

The Lord's Supper: Why the Fuss?
A Report on the Book by Dr. Martin Chemnitz
Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

Introduction

Many churches, and indeed many Christians today consider a true understanding of what the “Lord’s Supper” is as far less important than its value as a symbol of Christian unity. To commune together, most Christians believe, is to confess that we are all true followers of Jesus Christ. Yet sadly, and ironically, the Lord’s Supper is one doctrine where the lack of unity between Christians is most evident. When I was still a member of the ELCA, a Lutheran relative expressed how hurt she was that my LC-MS fiancée did not commune with our family. I explained the position of the LC-MS to her, especially the importance of the Real Presence. She responded angrily that she didn’t believe in the Real Presence, so perhaps I thought she shouldn’t be communing either. I have many more such stories, and I am sure other Lutherans do as well. What it illustrates is how some Christians see a proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper as non-essential to the faith, and yet at the same time as a key sign of Christian unity.

Today’s Lutherans should know why a proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper is essential to the faith. It is true that, in the words of Dr. Chemnitz “not all who are members of Christ can defend what they believe by the art of rebuttal” (p.195). But this should not keep Lutherans from learning what they can, so that they are “always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you” (1 Peter 3:15). Dr. Chemnitz’ book, The Lord’s Supper, even though written over 400 years ago, clearly presents not only why Lutherans believe what they do about the Eucharist, but also what is at stake in defending that belief. The book is especially applicable in the context of the United States, where the Sacramentarian or Reformed view of the Eucharist is more prevalent than the position of the Roman Catholics.

This report will, first, outline what the book says in regards to the Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper. For example, does Scripture require us to accept the simple, proper, and natural understanding of the words of Christ? Second, some of Dr. Chemnitz’ important arguments in favor of this interpretation are given. Third, selected arguments especially applicable to our day of the adversaries to the Lutheran understanding will be presented, along with Dr. Chemnitz’ rebuttals. Four, the report will point out how departing from the Lutheran understanding of the Supper places the faith of the Christian and, indeed, the faith of the church in danger.

The Lutheran Understanding of the Lord’s Supper

First of all, why is there so much fuss about the proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper? Dr. Chemnitz gives us three reasons why a correct understanding is vitally important. First, Christians have been commanded to obey the Lord in all things. The Apostle John records Jesus as saying, “If you continue in My Word, and My words continue in you, you shall be My disciples indeed.” (John 15:7). The prophet Moses also warns us “If anyone will not hear the words of (the) prophet (to come after me), I will be his avenger.” (Deut. 18:19) Therefore the commands of Christ must be treated with due reverence and seriousness.

Second, the Last Supper is the last will and testament of Jesus Christ. As Dr. Chemnitz writes, “The words of the Supper are not to be classified in the category of points in Scripture which can be either ignored or variously explained or even incorrectly understood and still have no bearing on faith or salvation. For these are the words of the last will and testament not of a mere man but of the very Son of God.” (p.26) Dr. Chemnitz points out that Imperial civil law of the Holy Roman Empire forbid the changing of a will by an executor or other party (p.27). Anyone who did so would lose anything they might have received from the deceased’s estate. What might we lose, then, if we change the last will and testament of the Lord of the Universe?

Last, Paul warns us in 1 Cor. 11:29 that “He who does not discern the body of the Lord eats judgment to himself and is guilty of the body of the Lord.” Should we not then, as Christians, be mindful of avoiding that judgment? These are the three key reasons for exercising the utmost care in interpreting the words of institution of Christ’s Supper, his last will and testament for mankind.

How, as Lutherans, do we understand the nature of the Lord’s Supper? At the heart of this question is the matter of what we actually receive when we eat and drink the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Dr. Chemnitz again provides three hermeneutical principles to apply in reading the words of institution of the Supper recorded in Scripture. The first is that “the dogma of the Lord’s Supper has its own proper and peculiar setting in the words of institution” (p.21) It is in the passages that record the Lord’s institution of the Supper itself that we must find its meaning. This is not an original idea, but is actually itself a scriptural principle. When the Pharisees come to Jesus to ask a question about the bill of divorce, Jesus basis his answer not on the passage in Deuteronomy about bills of divorce, but on the Genesis account of the creation of marriage (Matt. 19:3-9). Not content to argue on the basis of a passage peripheral to the point, Jesus goes right back to the source. Likewise, when Paul writes to the church at Corinth about their misuse of the Lord’s Supper, he quotes the words of institution themselves (1 Cor. 11:17-32) as the basis for his response.

