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# Martin Luther's Concerns With The Numinous In The Lord's Supper

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The scholarly attention to Luther's understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper has been extensive. The early phase, up to 1520, while generally affirming the real presence, mainly addressed what Luther regarded as Roman Catholic aberrations. Subsequently Luther responded to the Swiss Reformed and German Anabaptist criticisms. Continuing to affirm the real presence, Luther elaborated several key motifs, such as the personal presence of Christ, the idea of testament and promise, the existential need for trust and for courage, the significance of love and faith. In the course of time, these motifs have received a detailed attention.

At the same time, the motif of the numinous<sup>1</sup> has been rather neglected, namely Luther's intense awareness of the holiness of God along with the awe, humility, and joy which envelops the authentic experience of faith in Jesus Christ. Here Luther celebrated both God the Creator and God the Redeemer. Yet his awareness of the sense of the numinous, surrounding all of nature, was far exceeded by the encounter with the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. This latter context elevated the Lord's Supper to its supernatural heights.<sup>2</sup>

## I

While seeking to offer a constructive interpretation of the Lord's Supper, Luther did not overlook what he regarded as corrosive trivia, magical deviations, and heresy which he excluded from the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For this task, his standard was the Gospel, the central message of Jesus Christ, which he often defined as "testament." Luther wrote in *A Treatise On The New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass*, 1520:

Christ has gathered up the whole gospel in a short summary with the words of this testament or sacrament (*i.e.* "This is my body, this is my

*blood.*" E.G.). For the gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God's grace and the forgiveness of all sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ ... [35:106]<sup>4</sup>

As Carl F. Wisloeff<sup>5</sup> has succinctly pointed out, Luther's definition of a testament has been a major insight which Luther identified with God's promise, grounded in the incarnation and atonement, and connected with a central traditional motif from the canon of the mass. By changing the mass into an exercise for gaining meritorious "good works" [LW 35:93], this understanding, according to Luther, had been virtually obliterated. In prophetic anger, Luther observed:

... what about those priests and laymen who have departed so far from the true meaning of the mass and faith that they have even made it into a kind of magic? Some have masses said in order to become rich and prosperous in business; some, because they think that if they hear mass in the morning they will be safe during the day from all danger and want; some on account of sickness; some for still more foolish, even sinful reasons." [35:107]

Despite these traditional claims, Luther was prepared to assert, that "one mass is like another, and there is no difference except in faith." [35:108] As Luther well knew, there had been developed different masses for different purposes:

One is valued as useful for this, another for that. Thus they have made seven "golden masses." The "mass of the holy cross" has come to have a different virtue from the "mass of our Lady." In this matter they all keep silent and permit the people to go on for the sake of the cursed filthy pfennings which, through these various titles and virtues of the mass, keep piling up. [35:107-108]

Luther also knew that the so-called "masses for the dead" were claimed to benefit the souls of the departed suffering in the purgatory – for which Luther had not found any biblical foundation. [35:101-1-2] And while Luther cherished an orderly and rich service of worship – and contributed to the development of liturgy – he did not hesitate to criticize the numerous "enrichments" which in the course of time had begun to obscure the gospel content of the Lord's Supper:

"When Christ himself first instituted this sacrament and held the first mass, there was no tonsure, no chasuble, no singing, no pageantry, but only thanksgiving to God and the use of the sacrament. According to the same simplicity the apostles and all Christians for

a long time held mass, until there arose the various forms and additions by which the Romans held the mass one way, the Greeks another. And now it has finally come to this: the chief thing in the mass has been forgotten, and nothing is remembered except the additions of men!" [35:81]

At the same time, while offering an outspoken critique, Luther did not lack positive suggestions:

If we desire to observe the mass properly and to understand it, then we must surrender everything that the eyes behold and that the senses suggest – be it vestments, bells, songs, ornaments, prayers, processions, elevations, prostrations or whatever happens in the mass – until we first grasp and thoroughly ponder the words of Christ by which he performed and instituted the mass and commanded us to perform it. For therein lies the whole mass, its nature, work, profit, and benefit. Without the words nothing is derived from the mass. Now the words are these: *Take and eat, this is my body, which is given for you. Take and drink of it, all of you, this is the cup of the new and eternal testament of my blood, which is poured out for you and for many of the forgiveness of sins.* These words every Christian must have before him in the mass. He must hold fast to them as the chief part of the mass, in which even the right, basic and good preparation for the mass and sacrament is taught, as we shall see. [35:82]

What Luther proposed was more than an invitation to a clear interpretation of the Scripture and an intensively devotional attitude. He was challenging to an absolute reverence, which alone was appropriate for facing the eternal and all-powerful God.

