of the cross, private confession, a personal visit to the pastor before Holy Communion, fasting, and so on. We have our reasons for doing this, but have we changed our Communion preparation for the better? Is our new American 'lite' generating a positive hunger for the deep things of the faith? Might we consider taking some action to better prepare for the Sacrament? Perhaps we could forgo reading the Sunday paper before church. We might instead read selected psalms, portions of the catechism, or reflect on the Ten Commandments. One might arrive at church 15 minutes earlier to read through the Communion hymns ahead of time. We could meditate on the readings of the day and ask, 'What does this mean to me?' or 'How have I failed my God?' ("Lutheran Lite." *Lutheran Leader*, Fall 1999).

those sweet invitations we hear from the pulpit. Not that a pastor has failed if he doesn't "preach us to the table." But he shouldn't take our eagerness for granted either. Invite us, pastor. Help us remember the "and" in Word and Sacrament.

Christ's command and promise

Since preparation for Communion is such an important issue, some have actually concluded that it's better not to receive it often, to avoid the possibility of improper reception. Others have suggested that it's enough to listen to God's Word. After all, the argument goes, the message of Jesus is just as powerful from a pulpit or an open Bible as it is from the Communion Table.

But the decision as to whether or not a believer should receive Communion isn't up to us. Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me." Some people imagine a loophole in Jesus' command, because when he distributes the cup he says, "Do this *whenever you drink it* (emphasis added)" (1 Corinthians 11:25). They take this to mean that it's fine to stay away from the Communion table for as long as they'd like.

Martin Luther interprets the phrase in another direction. He says, "Since he speaks the words 'As often as you drink it,' it is still implied that we should do it often" (LC V, 47). He says, "It is not left free in the sense that we may despise it. I call that despising the Sacrament if one allows a long time to elapse... If you want such freedom, you may just as well have the freedom to not be a Christian and not have to believe or pray. One is just as much commanded by Christ as the other" (LC V, 49).

Besides, Luther says, "Here he offers to us the entire treasure that he has brought for us from heaven" (LC V, 66). "We must never think of the Sacrament has something harmful from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort" (LC V, 68).

Writing about Holy Communion, Gene Edward Vieth, Jr. observes:

Without food, we would starve to death. We have to eat to fuel our physical life; otherwise, we grow weak and waste away. The only food that can sustain our bodies comes from the death of other living things. Whether we are nourishing ourselves from a bloody steak or ripped up plants in a vegetarian casserole, there can be no life, even on the physical level, apart from the sacrifice of other life. What is true for physical life is true for spiritual life – we can only live if there has been a sacrifice. And we can only live if we have continuing nourishment.²⁸

Frequency of Communion celebration

Those who recognize the profound depravity of their sinful nature, and who understand what they receive and what they proclaim at the Lord's Table will naturally want to partake of it as often as they can.

Scriptural evidence suggests that early New Testament Christians offered the Sacrament weekly.²⁹ So did the Lutheran reformers of the sixteenth century.³⁰ Of course, frequent Communion

²⁸ Gene Edward Vieth, Jr. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 53.

²⁹ The "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42 is most likely a reference to Communion, or at least to the meal that preceded Communion in those days. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 the Apostle Paul strongly implies that the Corinthian Christians were celebrating the Lord's Supper whenever they came together for worship. It's interesting to note that even though Paul warns the Corinthians about improper reception of Communion in these weekly services, he never suggests that they should offer Communion less often to avoid its misuse.

celebration doesn't automatically translate into the frequent participation of God's people. In the centuries following the Reformation, many Lutherans lost their appreciation for the Sacrament, and so in time, Communion was offered as rarely as four to six times per year. In the twentieth century, Lutheran church calendars began to become more populated by Communion services. For a time, most of us in the WELS were offering Communion monthly. The practice now in most WELS congregations is to offer the Lord's Supper on two weekends per month. There are some congregations among us who have begun to offer Communion every week.