The second principle is that the words of institution, as alluded to earlier, are the last will and testament of Jesus Christ. Therefore the words of institution should be interpreted with the same care as would be given to any legally binding will. In the words of Dr. Chemnitz, they “must not be treated in a frivolous or light manner.” (p.21) One principle of interpretation to apply is “What the written text of the will does not say we should not say.” (p.84) It is inappropriate to try and imagine what the testator of the will really *meant*. We must stick with what the testator actually said or wrote in the will.

The third principle is that the “simple, proper and natural” meaning of the words of Scripture must be used unless doing so “forces an absurdity on other, clearer passages of Scripture or on articles of faith.” (p.68) The words of institution are the clearest passages of Scripture dealing with the Lord’s Supper. So as long as the natural meaning of the words of institution do not conflict with any articles of faith, it is that meaning that must be retained. The words of institution simply cannot mean whatever we want them to mean. They must mean what they say.

Dr. Chemnitz gives four questions of Dr. Luther's to assist any Christian in his or her discussions of the Lord's Supper with others. How these questions are answered will clearly show whether the other party has a Scriptural interpretation of the Supper or not. These questions are (from p.43):

1. Are the words of the last will and testament to be understood in their proper and natural sense?
2. What is present in the Lord's Supper which is celebrated among us, and received orally?
3. Is the body only in heaven, so that it cannot also be here on earth in His Supper?
4. What do the unworthy receive when to them the Son of God also says, "Take, eat"?

Using the three hermeneutical principles stated above, and bearing in mind the four key questions just mentioned, what is the proper understanding of the words of institution of the Lord's Supper? In particular, how do we understand the phrase "this (the bread) is my body"? The Lutheran position is that the words "bread and body" must be taken in their natural, plain sense. Bread is bread, and the body is the same body of Jesus that was born of the Virgin, hung from the cross, and rose again from the dead (p.46). The question arises of the meaning of the connective verb, "is". There are several interpretative possibilities, each of which Dr. Chemnitz examines in turn.

The phrase "this is my body" could be a regular predication. But this would mean that the bread and body combine in some kind of freakish material that is neither one substance nor the other. Dr. Chemnitz uses the example of the phrase "this man is a bull", describing the half-man, half-bull minotaur, as an example of this type of predication. We do not recognize as regular predications other similar Scriptural passages that have as subject a natural animal or object and as predicate some exalted thing, such as the Holy Spirit or God. Examples of this include the burning bush, and the tongues of fire at Pentecost. Therefore "this is my body" should not be seen as a regular predicate either. "This is my body" is also not a metonymy, such as using the word "sword" to designate "kingdom". A metonymy never occurs in a construct with the word "is". Neither are the words of institution an interpretive passage. The Lord is not saying that the bread "represents" his body, as if he were explaining a dream or vision, since the Last Supper was neither a dream nor a parable but a real live event. Last, it is not referring to a change, for example saying "this is (now) my body", since Paul in 1 Cor. 11 still speaks of the presence of the bread even while referring to it as the Body of Christ. Therefore, the "is" of this passage must be something different than all these manners of predication. Luther calls it a "synecdoche", while others refer to it as a "sacramental" or "irregular" predication: in other words, the words describe the union of two substances. Examples of such predications were given above, and include the burning bush being "the God of your father", and phrases such as "Jesus is God".

What this means is that the bread of the Eucharist is not simple bread, but bread and the Body of Christ, joined and united together but yet unmixed and distinct. This union is not the same as the union of the divine and human natures in Christ, which is an inseparable union. But there is a similarity between the union of the two natures in Christ and the union of Christ and elements in the Eucharist. In fact, the early church understood the Eucharist this way. Augustine writes "What we are saying...(is) that this sacrament is made up and consists of two elements: the form of the visible elements and the invisible flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." (p.152) Likewise Bernard writes "What we see is

the outward appearance of bread and wine; what we believe is under the outward appearance is the true body of Christ which hung on the cross and true blood of Christ which flowed from His side.” (p.152)