In such a context, Luther rejected any attempts that had sought to embellish the mass. The Word of God could not be “enriched” by human inventions and additions! Nevertheless, Luther always continued to respect the real presence, affirmed by the Catholic Church. Ultimately considered, his position always remained clear, as stated in the *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, 1528,<sup>6</sup> “Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood.” [37:317]

## II

Having criticized what he regarded as Catholic theological abuses, Luther also made several positive proposals. Above all – in matters of doctrine, the Scriptures were to be the sole guide! Luther thought that

his own age had grossly undervalued them. Having been awakened to faith through the wrestling with the holy Writ, Luther the interpreter, the translator and the preacher, stood in horror before visible abuses. He affirmed *That These Words Of Christ, 'This Is My Body, Etc.', Still Stand Firm Against The Fanatics, 1527*:

Once Scripture had become like a broken net and no one would be restrained by it, but everyone made a hole in it wherever it pleased him to poke his snout, and followed his own opinions, interpreting and twisting Scripture any way he pleased, the Christians knew no other way to cope with these problems than to call many councils. [37:14]

Now Luther was not, in principle, opposed to serious discussion or even dialogues or councils. Yet the fact remains that Luther was above all interested in an awe-filled faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures and did not seek a mere rational consensus of participants' opinions. Hence the scriptural view of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was his only goal. In various, sometimes gently and at other times harshly, even coarsely, briefly and at length, Luther never grew tired of witnessing to the center of the eucharistic doctrine as he believed it. Having experienced Christ as his personal Savior, ever present and ever real, Luther did not want to leave him out of sight, experience, and confession:

... according to the words Christ's true body and blood are present when he says, "Take, eat; this is my body." If our belief and teaching go wrong here, tell us, what are we doing? We are lying to God, and proclaiming that he did not say this but said the opposite. Then we are assuredly blasphemers and liars against the Holy Spirit, betrayers of Christ, and murderers and seducers of the world." [37:25]

Accepting Luther's position, Franz Hildebrandt<sup>7</sup> found it persuasive precisely because it was not the result of an interpretation, that is, "it is not a synthesis but a thesis." Precisely this emphasis saved Luther from objectifying the eucharistic elements as if they were "dead, isolated things." As a rule, for Luther the body of Christ always meant the living Christ himself.<sup>8</sup>

As we shall subsequently reiterate, this real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was no mere object, but a numinous presence, an authentic miracle to be adored for its essential holiness and celebrated in the awareness of its redemptive power. At the same time Luther also contributed to the subjective dimension of this miracle. Luther

repeatedly and in numerous ways celebrated eucharistic devotion fired by personal experience<sup>9</sup> and devotion to the Holy Scriptures. Through such emphases Luther guarded against a simplistically magical view of the Eucharist, which would objectify the miracle by placing it under human manipulative control. Luther wrote:

To give a simple illustration of what takes place in this eating: it is as if a wolf devoured a sheep and the sheep were so powerful a food that it transformed the wolf and turned him into a sheep. So, when we eat Christ's flesh physically and spiritually, the food is so powerful that it transforms us into itself and out of fleshly, sinful, mortal men makes spiritual, holy, living men. [37:101]

Eventually, by the end of the sixteenth century the famous Anglican theologian Richard Hooker (1554-1600) in his definitive *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity* will similarly describe the effects of the partaking of the Eucharist: "in us is a real transmutation of our soules and bodies from sinne to righteousness ..." [V.67.7; Folger Library Edition, 2:336] At the same time Hooker basically remained in the Reformed camp as he had warned: "The reall presence of Christes most blessed bodie and bloode is not therefore to be sought for in the sacrament, but in the worthie receiver of the sacrament." [*Lawes*, V.67.6; 2:334]

Luther would not go that far. For him, the real presence remained in the elements.