The idea of offering Communion at each main service is the kind of thing that people need to mull over in their minds. Some may be concerned that more frequent Communion will make Communion seem less special. Some people are used to inviting their friends to church on non-Communion Sundays. Some will be uneasy about increasing the length of the service in an already tight Sunday morning schedule. Some may misinterpret weekly Communion to be a shift toward Roman Catholicism, which has at times elevated the Sacrament over preaching. Luther says, "No one should by any means be forced or compelled to go to the Sacrament, lest we institute a new murdering of souls" (LC V, 42).

There are answers to these objections. The better we understand the blessings of Communion, the less concerned we will be about more frequent Communion seeming less special. People can learn how to talk to the friends they invite and the visitors they welcome. Services can be carefully streamlined and schedules can be changed. Weekly Communion predates Roman Catholicism; frequent communing doesn't denigrate the preached Word, it supports it.

There is more here to discuss than the scope of this paper will allow.³¹ Suffice it to say that a Lutheran congregation isn't less Lutheran for offering Communion less than every week. Martin Luther offers sage advice for pastors: "Preach in such a way that by their own will, without our law, they will urge themselves and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer the Sacrament" (SC Preface, 22). Let pastors preach Law and Gospel and the benefits of Christ's Supper. If there is a move toward more frequent Communion celebrations, let it come from the people.

Symbols and ceremonies

Preaching the benefits of the Lord's Supper is always in place, but a pastor doesn't have to do all this encouraging on his own. A wise pastor lets his church's architecture preach its sermon too, without getting in the way. This is true even in congregations who worship in a shared space like a school gymnasium or a strip mall. We put a table in front of our people and we teach them to call it the altar, because it's a symbol of the once-for-all willing sacrifice of God's Lamb for the sins of the world. Then we serve Communion from it. People get it. Just as the font reminds, so the altar can invite.

The Communion liturgy has a sermon to preach, too. The canticle *Holy, Holy, Holy* combines the sermon of six-winged seraphs with the shouts of the Palm Sunday parade. Everyone who sings this canticle is preaching the same glorious news: our Savior, Jesus, God and man, is really present in this Sacrament, and he's coming to save us: "*Hosanna!*" So also, in the simplest of language, the canticle, *O Christ, Lamb of God* helps us confess sin, proclaim Christ, and pray confidently for his mercy. It wasn't until after the time of Luther that Christians began using the *Song of Simeon* as a regular part of the Communion liturgy. That makes it a relatively new addition, compared to the other two canticles. But it

³⁰ "Because the Mass is for the purpose of giving the Sacrament, we have Communion every holy day, and if anyone desires the Sacrament, we also offer it on other days, when it is given to all who ask for it." (AC XXIV, 34.) See also Ap XXIV, 1.

³¹ Especially helpful for this discussion are Jonathan Micheel's essay: "The Church Offers Holy Communion" and Jonathan Schroeder's essay, "Worship and Outreach: A Lutheran Paradigm." Both essays are available online at www.wlssays.net.

fits well. As blessed as Simeon was to hold the world's Savior in his arms, so blessed are we to receive his true body and blood in the Lord's Supper: "My eyes have seen your salvation." A fresh look at these familiar texts, together with the preface, the proper preface, and the collect, will never fail to prepare and encourage the hearts of God's people to receive Christ's Supper.

In *Christian Worship Supplement (Divine Service II)*, you'll notice that there's a Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Communion service to help everyone linger for a few more moments upon the saving work of Jesus and the meal he is about to share (See Appendix E).

In every sacramental sermon, song, and symbol, God's tired and hungry people can hear the sweet invitation of our Savior. "Come to the feast!"

The Sacraments Promote Good Theology

God has poured his love on us. God feeds us Jesus. Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are treasures from heaven. It doesn't surprise us, then, to learn that Baptism and Communion, rightly taught and properly administered, promote good theology (just as good theology promotes our eager use of the Sacraments).

1. The Sacraments celebrate God's mysteries.

Giving people Jesus

Consider, first of all, how proper use of the Sacraments can promote a clear understanding about faith.

It's easy to slip into the thinking that faith is primarily an intellectual exercise.