In addition to understanding what the phrase “this is my body,” means, we should also understand what Lutherans believe when we say we “eat and drink the body and blood of Christ”. There are actually three types of eating that occur in the Eucharistic meal, according to Dr. Chemnitz. The first is the physical eating of the bread. Origen, Augustine, and Luther all agreed that the bread and the wine received in the mouth were actually digested in the body. The second is the spiritual eating upon the flesh and blood of Jesus as described in John 6. The most important eating, however, is the mysterious *sacramental* eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ. We cannot understand how the Holy Spirit, who exists everywhere, could be said to descend in the form of a dove at Jesus baptism. In the same manner, we cannot understand how we actually eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. Nonetheless, since that is what Jesus Christ says we do, we believe it. Dr. Chemnitz distinguished the spiritual and sacramental eating, saying “The spiritual eating of Christ which is sealed is one thing and the sacramental eating of the body of Christ by which the sealing is done is another.” (p.64)

Arguments in Favor of The Lutheran Interpretation

Is it not possible that the phrase “this is my body” might be just a figure of speech and not a sacramental predication? Dr. Chemnitz gives a couple of reasons why this is unlikely. First, in other places in the Gospels when Jesus uses a figure of speech, he then explains it to the disciples (Mark 4:34). The words of institution are never, in the four places they are written, explained as being a figure of speech. Second, an examination of Scripture will show that all doctrines vital for our understanding are presented clearly and often several times. Paul writes to the Philippians that it is no trouble for him to write “the same things again, and it is a safeguard to you.” (Phil. 3:1) In this same way the words of institution are repeated in all three synoptic gospels as well as by Paul in 1 Corinthians.

But does not human reason tell us that a literal understanding of the phrase “this is my body” is impossible? The Scriptures give us, in the example of Abraham, a clear reason why relying on human reason is a bad idea. God promised a son to Abraham. Sarah, seeing her own advanced age and barrenness, took matters into her own hands so that Abraham had a son through Hagar, her handmaiden. God then restated the promise to Abraham, that he would have a son specifically by **Sarah** (Gen. 17:16). Later on, after the birth of Isaac, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son to Him. This command would seem to go not only against a basic moral law not kill, but also the promise of God to make Abraham a mighty nation through the offspring of Sarah. Nonetheless, Abraham had learned his lesson, and did not let his human reason interfere with the clear command of God. In this way, Abraham, the father of the faithful (Gal. 3:7) serves as an example of one who trusted God’s Word over and above human reason.

It is also important to consider what it means that the words of institution are the last will and testament of Jesus Christ. Christ, as the Son of God, would not give his people an ambiguous will to interpret. Interpreting the words of institution against their plain, simple, natural meaning has led in the past and in the present to a multitude of meanings attributed to the supper. Therefore, the will should only be interpreted according to its natural meaning. In fact,

Imperial law in effect at the time of Chemnitz requires that any will be interpreted according to its plain and natural meaning (p.84). It is likely that the laws of the United States have the same requirement today.

One last analogy worth mentioning is the analogy between the Old Covenant established with Israel at the time of Moses and the New Covenant established with Jesus. When the Old Covenant was established, as recorded in Exodus 24, young bulls were sacrificed and half the blood offered to God. The other half was then sprinkled on the people as the seal of the covenant with them. In the New Testament, Jesus offers up his blood on the cross to God, and we receive his blood in the Eucharist as the seal of the covenant made with the new Israel. It is only fitting, then, that the Lord should offer his very body and blood for us to consume as the seal of the new covenant with us.

The Objections of the Adversaries

As I stated in the introduction to this paper, one of the most common interpretations of the Lord's Supper is as a sign of unity among Christians. Yet the Supper serves as a powerful symbol of disunity in the church, as many Christians disagree on the true nature of the Supper. How do those who reject the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper understand it? Some see it only as a reminder or a kind of theatrical reenactment of the giving of Christ's body for us. Others as a kind of symbol of Christ's promises, similar to promise of an engagement ring. Some feel that only the divine nature of Christ is present, others that only the Holy Spirit is present, and others that only the merits and benefits of Christ's body are present. (p.41) Calvin himself held this last belief, being "unwilling to disassociate the body of Christ from the meal since the words are so clear: 'I have said that the body of Christ is distributed efficaciously, but not naturally; according to its power, but not according to its substance.'" (p.41) Likewise another adversary, Peter Martyr, wrote that "If anyone by the term 'presence' understands the grasping by faith whereby we ourselves ascend into heaven and lay hold on Christ in his majesty with our mind and our spirit, then I am in agreement with him." (p.42)