Yet Luther also affirmed that the believing receiver is miraculously re-constituted. And this personal transformation had societal effects resulting from active faith and love. Most eloquently and powerfully Luther recorded this insight in his 1519 tract *The Blessed Sacrament Of The Holy And True Body Of Christ, And The Brotherhoods*.<sup>10</sup> Here Luther observed that the sacrament "signifies the complete union and the undivided fellowship of the saints." [35:50] Of course, Luther had not referred to the canonized saints of the Roman Catholic Church, but using New Testament language, to all of the believers in Christ. Luther's language attests to his profoundly numinous and exhilarating experience:

[4] ... To receive this sacrament of bread and wine, then, is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints. [35:51]

[5]... This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the

common property of him who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and [mutual love] unites. [35:51]

While distinguishable, the personal and interpersonal dimensions of the eucharistic experience are inseparable. At the moment of reception before the altar, both demand equal attention:

[8] ... Whoever is in despair, distressed by a sin-stricken conscience or terrified by death or carrying some other burden upon his heart, if he would be rid of them all, let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar and lay down his woe in the midst of the community [of saints] and seek help from the entire company of the spiritual body – just as a citizen whose property has suffered damage or misfortune at the hands of his enemies makes complaint to his town council and fellow citizens and asks them for help. [35:53-54]

At the same time this celebrative reception did not dare to deteriorate into a merely selfish act, merely rejoicing in the receiving. Getting and giving needed to go hand-in-hand, not counting merit, but the magnificent grace, just now experienced. and witnessed. Luther challenged:

[9] ... Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ and his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and – if you cannot do more – have heartfelt sympathy. [35:54]

Clearly, Luther was speaking of *agape*, the love which is a divine gift, infinitely surpassing any human affection, since *agape* also loves the unlovable, just as Christ has and does love us while we are yet sinners. As God's love has no boundaries, so also Luther did not envision any limits for our growth in grace:

For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes the person that he is made one with all others. [35:58]

[14] ... That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community of love. Without love there can be no such change. [35:58]

At the same time it has to be admitted that such a re-definition of the eucharistic miracle was not without some problems. The traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the eucharistic miracle centered its attention to the acts of the ordained priest, who speaks the words of consecration – and effects transubstantiation. The miracle itself remains invisible to the naked eye, but can be affirmed in faithful acceptance of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The way Luther described the eucharistic miracle, the invisible also became visible. Where there is faith, there love is visible – in principle and in reality.

In actual experience and ecclesial practice, this can become a fierce straightedge which measures the level of Christian righteousness. While Luther was not interested in such measuring, some of his spiritual successors were. Notably within the pietist circles a life-style was often identified with true faith. The journey from a quest for righteousness to self-righteousness was sometimes remarkably short. Despite potential pitfalls, Luther's 1519 statement has continued to appeal. Gustaf Aulén has particularly appreciated its "eucharistic joy" and the sense of communion as a balance to "excessive individualism" and "gloomy aspect" which developed later.<sup>11</sup> Yet while not customarily appealed to, Luther's statement continues to offer a challenge to Lutherans in drawing the necessary connections between doctrine and ethics.

### III

Having established an evangelical position over against Roman Catholicism, beginning with 1524 Luther had to confront the Swiss Reformed and the German Anabaptists. Both offered spiritualist interpretations of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper: the "is" – "this is my body" – was to mean "signifies". Real presence was now replaced with a metaphorical or symbolic presence. Luther thought that this was a blasphemous heresy, as it removed the miraculous presence from the life of the believer. In a vigorous statement in 1528, Luther summed up his position: the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper must be affirmed but cannot be explained:

... in the Supper we eat and take to ourselves Christ's body truly and physically. But how this takes place or how he is in the bread, we do not know and are not meant to know. [37:29]

In addition, Luther noted that Christ has not "commanded us to investigate how his body is in the bread!" [37:103] Hermann Sasse

has summed up Luther's position with notable insight: "It is not his intention to explain what even the angels in heaven cannot explain. He only wants to reply to those critics who, like Zwingli, declared the Real Presence to be quite impossible for philosophical reasons."<sup>12</sup>

This response was not satisfying to Luther's "spiritualizing" opponents. If Luther is correct and yet cannot account for his correct position except by an authoritarian assertion, then there is a notable theological shortcoming! In Luther's defense we must note that his concern with the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was not a philosophical explanation. Having encountered the ineffable and the holy, Luther stood before a stupendous miracle, which he would not let go just because some rationalistic critics did not have the faith to honor it. As Luther saw the situation, every attempt to witness to the holy and the numinous encountered a similar critique.