A preacher may find himself *explaining* the saving work of Jesus rather than *preaching* Jesus. Faith does involve knowing things. And yes, it's true: *explanations* of Law and Gospel are still Law and Gospel, and so they are still powerful. But if all the preacher ever does is *explain* God's saving plan, his listeners will soon gain the impression that faith is primarily a matter of understanding explanations.

But then why should they keep listening to the same explanations about Jesus' saving work over and over again? In time they'll begin to think of their pastor as though he were a restaurant that only hands out menus but never actually serves food. They'll listen to his sermons and say, "Sounds good, but I'm still hungry!" If they're loyal, they'll keep coming to listen anyway, out of duty. But no one will gladly listen for long.³²

There's a little rationalist at work in all of us.³³ God wants preachers and people to use the brains he gave them, but when it's time to preach and listen to the mysteries of the Gospel, logic has to know when to take a back seat. Faith is more than an intellectual exercise. Saving faith needs food. Saving faith needs Jesus. By their very nature, the Sacraments encourage this view of faith.

³² If faith really were nothing more than an intellectual exercise, which it isn't, then a preacher would be better off keeping his Gospel preaching to a minimum. Too many Gospel explanations would insult his listeners' intelligence. If a preacher's job were only to *explain* God's Word, then his people would eventually expect him to find a more diverse subject matter, like the commandments.

³³ Rationalism is an approach to discourse that elevates human reason and logic above all else, even God's Word.

It's your turn. You walk to the front. You kneel at the railing. The pastor approaches. He gives you... what? ...an explanation? No. He gives you Jesus.³⁴ Preaching can work the same way, of course.

We would do well to take our cue for preaching from what we do in the Sacraments: We *do* something. We *wash* people. We *give* Christ to them... In the Sacraments, we do not just *explain* Christ or the Gospel, or *describe* faith, or give instructions about how to get salvation, or whatever (though we may well do all of that), we just give it, do it, flat out, unconditionally.³⁵

Not that the Sacraments are somehow better than the preached Word. The two work together. "Word and Sacrament are the single serving of two holy treasures bestowed by the risen Christ as he comes into the midst of his gathered church."³⁶

It's o.k. to love your pastor.

"Great sermon, pastor!"

A pastor shouldn't be ashamed to say, "Thank you." The Gospel alone changes hearts, and God alone deserves the glory, but preaching is an art. Art requires skill. Skill requires faithfulness. People shouldn't be afraid to commend their pastor for a job well done, and he should continue to put his God-given gifts to faithful use each time he preaches.

But sometimes we go too far. We may begin to imagine that the spread of God's kingdom rides on the specific skill set of a pastor we love. "If he ever leaves, our congregation will be sunk!" we think. Or we may become envious of some other congregation's pastor and fail to appreciate the abundant gifts and the faithful work of our own. Pastors themselves aren't immune to this kind of thinking.

The Sacraments have a unique way of tempering our perspective. What kind of skill does it take to splash water on someone and say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"? How many amazing gifts are required for a pastor to lift a cup to someone's lips and say, "The blood of Christ, shed for you"?

We are grateful for the gifts God has given each of our pastors, and we benefit greatly from their faithful use of those gifts, but the success of our congregation's ministry depends on our good and gracious God, and the mysteries of his Gospel. The Sacraments help keep it all in balance.

"Thanks for the Supper, pastor!"

2. The Sacraments preach gospel certainty.

We have an incurable tendency to collapse inwardly upon ourselves all the time, to feed on our own innards.³⁷

³⁴ "The Sacrament preaches Christ... Sometimes we forget this. Christ is crowded out and something is substituted in his place. At times we become engrossed in some project of the church, or we labor diligently through the years for some organization within the church, or we set ourselves to acquire a fuller knowledge of the Bible, while all the while our Christ recedes into the background, his face is veiled, Golgotha grows dim. Then the Sacrament speaks. It preaches Christ and only him, who gave his body and shed his blood on the cross. It tears away every veil which has hidden Golgotha and brings us face to face with him who alone is to be the object of our affection and the center of our life" (Fred Lindemann, *In Remembrance of Me: Twelve Communion Addresses*. New York: The Lutheran Press, 1937) 86, 87.

³⁵ Gerhard Forde, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 89.

³⁶ Kenneth Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 17.

