

For the

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The Holy Supper: A Taste of Heaven - p.6

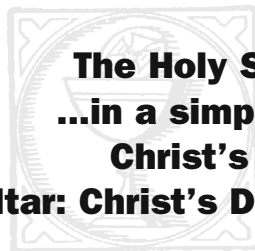
...in a simple way to his household... - p.8

Christ's Body and Blood Saves Us - p.10

Sacrament of the Altar: Christ's Daily Food and Sustenance - p.12

Coming Home - p.14

In the Field - p.16




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P R E S S

Christ's Body and Blood Saves Us

By Kevin Leininger



When I was in high school, one of my teachers in sociology class, I think, often allowed students to discuss religious issues.

No matter which faith or denomination was being discussed, one girl always made the same speech—"I know exactly when I decided to become a Christian," she would say with a certain amount of implied superiority. "How do YOU know that you are going to go to heaven?"

That question confused and troubled me. I could remember no specific time I began to believe in God or became a Christian. I knew I had made no "decision for Jesus" nor experienced an emotional Paul-like conversion. And so I began to question the strength of my own faith and the certainty of God's promise of salvation.

All of which proves two things—I'm so old I remember when God wasn't a four-letter word in America's public schools and, more to the point; nearly two decades of regularly going to a Lutheran church hadn't yet given me the comforting assurance that God's grace is found not in my own feelings and actions, but through faith and in the sacraments instituted by Christ and

administered by His church.

It took years and the study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions for me to develop an answer for my high-school classmate—I couldn't remember when I became a Christian because I didn't choose God, HE chose me through baptism, when I was only a few weeks old. And I can be sure of salvation not because I FEEL close to God, but because I have PROOF that God is close to me—proof found not only by God's Word, but in the body and blood of Christ Himself.

Nothing separates Lutherans from most of American Protestantism quite like the Sacrament of the Altar—and not just because we believe that the sacrament is about something far more meaningful and profound than fellowship, grape juice, and biscuits. As Scripture and confessional Lutheranism make clear, the Lord's Supper is where God works His forgiveness.

And what is He forgiving? Something many Christians would like to think no longer matters—sin.

Several weeks ago, I received a letter from a non-denominational church that was about to open in my neighborhood. "Many folks view religion as a few people getting together and using God to spoil their fun," the minister wrote. "I vowed to help change that perception by always sharing messages that emphasize the Good News, hope and comfort, rather than emphasizing shame and condemnation. Our commitment to you is always to consider your needs and feelings, and to present solid Bible-based messages that touch your mind and emotions."

The words are different, but the message is the same as that expressed by my "evangelical" classmate all those years ago—come to church with us and you'll know you are saved. How will you know? Your emotions will tell you so. You'll feel good about yourself. None of that yucky sin stuff.

I suspect that message is just as confusing and alluring to uninformed Christians today as it was to me. It's just as dangerous today, too—which is why Lutherans need to clearly confess the truth about Holy Communion.

Today too many well-meaning church

leaders seem to think that the historic Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper will be a "turn-off" to Americans who don't mind seeing bodies and blood on television, but demand a sanitized version of the Gospel at church. Don't preach to us about our sins, we want to hear about God's love. Don't preach about how Christ suffered a human death on the cross because of those sins, we want to praise His heavenly glory.

Don't preach to us that Christ invites us to receive forgiveness at the communion rail along with His true body and blood. Tell us that communion is something WE do for God. Then we can leave church feeling good about ourselves.

You don't have to be a theologian—you don't even have to be familiar with Christ's own words of institution—to see how tragically shortsighted such an understanding of Holy Communion is. Far from being a blood-and-sin-drenched "downer," the Sacrament of the Altar is a joyous, liberating gift of God. Far from a simple commemoration of Christ's suffering, it is intended to free us from OUR suffering.

Luther called this sacrament a "food of souls" in his Large Catechism, and for good reason. "We must never regard the sacrament as something injurious from which we had better flee," he wrote. "But as a pure, wholesome remedy imparting salvation and comfort, which will cure you and give you both life in soul and body. For, where the soul has recovered, the body is also relieved."

Perhaps even Protestants who believe that communion is merely a symbolic act of fellowship would agree with Luther. But, rejecting the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine, they would say that any comfort found in the sacrament is merely psychological and emotional, not physical or spiritual.

But that's not what Scripture teaches. St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11 that anyone "who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many among you are sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." If the Sacrament of the Altar has the power to make undiscerning participants ill, does it

not also have the power to impart physical and spiritual health?

Luther's words make it clear that he thought so. Personal experience helped lead me to the same conclusion.

It happened five years ago, but the memory is as fresh as if it were yesterday. I was driving home from work one cold, dark night in January when a man stepped out in front of my car for a reason I still do not know. Unable to stop in time, the resulting collision proved fatal for him, and overwhelmingly painful for me.

My mind was filled with what I suppose are all the "normal" thoughts following such an extraordinary event. I felt guilt at not having been able to avoid the accident and a deep sense of grief for

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the victim's family. I was confused as to why the accident happened in the first place, and puzzled as to how this incomprehensible tragedy fit into God's plan for my life and that of the man whose life had been prematurely and violently ended. Perhaps I was even a little angry with God for having allowed such a thing to happen in the first place.

Still numbed by what had happened, I nevertheless went to church the following Sunday morning. I knew that I needed God more than ever that day and, because I finally understood what it means to be a Lutheran Christian, I knew exactly where to find Him.

Instead of the memory of that body and blood on the street, I eagerly received the body and blood of Christ through the

Sacrament of the Altar. My emotions that morning may not have told me that God loved me and forgave my sins—they in fact may have been telling me just the opposite. But the promise of God's Word told me that He was present in the sacrament, sustaining my life and faith regardless of how I felt.

In the Large Catechism Luther writes, "If you are heavy-laden and feel your weakness, go joyfully to this sacrament and obtain refreshment, consolation and strength. For if you would wait until you are rid of such burdens, that you might come to the sacrament pure and worthy, you must forever stay away."

The joy of the Sacrament of the Altar is that none of its blessings depend on our emotions. Either, as Luther noted, we will feel unworthy and reject the gift God would give us, or we will be so self-righteous in having chosen Christ that we will mistake the sacrament for a law-driven work we do, not as the pure Gospel it is. That is a joy the world can neither give nor take away; it is joy denied emotion-driven believers who mistake momentary euphoria for eternal peace.

Long before I was in high school, I had been taught Luther's Small Catechism. If I had actually LEARNED it, I could have responded to my classmate by quoting Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed.

When did I become a Christian? How do I know I'm saved?

"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified me and kept me in the true faith." None of those gifts is greater than the forgiveness and peace found in Christ's own body and blood.

Notice—the verbs in Luther's explanation are (on our part) passive. God does it all, lest we should boast. I wish I'd been smart enough to say that 25 years ago.

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