Initially, it may be tempting to attribute some fault to Luther as well. Numerous requests for clarification Luther too simplistically settled with the quotation "This *is* my body." Perhaps Paul Althaus has summed up the situation most insightfully: "... this reference should not be interpreted as biblicistic stubbornness. Luther is bound neither by a theory of verbal inspiration of the Scripture nor through grammar.... The only possible answer is that the substance of the words of Scripture themselves compelled him to take the position he did and that his entire understanding of Christ and the gospel – in which he was certain that he was obedient to the scripture – bore witness on behalf of his exegesis."<sup>13</sup> But eventually Luther said more, and with great clarity. Namely, as Albrecht Peters<sup>14</sup> has observed, Luther had vigorously acknowledged the power of the Word of God: "As soon as Christ says, This is my body, it becomes such the Word and the Holy Spirit." Hence Luther's position was reached thoughtfully as he looked at the truth of the real presence in various perspectives.

In 1520, writing his aggressive *The Babylonian Captivity Of The Church*,<sup>15</sup> Luther was prepared to declare with contempt: "transubstantiation [is] (a monstrous word and a monstrous idea)!" [36:31] According to Luther's *The Adoration Of The Sacrament, 1523*,<sup>16</sup> Catholic talk was but a "monastic fantasy buttressed by Thomas Aquinas and confirmed by the popes."<sup>17</sup> [36:287] Here it needs to be noted that Luther did not reject the idea of substance, but the notion of change:

Some time ago when I was drinking in scholastic theology, the learned Cardinal of Cambrai [Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1430] gave me food for thought in his comments on the fourth book of the *Sentences*. He argues with great acumen that to hold that real bread and real wine, and not merely their accidents, are present on the altar would be much more probable and require fewer superfluous miracles – if only the church had not decreed otherwise. [36:28,29]<sup>18</sup>

At this early stage in 1520 Luther could still exhibit some humanist tolerance and advise, “Therefore I permit everyman to hold either of these opinions, as he chooses.” [36:30] In other words, at issue most centrally was not transubstantiation, but the presence of the substance of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. To affirm this was ideally but not absolutely essential, and that not so much on philosophical than on devotional grounds. Christ’s eucharistic real presence was to be celebrated in experience and in life!

In addition, soon enough – as in all of his theology – Luther came to interpret and to defend the eucharistic presence of Christ exclusively in terms of biblical theology. Hence Luther insisted with vigour that “This *is* my body” really means “*is*,” and not merely “this signifies” or “this represents.” Here we have the key to Luther’s subsequent defense.

Totally convinced of scriptural clarity and the correctness of his interpretation, Luther paid only minimal attention to self-defense. Or, perhaps more accurately, Luther sought to proclaim what he believed was needed to be proclaimed – without much particular concern as to how he will be understood and appreciated. Of course, by mid-twenties Luther was no longer surprised that he was being misunderstood and slandered. Had Luther been more sensitive about the reception of his theology, one could say that he was arrogantly self-righteous. Convinced of the clarity of the Scriptures and the perennial assaults by the Devil, Luther proceeded aggressively and without diplomatic caution. Indeed, that is how Jesus Christ and Luther had overcome the papacy, and that is how they would undo the new heretics, the so-called sacramentarians or spiritualizers of the presence of Christ. Luther said:

Ugh! What shameful fools and monkeys the devil would make of us, that on account of such empty prattle we should deny these clear, manifest words, ‘This is my body,’ and allege that the Scriptures are contradictory and force us to this position! [37:81-82]

Consequently, as has been said, it is one of the greatest blasphemies of our time and a truly abominable thing to hear, when Zwingli and Oecolampadius dare to say that Christ's flesh is of no avail if it is eaten physically, even for believers. [37:130]

Just how to interpret this insight, Luther has rethought with some care and stated his insights on several occasions, e.g.:

Once again I ask: What if I eat Christ's flesh physically in the Supper in such way that I also eat it spiritually at the same time; would you not concede then that Christ's flesh in the Supper avails very much? "Now how can this be?" you say. Precisely thus: I shall eat this body with the bread physically, and yet at the same time believe in my heart that this is the body which was given for you – which you yourselves call the spiritual eating. Now if the spiritual eating is there, the physical eating cannot be harmful but must also be useful on account of the spiritual eating. [37:85]