³⁷ Forde, *ibid*, 101

In the century following Martin Luther's death, there was a reform movement within the German Lutheran church called *Pietism*. *Pietism* is not the same as *piety*. *Pietistic* is not the same as *pious*. Pietists believed that Lutherans had become so intent on preserving pure doctrine that they had begun to lose the personal, spiritual aspect of the Christian faith. Pietists wanted to get people more interested in personal Bible study, prayer, and Christian living.

These were good goals. The problem was with the Pietists' methodology. They didn't trust the Gospel in Word and Sacraments to do what God promises it will do. Instead they emphasized something they considered to be more practical. They preached about how to live the Christian life. One of the contributing factors to the decline of Communion celebrations in the centuries after Luther is that the Pietists didn't consider the Lord's Supper to be of any real value in equipping Christians to live a godly life. Even Baptism was considered incomplete until a baptized person added his conscious pledge at the time of his Confirmation in the faith.

Today's heirs to this pietistic thinking are found in large number within that large, loose federation of conservative Christian denominations who call themselves "Evangelicals." Many of them have just as little respect for the Sacraments as the Pietists did in centuries past. "Evangelicals have tended to see sacramental churches as dead churches because they rely merely on outward acts (the Sacraments)."³⁸

The influence of Pietism is felt among us whenever we refuse to let God's Law be the destroying flood that it is, and treat it instead as though it's a squirt gun: "Sometimes I do bad things." Then, when it comes time to do better, we see no need for God's baptismal flood of forgiveness or the "holy ark of the Church."³⁹ The spirit of Pietism makes a person happy to read the end of Colossians three and the beginning of chapter four (rules for holy living) without paying much attention to the baptismal comfort of chapter two.⁴⁰ We may think we can do what we need to do if we dig down deep inside ourselves. But what do we find in there? The saint is still a sinner.

Pietists thought that by encouraging people to put more heart into their religion, they could help people to make their religion more genuine. What they really did was introduce doubt. What seemed to them to be the path to God was the wide road away from him. Pietism gave up the objective certainty of God's Means of Grace for the fearful uncertainties of the sinful flesh.

Precisely because the Sacraments come to us from the outside, they provide us with the certainty and confidence we so desperately need. In Baptism, God buried you with Christ and raised you again to new life. Who you are, what you do, and where you're headed: all of it is defined entirely by the robe of Christ's righteousness that God has already given you. In his Supper, Jesus the Savior really gives you his crucified body and shed blood, the price he paid to make you his.

A wafer touches your tongue. A word strikes your ear: "the body of Christ, given for you." This changes everything. Now you can work and pray and trust and forgive and rejoice. Are you feeling it? That doesn't matter. God is saying it. God can't lie.

³⁸ Harold Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action*. (Milwaukee: NPH, 1989), 154.

³⁹ From Luther's *Sintflutgebet*

⁴⁰ "In (Christ) 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, 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" (Colossians 2:11-12).

3. The Sacraments inform our worship practice.

Is public worship primarily a matter of nurture or outreach?

Life-long Christians might not seem like they need much help with their faith. We call them “pillars of the church.” It might seem like all they need to be nurtured is the occasional reminder about what Jesus has done for them.

Jesus’ institution of the Sacraments demonstrates that Christian nurture is serious business. Baptism is a daily drowning and rising from the dead. Holy Communion is the real flesh and blood of Jesus, once shed, now given. If we believers really were so self-sufficient, then Jesus would not have had to take such extreme measures to keep us close to him. Even the most mature Christian depends completely and entirely on the shed blood of Jesus *every moment of his life*.

The business of outreach is equally serious. God has called us to preach the Gospel to all people. What happens in worship also serves those who are lost in sin and unbelief. Since worship is often their first contact with our church, we are right to do all we can to welcome them to our services and follow up with them afterward. This Word they will hear is the difference between life and death. The Sacraments proclaim Christ, even to those who don’t partake. We need to pay careful attention to our guests in worship, and we need to pray that the message takes root.