Dr. Chemnitz' rebuttal to all these arguments is very clear: all of these beliefs depart from the clear and plain teaching of the words of institution. Besides which, there is no agreement amongst the adversaries themselves as to what communicants partake of at the Eucharist. One thing is sure: they do agree that the bread and wine are not in any true sense the body and blood of Christ, since he is far away from the earth in a distant heaven. How, then, should a Lutheran respond to this chief charge, that Christ cannot be in the bread and wine by virtue that he is "ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father"? (The Apostles' Creed, 2nd Article)

First, it is argued by the adversaries that the human body, wherever it may be, cannot be present in many places at once. This, for our human flesh, is most certainly true. But Christ was not only human, but also divine. He was able to walk on water, walk through walls, and become invisible. In fact, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:10, Christ fills the universe in his exalted, resurrection state, making it possible to be with us always (Matt. 28:20). Since these are all the case, and God is omnipotent, how is it not possible to believe that he could also be in the bread and the wine as he promised us he would be?

Second, it is argued that the clear and simple meaning of the words of institution do, in fact, contradict the article of faith that Christ is now in heaven and not on earth (Nicene Creed). To this, Dr. Chemnitz asks who it was that Paul saw in Acts 23:11 if it was not Jesus Christ the Lord? Clearly it is possible for Christ to be on earth while at the same time he is seated at the right hand of God in heaven. We simply do not have the capacity to understand the “third heaven” in which Christ is located. We should also recall that Christ is not held captive by heaven, but rather has taken possession of it.

At the heart of this dispute is whether “it is...our task...to inquire into or explain the ways of the divine mysteries, (or if) it is our responsibility to in a simple, humble, and obedient way...believe the expressions of the divine voice.” (p.196). For if we do not believe the words of Christ in his last will and testament, what else will we not believe? What danger might there be to the Christian and to the Christian faith if human ability to comprehend a revealed matter were to become our judge, rather than the revealed Word of God?

The Danger of Rejecting the Lutheran Understanding

As stated in the introduction, many Christians believe that a correct and common understanding of the Lord’s Supper is not essential for the Christian faith and for the unity of the church. Dr. Chemnitz clearly disagrees. First of all, would Paul have warned against eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper to judgment for a non-essential matter (1 Cor. 11:29)? If the result of communing unworthily is judgment, the understanding of the individual Christian would seem to be quite important. Second, Dr. Chemnitz speaks out against those who feel this doctrine has no impact on any others. He writes that the “irreverent desire to invent various interpretations for the last will and testament of the Son of God is confirmed by the proposal that there be a kind of immunity to criticism in this area, so long as one retains the fundamentals of the other articles of faith...Long ago Pelagius argued the same way.” (p.25). Pelagius was condemned as a heretic for teaching that there was no original sin, and that man could come to faith on his own. This section of the paper will examine what impact an interpretation of the Lord’s Supper apart from the clear meaning of the words of institution might have on the individual Christian and on the church’s doctrine.

Dr. Chemnitz points out eight benefits of the Lord’s Supper that would be lost if Christ were not truly present according to his human nature in the elements. The first is our ability to commune with Christ. The adversaries of the Lutheran perspective sometimes talk, like Peter Martyr, of laying hold by faith of Christ who is in heaven in the Supper. Dr. Chemnitz writes that “we, weighed down by the burden of sin and pressed under by the weight of our infirmities, are not yet able to enter the secret places of heaven (Col. 2:18) and penetrate to Him in glory. He Himself therefore comes to us in order to lay hold upon us with that nature by which He is our brother.” (p.187). We cannot go to Christ or to the Father: but Christ can and does indeed come to us. We need not search heaven to find him – He gives Himself to us in the Eucharist.

Second, Christ is the medium by which we are joined to God. He is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6) The Supper is the medium by which we are joined to God, just as God made himself visible in flesh on earth in Jesus. Third, we are joined to Christ’s incorruptible nature through the Lord’s Supper. In a tangible way Christ removes the

doubt that our flesh will one day be like his. If Christ were far removed from us, what assurance would we have of our own resurrection? Fourth, Christ gives himself for the forgiveness of sins. Fifth, the Supper strengthens our own faith and confidence that our sins are forgiven. Sixth, the Supper is the seal of the New Covenant made with us. It serves as the blood sprinkled on the people of Israel to seal the Old Covenant. If Christ has lied, and is not present in the Supper, what confidence do we have that we are part of the New Covenant? Seventh, the Eucharist is the remembrance of God's on-going rule in our lives. Eighth and last, it serves to bring together as one the Body of Christ who partake of it. All these many benefits are lost if we reject the clear words of our Lord.