The spiritual dimension of eating – that is, faith as a metaphor for eating – was familiar from the writings of St. Augustine, notably from his dictum, "Believe, and you have eaten!" An exclusively metaphorical understanding of "eating," however, was not sufficient for Luther. Repeatedly, Luther affirmed that in the Lord's Supper there is also present the "true, physical flesh" of Christ. [37:89] It is "material" – yet by such eating the believers are not cannibals (or Capernaïtes, a term familiar from John 6). Namely, the believers cannot be cannibals-Capernaïtes, because "we maintain both the physical and the spiritual eating." [37:93]:

So God arranges that the mouth eats physically for the heart and the heart eats spiritually for the mouth, and thus both are satisfied and saved by one and the same food. [37:93, cf. 37:238; 38:46-47]

Luther's strongest statement, however, was his condemnation of Berengar:

Therefore, the fanatics are wrong, as well as the gloss in Canon Law, if they criticize Pope Nicolas [II] for having forced Berengar (in 1059) to confess that the true body of Christ is crushed and ground with the teeth. Would to God that all popes had acted in so Christian a fashion in all other matters as this pope did with Berengar in forcing this confession. For this is undoubtedly the meaning, that he who eats and chews this bread eats and chews that which is the genuine, true body of Christ and not mere, ordinary bread, as Wycliffe teaches. [37:300-301].

Luther's observation is significant. As Hermann Sasse has pointed out, "... Luther will under no circumstances give up the *unio sacramentalis*, the sacramental union between the elements and the body and blood of Christ. He maintains that what happens to the consecrated elements happens to the body and blood of Christ."<sup>19</sup> Here Paul Althaus<sup>20</sup> offers a further observation of note: "On this point, Luther's position is far superior to that of his opponents. He breaks through their idealistic equation of the world of the Holy Spirit with the sphere of inwardness in which there is only "spirit." He preserves the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the totality and the significance of reality, of sharing with God, association with God for all of life. All of these are not only spiritual but also bodily in nature."

In other words, while some Luther's critics have at time viewed Luther as stubbornly making absurd statements in order to cover his faulty exegesis of "is" in "This is my body," Luther's position can be seen as making good scriptural sense. A further clue is supplied by an incisive insight:

For this bread is truly the body of Christ, just as the dove is he Holy Spirit and the flame is the angel. [37:301]

Namely, Luther was rejecting a metaphorical relationship and argued for a real identity, which is inclusive and essential. In this way, while avoiding the term "substance," he was nevertheless affirming no less than the scholastic conception of substance, known to him from his university days. Luther's tract of 1544, *Brief Confession Concerning The Holy Supper*<sup>21</sup>, even pointed in that direction with emphasis. With noticeable chagrin, Luther recalled, "They called us cannibals, blood-drinkers, man eaters, Capernaites, Thyestean, etc." [38:292] Luther charged that the critics knew that their charges were totally false. Luther now wrote:

... they knew very well that we had never taught or believed this, although they would like to have spread this view among the populace to their glory and our shame to make it look as if we were such mad, senseless, raving people who held that Christ was locally (*localiter*) in the sacrament and was eaten up piecemeal as a wolf devours a sheep, and that we were drinking blood as a cow drinks water.... For even the papists have never taught such things, as they clearly knew, but yet they – these holy, spiritual people – wanted to hurt us with the name 'papist.' [38:292]

When Luther offered one of his most intensive explanations, he avoided the concept of substance altogether. Luther summarized:

For this is how it was taught under the papacy, how we still accept and teach it, and how it was accepted in the true, ancient Christian church of fifteen hundred years ago for the pope did not institute or invent the sacrament, as the fanatics themselves also must admit, although they want to make it papistical: When you receive the bread from the altar, you are not tearing an arm from the body of the Lord or biting off his nose or a finger; rather, you are receiving the entire body of the Lord; the person comes after you also receives the same entire body, as does the third and the thousandth after the thousandth one forever and ever. In the same way when you drink the wine from the chalice, you are not drinking a drop of blood from his finger or foot, but you are drinking his entire blood; so, too, does the one who follows you even to the thousand times thousandth one, as the words of Christ clearly say: ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ (Matt. 26:26). [38:292]