In gospel ministry outreach is just as important as nurture. In public worship, nurture comes first. If a preacher puts outreach ahead of nurture in worship, he will never say, “You died with Christ in your Baptism and have been raised to live a new life.” Sinners within God’s flock need to be addressed like the saints and soldiers they are. The outreach ministry of our congregations depend on it!

The missionary call “Repent” is always followed with “and be baptized.” The faith planted through Baptism or the Word, Christ wants to strengthen through a lifetime of feeding at the Supper. Any paradigm that removes the Sacraments from worship for the sake of outreach loses one of its God-given tools to accomplish worship’s goal and purpose: the glory of God and the salvation of man.⁴¹

Conclusion

Marriage counselors are always encouraging communication. Husband and wife express their love for each other in many different ways: a word, a smile, a kiss. A good marriage depends upon it.

In our marriage to Christ, he doesn’t depend upon us for a thing. We depend entirely upon him. He needs no counsel; we do. We need regular admonishment and encouragement to see the many different ways he expresses and gives us his love. It makes sense that the Lord God who designed marriage to depend on such varied expressions of love would also design the marriage between Christ and his Church to work the same way.⁴²

We will now return to the Gospel, which does not give us counsel and aid against sin in only one way. God is superabundantly generous in his grace: First, through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world (Luke 24:45-47). This is the particular office of the Gospel. Second, through Baptism. Third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourth, through the Power of the Keys. Also through the

⁴¹ Schroeder, *ibid*, 18.

⁴² Thanks to Bryan Gerlach for this marriage illustration.

mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, "Where two or three are gathered" (Matthew 18:20) and other such verses (especially Romans 1:12). (SA III, IV).

To live the sacramental life is to live on the receiving end of God's saving love in all its forms. It means that God has won us over to his way of thinking about what we need from him to live and serve each day. The key to this sacramental life, this sacramental piety is the Word and Sacraments themselves. "To increase sacramental piety in our churches, use the Word (sermon, Bible study, and the visual Word: symbolism). To strengthen our preaching and teaching, use the Sacraments."⁴³

In our efforts to be the people God wants us to be, it's easy for us to forget who we already are in Christ. Our baptism tells us: we are saints and we are soldiers. God has called us to engage in a daily battle against our traitorous sinful nature and its allies, the devil and the unbelieving world. But God is on our side. His Word and Sacraments do more than point us to the blessings Jesus won for us by his death and resurrection; they actually deliver the goods. Baptism puts us on the cross with Jesus and brings us out of the empty tomb with him alive. In Communion, we receive the true body and blood of our Savior, together with God's unbreakable promise: *given and shed for you*.

The Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, is the bridge between the love of Christ and our calling as saints and soldiers in this world. Cleansed and fed by the Lord himself, we can fight our sinful nature, we can gladly serve our neighbor, and we can spread the good news to all creation.

Piety regards both what has been given and what has been forgiven, that is, it compares the greatness of God's blessings and the greatness of our evils, sin and death, with each other, and gives thanks (Ap XXIV, 76).



⁴³ Ron Muetzel, "Sacramental Piety – Past and Present." WELS National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts, 2002.

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Appendix A – Baptism and Faith

If anyone refuses the blessings God gives in Baptism, he loses those blessings. Jesus says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but *whoever does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16, emphasis added). Some who have been baptized will not be saved, because they have turned their back on the Savior who died for them, just as some who have heard the Gospel of Jesus will not be saved, because they have chosen not to believe in him. This truth doesn’t in any way diminish the power, the certainty, or the comfort of Baptism’s blessings.

Yet although we receive Baptism’s blessings only through faith, it is wrong to say that Baptism’s power *depends* upon faith, as though Baptism’s power is incomplete until we add our faith to it. That would make Baptism’s usefulness dependent upon us, and we would have to be uncertain whether our baptism is everything God says it is. Luther says:

They are arrogant, clumsy minds that draw together such ideas and conclusions as these, “Where there is not the true faith, there also cannot be true Baptism.” That’s as if I would conclude, “If I do not believe, then Christ is nothing.” Or “If I am not obedient, then father, mother, and government are nothing.” Is that a correct conclusion, that whenever anyone does not do what he ought, the work that he ought to do shall become nothing and of no value? My dear, just invert the argument and rather draw this conclusion: For this very reason Baptism *is* something and *is* right, because it has been wrongly received. For if Baptism was not right and true in itself, it could not be misused or sinned against. The saying is, “Abuse does not destroy the essence, but confirms it.” For gold is not the less gold even though a harlot wears it in sin and shame” (LC IV, 58, 59).

