

April 10, 2017



“What is the Sacrament of the Altar?”

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

Martin Luther seeks a middle path in understanding the Sacrament of the Altar. On his theological “right” was the position of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. This position has the technical name of “transubstantiation.” In this view, as the priest prays the eucharistic prayer over the elements, the bread and the wine become in their essence or substance the physical body and blood of Jesus Christ. The theologians of the church intended this as a way to explain the mystery of the holy meal. But this perspective often led people to treat the sacrament as magic rather than mystery.

On his theological “left” was the position of the Zwinglians. Huldrych Zwingli and his associates asserted that the bread and the wine are symbols to remind us of God’s marvelous gift to us in Jesus Christ. Zwingli argued that since the risen Jesus now sits at the right hand of God the Father, his risen body cannot also then be on the altars of churches week in and out. So the Sacrament of the Altar in this tradition is a memorial meal. It is something that we do to express our faith in Jesus and our gratitude to God for this gift.

These two alternatives can help us understand how Luther defines the Sacrament of the Altar. It is the “true body,” the authentic and real presence of Jesus under the bread and wine. Luther doesn’t try to define that preposition “under.” In other writings he adds “in” and “with” to try to clarify things (but they don’t help that much). Regardless, Luther says to Zwingli that when Jesus says “This is my body,” that’s what Jesus means.

We receive the true body and blood of Jesus in the Sacrament by eating and drinking the bread and wine. In the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, the eucharist was a spectator sport rather than a participatory activity. It was a visible feast rather than an edible one. This reinforced the “magical” experience of the participants. And it made the Sacrament something reserved for those who were truly worthy by their own and personal holiness. Luther emphasized the personal eating and drinking as a way to directly experience the promise in the Sacrament that Jesus’ body and blood are given and shed “for you.”

Most important, the Sacrament was instituted by Christ himself. The Sacrament of the Altar--Holy Communion--is something God does for us. It is not something we do for God. That is the most important part of this definition. In Holy Communion we receive in our bodies the gracious gift of Jesus’ body and blood by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is, as ancient liturgies say, the gifts of God for the people of God. We Lutherans suggest that the Sacrament of the Altar is neither magic nor mere memorial. It is the Real Presence of Jesus’ body and blood given and shed for you and for me to share God’s forgiveness, life and salvation.

Let’s pray. Dear God, give me the power of your Holy Spirit that creates in me the faith to receive Jesus’ body and blood with joy and gratitude. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Do something: Think about your understanding of Holy Communion. Do you have questions you want answered? Share those questions with your pastor or a trusted Christian friend.

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