Accordingly, the mode of Christ’s eucharistic presence was not ever to be thought in terms of a local, cannibalistic presence. That is, Luther denied that “Christ’s body was in the bread like a straw in a sack, or wine in a barrel.” [38:301] (Actually, this observation was not new for Luther. Already in his *Confession Concerning The Lord’s Supper, 1528*, Luther had scorned and rejected a misunderstood local presence “like flour in a sack or gold in a purse, that is, locally.” [37:285])

It was here that Luther, under obvious duress, could also spell out the exact mode of Christ’s eucharistic presence in the Nominalist terminology which he knew well from his university days. Namely, after consecration, Christ is present “definitively,” that is, in an “uncircumscribed manner.” Here the presence cannot be measured by ordinary means, since it is no way limited by its setting. For example, Luther pointed to the angels:

For an angel or devil can be present in an entire house or city; again, he can be in a room, a chest or a box, indeed, in a nutshell. The space is really material and circumscribed, and has its own dimensions of length, breadth, and depth; but that which occupies it has not the same length, breadth, or depth as the space which it occupies, indeed, it has no length and breadth at all. [ 37:235]

This “definitive” mode of presence occurred when Christ left the grave, and also later when Christ came to the disciples through the

closed door. [37:216] In addition, Luther noted, there was also a third manner of presence, called repletive or supernatural presence, when someone is “simultaneously present in all places whole and entire...” [37:216] Now “this mode of existence belongs to God alone,” is “altogether incomprehensible, beyond our reason, and can be maintained only with faith, in the Word.” [37:216] Apparently, this repletive presence could also be attributed to Christ, “since Christ’s body is outside the realm of creation, it can assuredly be wherever it wishes...” [37:217] In another passage Luther spoke more definitely, stating that repletive presence could be attributed to Christ on the grounds that Christ “is supernaturally one person with God.” Hence Christ “is and can be wherever God is.” [37:218] Had Luther now, under theological duress and popular ridicule, sought refuge in the Nominalist terminology which he had known so well from his student days? While this might have been a hot-tempered outburst, intended to prove that Luther was not an unlearned ignoramus, it is more likely that Luther merely sought to communicate to those who would not otherwise understand him. And Nominalist terminology served that purpose very well. In fact, its extended use may suggest that Luther actually liked it.<sup>22</sup> Yet his heart was not in Nominalist vocabulary even when he used it with abandon.

At the same time Luther could also continue to speak of Christ’s real presence without the scholastic terminology. Namely, Luther warned that reason misunderstands the “is” literally and “always thinks of the straw-sack and breadbasket.” Faith, however, knows better and makes creative use of several, even contradictory, prepositions: “... faith understands that in these matters ‘in’ is equivalent to ‘above,’ ‘beyond,’ ‘beneath,’ ‘through and through,’ and ‘everywhere.’” [37:230]

While often celebrated in the Lutheran tradition, this formulation was more successful in excluding a magical or cannibalistic presence, rather than for further defining the numinous encounter with Christ. In Luther’s own view, most significant was the sense for which the prepositions were used, namely, that in the Lord’s Supper “this is no mere bread.”<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Luther did not fully dismiss the role of rational reflection. In his 1528 statement, *Confession Concerning The Lord’s Supper*, Luther admitted: “we must use our reason or else give way to the fanatics.” [37:224] Yet in the end it has to be admitted that Luther did not make a rigorous use of reason in interpreting the

eucharistic presence of Christ. His religious intuition and experience were deeper than his theological formulation. Perhaps it is this dimension of Luther's faith and personality that preserved the real presence for the Lutheran church.

#### IV

By standards of his day, Martin Luther was significantly but not overly superstitious. Far stronger was his sense of the numinous which he came to experience in his understanding of religion. Not relics, not miraculous occurrences (or at least relatively few of them), not holy places, not holy ceremonies, not even holy persons – but centrally and overwhelmingly the Holy Scriptures were for Luther the very source of numinous, divine power and majesty. For Luther, the Scriptural text offered the quintessence of holiness. It was the Holy Bible – no less.

