

The Sacrament of the Altar

by Martin Luther

As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

What is the Sacrament of the Altar?

It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.

Where is this written?

The holy Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul write: Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me."

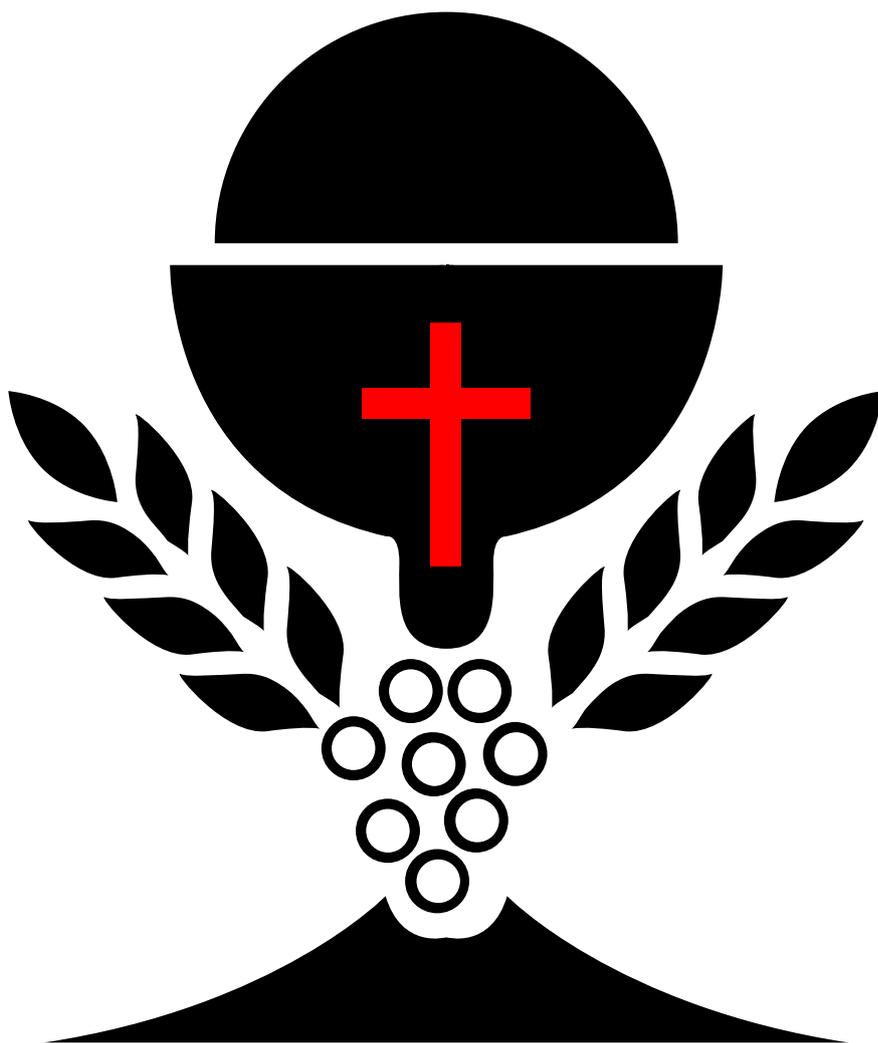
In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?

These words, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?

Certainly not just eating and drinking do these things, but the words written here: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness



of sins." These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: "forgiveness of sins."

Who receives this sacrament worthily?

Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.

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Christ's Body and Blood

by Edward G. Kettner

The sixth chief part of the Small Catechism is titled "The Sacrament of the Altar." Other names have been applied to it as well. It is often, and probably most popularly, called "The Lord's Supper," since it was instituted by Christ with His own words at the last meal He ate with His disciples before His death. It has often simply been called "Holy Communion," since St. Paul reminds us that the bread is a communion in the Body of Christ and the cup is a communion in the Blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Luther had no problem in referring to the entire service as the Mass, as had been done for centuries, provided that the service be stripped of all thought that this is a re-sacrifice of Christ necessary to complete the work of forgiving our sins. The idea that Christ was being sacrificed once again by the priest at the altar Luther rightly considered to be an "abomination."

But if Christ is not being sacrificed anew, why is it called the Sacrament of the Altar? We see something new going on here, in that while a sacrifice is performed by a priest toward God, here the process is reversed; here we have a sacrament, an act performed by Christ, given to us for our benefit. This act gives us the benefits of that sacrifice that was performed once for all. Here, in the eating and drinking of Christ's Body and Blood, we receive the sacrifice that was performed on Calvary, eating the very Body that was given over to death on the cross and drinking the very Blood that was shed on that same cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

When Jesus distributed the cup, He said, "This cup is the new testament in my blood." By these words He shows that this is His

last will and testament, assuring us that "is" means is. The nature of a will is to speak clearly, so that those who receive the inheritance can be absolutely certain about what they are receiving. Therefore, when the pastor says, "This is the true blood of Christ, shed for the remission of your sins," you can be certain that it is the true blood of Christ, and that it is indeed for you.



The Sacrament of the Altar. Woodcut from the 1558 edition of Luther's Small Catechism.

Jesus concludes with the words, "This do in remembrance of me." This does not mean that this is simply a memorial meal, but rather that in the eating and drinking we actually remember what Christ has done for us and what He has promised to give us here: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. As Luther reminds us, "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." To remember is to trust that what Christ said stands.

Who is worthy to receive this sacrament? Luther tells us that

the one who is worthy and well-prepared is the one who believes the words, "Given and shed for the remission of sins." In other words, faith is what is necessary. To receive the sacrament unworthily is to receive it without faith and without understanding what is truly given here. In the face of this, Luther and Lutheran churches insist that one not receive the sacrament until they have been properly instructed in the Christian faith and in the meaning of Christ's words. True faith by its very nature includes repentance, which is accompanied then by absolution. To receive the sacrament and not understand what it means (that is, failing to recognize that it is the true body and blood of Christ) may result in one taking the sacrament to one's judgment rather than for one's benefit. All who commune, whether believer or not, receive Christ's Body and Blood with their mouths. Only those who trust the words of Christ receive them worthily.

Do you shy away from the sacrament because you are overwhelmed by your sinfulness and thus see yourself as unworthy? Be assured that this sacrament most certainly is meant for you, for you, like all sinners, by nature deserve nothing but wrath from God, but by Christ's work you are deemed worthy—not by your own merits, but by the merits of Christ. Knowing that, you come with a penitent heart to the Lord's Table and depart in peace and joy, assured once again that those marvellous gifts are indeed for you.

Rev. Dr. Edward G. Kettner is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at Concordia Lutheran Seminary (Edmonton).