Appendix B – Luther’s Flood Prayer (Sintflutgebet), 1523

“Viewed in terms of biblical imagery, liturgical history, and pastoral sensitivity, Luther’s prayer is a masterpiece” (Hughes Oliphant Old, quoted in John Koelpin’s 1995 essay *The Uniqueness of the Rite of Baptism in Christian Worship*). This prayer is included in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* as part of a rite that is intended for private baptisms. The prayer could easily be added to any baptism:

Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father, through your stern judgment the unbelieving world was destroyed by the flood, but according to your great mercy, you saved Noah and his family. You engulfed stubborn Pharaoh and his army in the waters of the Red Sea but led your people through those same waters to safety on dry land. In the waters of the Jordan your own Son was baptized and anointed with the Spirit. By these signs you foreshadowed the precious, cleansing bath which you give us in Holy Baptism.

Clinging to your command and promise, we ask that you would look with favor on this child. Through this water of Baptism, drown in him all sin inherited from Adam and any other evil he may do. Set him apart from the unbelieving world and hold him safe and secure in the holy ark of the Church. Keep him always fervent in spirit and joyful in hope so that he may honor your holy name and at last receive, together with all your people, the promised inheritance of eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Appendix C – Baptism Symbols and Ceremonies

From “Communicating Baptism’s Power,” Parish Leadership, Spring 1993, by Bryan Gerlach.
The full article is available on WELS Connect.

- Let people see and hear the water during the baptism, the “washing of rebirth and renewal” (Titus 3:5). The Bible prescribes no mode for baptism; therefore any application of water is valid. But this does not suggest a minimum use of water.
- Banners and other art, whether installed permanently or placed just for baptisms, can help the baptized to appreciate baptism.
- Include special music from the choir or soloist in baptismal ceremonies.
- Offer a quality framed certificate to hang in the child’s room. As recently as the early part of this [20th] century, certificates were of substantial size rather than greeting card size.
- After the baptism the pastor may take the baby and hold him or her toward the congregation. With the joy our baptismal theology gives, he may announce, “Your new brother or sister in Christ.”

“The design and placement of the font may also speak our theology or mask it. We know what God does at the font, but what does the font itself say? Larger and more visible fonts would better remind people of their daily death and rebirth.

“If you are involved in a building program or the design of a chancel, you can urge that the baptismal font make a strong visual statement. Some baptisms occur on the side where worshipers can neither see nor hear what is going on. Some fonts seem designed as an afterthought rather than a place for God’s rebirth miracle. Tucking the font in the corner until it is “needed” doesn’t allow much visible reminder of baptism’s ongoing significance.

“How large should a font be? In smaller churches the lectern is often large to be a pulpit, the pulpit even larger — leaving little room for a font. Some of our parishes, especially the smaller ones, are realizing that both a pulpit and lectern are not necessary. This allows better space for the font.

“Consider a location within the assembly rather than in or near the chancel. This works especially well with wraparound seating. An ideal placement is along some entry path still visible when the congregation turns toward the font for a baptism. This placement reinforces that baptism is a sacrament of entry. It also can be a more prominent visual reminder of baptism’s ongoing meaning.

“It may be difficult or unwise to begin new customs. Parish leaders should encourage acceptance of new practices through education. Work slowly, patiently explaining the meaning of good customs. Start with a Bible class. Work at it for the next generation’s sake so that more of God’s people in the future can use a powerful vocabulary similar to Luther’s. Work at it so that Christians can use his powerful retort, “But I am baptized!”

Appendix D – Close Communion

From “The Lord Jesus Institutes Holy Communion.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium* (2003), by Joel Fredrich.