Precisely because the Lord's Supper was embedded in the Holy Scriptures, Luther could not question the truth of the real presence. Therefore Luther could not really understand his Protestant opponents – how could they seek to affirm the truth of God's Word and at the same time deny the real presence! In other words, how one could fragment God's total gift?! Hence Luther observed, in amazement and disgust, *The Sacrament Of The Body And Blood Of Christ – Against The Fanatics*<sup>24</sup>:

Thus they say it is not fitting that God should perform in the sacrament so many wondrous deeds that he does not perform anywhere else. For what we believe, they consider to be incongruous.... [36:338]

Luther did not see the real presence in the Lord's Supper as an exception, but as a culmination of God's numerous miracles, visible virtually everywhere in God's wide creation. Luther reflected:

Look at the grain of wheat in the field, and tell me how it comes about that the stalk grows out of the earth from a single seed and bears so many kernels on the ear, and gives each one its own form. Moreover, in a single kernel there are many, many miraculous works, which they neither perceive nor pay any heed to.... Take the word which I am speaking as a further example. The voice is a poor, miserable thing, to be reckoned as the least of creatures, not more than a breath of wind. As soon as the mouth ceases speaking, the voice is gone and is no more, so that there can be nothing weaker or

more perishable. Yet it is so mighty, that I could rule a whole country with my voice. How does it come about, then, that I may capture so many hearts with words? I have a small voice, and there are several hundreds or thousands of ears, yet every single ear perceives the complete and entire voice. I do not distribute it, so that each ear has only a part of it, but each one has all of it. The fanatics see this, and do not consider it a miracle. Indeed, if we had never seen it, it would be the greatest of miracles. Now, if my voice can accomplish this so that it fills all ears, with each one receiving as much of it as the other, and my word is distributed so widely, should not Christ be able to do so all the more with his body? [36:339]

Accordingly, the traditional line between the ordinary and the numinous is of clumsy human drawing, as is the traditional medieval distinction between natural and supernatural. In the final analysis, all that God does and ordains, is truly miraculous and far above our understanding. Yet while present and visible to everyone, the redemptive encounter is assuredly located only in the Holy Scriptures and is seen only by those with insight and faith. H. Paul Santmire<sup>25</sup> has summed up with clarity: “In this respect, for Luther, nature clearly was not a milieu for communion with God, as it was, for example, for Francis.” Hence even though miracles are present in both nature and the Holy Bible, only the latter offers doctrinal precision.

In defense of his affirmation of the miraculous real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Luther quickly pointed to other acknowledged and undisputed miracles by his opponents in his own time. He referred to such examples as:

Christ, the Son of God, was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, the greatest of God’s miracles....The Godhead dwells in Christ on earth and to all eternity....Christ sits at the right hand of God....[37:77]

These and many other biblical miracles are not provable by reason, are even invisible, yet absolutely true. Hence similarly invalid are the objections against the eucharistic miracle “that Christ’s body is at the same time in heaven and in the Supper.” Luther’s comment on such a rejection is thoroughly scornful: “He who does not have Scripture must have his own ideas; he who has no mortar must build his wall with mud.” [37:73] Clearly, Luther’s appeal to the Scriptures in the eucharistic controversy was consistent with his entire approach

to the reformation of the Church. Luther had stated that on numerous occasions in an obviously personal perspective, notably in *The Misuse Of The Mass, 1521*<sup>26</sup>:

How often did my heart quail, punish me, and reproach me with its single strongest argument: Are you the only wise man? Can it be that all the others are in error and have erred for so long a time? What if you are mistaken and lead so many people into error who might all be eternally damned? Finally, Christ with his clear, unmistakable Word strengthened and confirmed me, so that my heart no longer quails, but resists the arguments of the papists, as a stony shore resists the waves, and laughs at their threats and storms! [36:134]

It should not assumed that Luther's grasp of the risk and the profundity of the Lord's supper came easily and without grace. Indeed, some attention to the role of grace-guided courage belongs in this entire discussion.<sup>27</sup> Repeatedly, Luther had declared that "the Scriptures cannot err" [36:137] and hence are "our lamp." [36:191] At the same time, Luther was convinced that "Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are..." [36:277]

Ultimately, Luther did not rest the defense of the Lord's Supper on his correct interpretation of the "is" ("This *is* my body") but was moved by the entire numinous character of the Scriptures. The case of the Lord's Supper was but one remarkable instance of an infinitely larger truth.