But the danger is not to the individual Christian alone, but also to the teaching of the church. Dr. Chemnitz himself asks "may (we) either retain the proper meaning of the words or through the use of figure of speech depart from the simple, proper, and natural meaning of the words according to each person's notions? The answer is a categorical no! For if this were the case, all dogmas and all articles of faith could be so completely overturned and bypassed that all assurance of faith would be snatched away from consciences." (p.68) What doctrines would be in danger if such a loose interpretive practice were used?

First of all, if the foundation of a doctrine may be made on something other than the passage about which it is most clearly spoken, several doctrines could be overturned. Pelagius, for example, rejected the doctrinal of original sin because he used less clear passages of Scripture to interpret Romans 5:12, "just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned". Even though this passage clearly shows the trouble humanity is in, Pelagius rejected it on the grounds of other passages that were not specifically about original sin. Likewise the Papists at the time of the Reformation rejected Luther's doctrine of justification by grace through faith. They used passages in James which do not specifically deal with the issue of justification before God to refute Luther's exposition of clearer passages in Romans and Galatians. Lastly, liberal theologians of our day use unclear passages from the gospels as well as Romans 16 to overturn the clearer admonitions of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 against women serving as teaching overseers. This clearly demonstrates the danger of using passages not central to an issue to determine the meaning of passages that are central.

Second, what is the danger of not using the plain and natural meaning of the words, "this is my body"? One can use as an example the words "Jesus is God". The Arians, who believed that Christ was the first born of creation and not the eternally begotten Son of God, would interpret the passage as meaning Jesus is "God" (meaning participation in divine status). The Docetists, who did not believe that God would become a material creature, would read it as meaning "Jesus" (in some immaterial sense) is God. Liberals would read it as meaning God is "like" or "is analogous to" Jesus. This one phrase can be interpreted to mean three different things. The orthodox Christian church has clearly defined this phrase, like the phrase "this is my body", as being an irregular predicate. This means it is only properly understood as meaning God is Jesus, where Jesus retains his human nature but is also God. Likewise, the bread remains bread but is now also the Body of the God-Man Jesus Christ. If anyone accepts the union of the two natures in Christ, how can they not also accept the union of the two natures in the Eucharist? Likewise, if one denies the latter, what is keeping one from rejecting also the former? The Papists reject the union of Body and bread by saying the Body is "the bread",

but only the accidents of the bread and not its substance. The Sacramentarians reject the union when they say the bread remains but “the Body” is only present in some nominal, effectual, or spiritual sense.

Last, a word of warning from Dr. Philip Melancthon: “It can happen that a certain statement which is quite in harmony with human reason may be pleasing to a lazy mind, especially if the statement is constructed and supplied with learned arguments and concepts. But what will happen in a time of temptation, when our conscience is troubled as to what reason it has to depart from the long accepted position of the church?” (p.89)

Conclusion

This report has endeavored to show how The Lord’s Supper by Dr. Martin Chemnitz continues to have relevance for today. It is most useful in demonstrating how abandoning the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist could have detrimental effects on our own and the Christian church’s faith. The book explains the Lutheran understanding of the words of institution. The simple, natural meaning of the words “this is my body” should be kept, and understood as being a sacramental predicate not unlike the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Some support for this understanding beyond simple hermeneutics was given, as well as the support of the early church for this understanding of the Eucharistic meal. The chief objections of the adversaries to this position, especially from the Reformed or Sacramentarian perspective were also examined. Lastly, the danger to the individual and to the Christian faith itself of using a creative interpretation was outlined. I end the report with the last words of The Lord’s Supper itself:

“And when my mind is disturbed by arguments to the contrary, I repeat what has been truly and seriously said regarding secular wills: ‘In times of doubt it is safer not to depart from the words.’” (p.269)

All Scripture quotations from: New International Version, 1984

All quotations are from: Chemnitz, Martin, The Lord’s Supper, trans: J.A.O.Preus, (Concordia Publishing House, 1979)