At the Supper we proclaim the heart of the gospel explicitly through the words of institution *and the rest of it implicitly*. Who, then, has the right to muddy that proclamation with an alien message? Why should we allow that to happen by welcoming communicants who by their church membership continue to uphold a compromised confession of the gospel? The Supper was not given to reduce the gospel to a minimum but to summarize and clothe in sacramental form the gospel in its fullness. A traditional church building has altar, pulpit, and pews in one worship space. That nicely pictures the way the Supper, the sermon, and the people’s confession all belong together as one harmonious witness to the gospel. It is not for us to tear them apart...

If a sectarian Christian comes to our communion table without renouncing his false confession, he will be continuing his assault upon our confession at the very time he is supposed to be proclaiming to us the death of the Lord for our salvation. It is bad enough that he maintains a false confession against us under any circumstances, but it is especially grievous if he does so at our celebration of the Supper. Why should we permit such a thing? Let him lay down his weapons first and come in peace. We are glad that there are many millions of believers outside the WELS, and we yearn for the day when all ills will be healed and we can sit down together at the marriage Supper of the Lamb. But where there are still assaults on the gospel, the Supper is no place to ignore them. The integrity of the gospel is at stake (page 18).

Appendix E – Eucharistic Prayer – a brief history

Used as early as the third century by Hippolytus (A.D. 170-235), Eucharistic prayer was used as preparation for Holy Communion throughout Christendom until the days of the Reformation. Over time, Rome began to teach that Communion is a recurring sacrifice of our Savior, as though Christ’s one-time sacrifice for all people were not yet complete, and as though it were up to the church to finish what he started. The Eucharistic Prayer began to reflect this false teaching. By the time of Luther, the Eucharistic prayer had become so identified with Rome’s false teaching that when Luther revised the Liturgy, he omitted the Eucharistic Prayer completely. Luther wanted to make sure people understood that Jesus’ death on the cross was a one-time sacrifice for all people, and there’s nothing any human being will ever be able to add to that with our own sacrifices, even our sacrifices of thanksgiving.

Since then, some Lutherans have seen fit to restore this ancient prayer minus those offensive characteristics that had developed in Rome. Even one of Luther’s own students designed an order of service which included the Eucharistic Prayer, with Luther’s blessing.

(Appendix E – Continued)

One of the benefits of using a Eucharistic prayer is that it can allow congregations time to remember and give thanks to God for the saving work of his Son and the blessings of the Sacrament. Jesus himself gave thanks before instituting his supper.

We are free to use a Eucharistic prayer in our Communion services, but we need to be careful not to offend those who are aware of the prayer's checkered past. The prayer found in *Divine Service II of Christian Worship Supplement* is clearly separated from the words of institution, so that no one confuses our sacrifice of thanksgiving (prayer) with Jesus' one-time sacrifice of atonement. The words of the prayer recall and proclaim Jesus' saving acts.

Liturgical historians will notice that the *Divine Service II* prayer has little in common with the Eucharistic prayer of the early Christian church. In the future, perhaps we will reclaim more of a connection with the good and wholesome aspects of that prayer. For now, the Hymnal Supplement Committee thought it best to keep the prayer brief and clear, to allow people to get used to the idea of using a Prayer of Thanksgiving as part of their Communion service.

For more about Eucharistic prayer, read Stephen Valleskey's 2003 essay, "Dr. Luther Celebrates Holy Communion," which is available at www.wlsessays.net.

Prayer of Thanksgiving, from *Divine Service II (Christian Worship Supplement)*

M: Blessed are you, O Lord of heaven and earth. We praise and thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, and we remember the great acts of love through which he has ransomed us from sin, death, and the devil's power.

By his incarnation, he became one with us.
 By his perfect life, he fulfilled your holy will.
 By his innocent death, he overcame hell.
 By his rising from the grave, he opened heaven.

Invited by your grace and instructed by your Word, we approach your table with repentant and joyful hearts. Strengthen us through Christ's body and blood, and preserve us in the true faith until we feast with him and all his ransomed people in glory everlasting.

C: Amen.

(Included in the Electronic Edition of the Supplement are seasonal versions of the Prayer of Thanksgiving: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and End Time, as well as two alternate versions for general use.)