Where hermeneutical presuppositions alone – without being corrected by the Scriptures – determined the quest, it was bound to go astray. Seriously and yet with a sense of humor, Luther noted in *The Private Mass And The Consecration Of Priests, 1533*<sup>28</sup>:

One man preached from Aristotle and other heathen books; another from the decretals; another brought up questions based on St. Thomas and the Scholastics; another preached about the saints; another about his sacred order; another about blue ducks; another about the milk of chickens. Who can enumerate all this nonsense? [38:189]

Did Luther underestimate the need to be concerned with and perhaps even to take in account the latest insights from the best methodology of interpretation known in his day? Luther did not think so. Luther recognized the datedness of late medieval Nominalism, and therefore sought to develop a biblical hermeneutic which honoured both the holiness and the humanity of the Bible. Luther's

reading of the eucharistic texts offers a fine example of his remarkable ability to remain text-bound but not text-limited. Those of us who have moved from Liberalism to Neo-Orthodoxy, and then into Post Modernism (and wonder when that will be succeeded by “Meta Post Modernism”!) have sympathy with Luther’s concern with the text itself that remains even after interpreters have demythologized, deconstructed, and existentialized it. At the same time Luther was also modern, in that he assumed that the task of interpreting was never complete. There was no escape from human finitude and hence from its limits, and thus from the potential errors of our insights. Yet in the midst of all finitude, Luther, the friend to mystics and often even sharing their views, had deeply absorbed a sense of the numinous, within and beyond words, somehow radiating from the Holy Bible, and therefore offering an eschatology oriented freedom. Therefore in his own way, Luther could be consistent with himself – a literalist, at times a free interpreter, often creative, Luther wrote and spoke as one *coram Deo* – while also doing battle with his opponents.

## Notes

- 1 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. Trans. John W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press, 1950, has offered the most insightful analysis of this concept. In regard to Luther, however, Otto has over-emphasized such ideas as wrath, awe and dread, with much less attention to adoration and love. The latter are particularly relevant in appreciating Luther’s reverence for the Holy Scriptures.
- 2 Helmut Feld, *Das Verstaendnis des Abendmahls*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, 110-115; Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, 375-403; Albrecht Peters, *Realpraesenz: Luthers Zeugnis von Christi Gegenwart im Abendmahl*. Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums, 5. Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960, 9-45.
- 3 To some extent, Luther himself was not free from such influences. See Erich Klingner, *Luther und der deutsche Volksaberglaube*, Berlin, Mayer & Mueller, 1912, rpr. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970; Hans-Martin Barth, *Der Teufel und Jesus Christus in der Theologie Martin Luther*: Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967;

- 4 Weimarer Ausgabe, subsequently WA, 6:353-378; English translation, American Edition, 35:79-124, quoted by volume and page in the text.
- 5 *The Gift of Communion: Luther's Controversy with Rome on Eucharistic Sacrifice*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964, 23-40. However, the most insightful interpretation of Luther's understanding of "testament" has been offered for this generation by Kenneth Hagen, one of the great American Luther scholars.
- 6 WA 26:261-509; 37:161-372.
- 7 *EST: Das Lutherische Prinzip*, Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931, 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 9 For a very insightful analysis of Luther's experience celebrating his first mass, see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950, 39-44.
- 10 WA 2:742-759; 35:49-73.
- 11 *Eucharist and Sacrifice*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958, 79. Ernest L. Hazelius, the founder of the Lutheran Southern Theological Seminary and its first professor, cherished the statement as it seemed to agree with Zwingli as well, note his *Life of Dr. Martin Luther together with Extracts of His Writings on Sacred Religious Subjects*, trans. from German by Ernest Lewis Hazelius, New York: James Oram, 1813. Cf. also Egil Grisliis, "Ernest L. Hazelius: Ecumenical Theologian of the Southern Lutheran Church," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin, A Rasmussen Festschrift*, 45,3 (August 1965): 22-39.
- 12 *This is my body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959, 159.
- 13 *Op. cit.*, 352-353.
- 14 *Op. cit.*, 64, quoting Weimarer Ausgabe 19:491:13.
- 15 WA 6:487-573; 36:11-126.
- 16 WA 11:431-456; 36:275-305.
- 17 Here Hermann Sasse has offered a thoughtful warning: "... the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation should not be denounced as materialistic, otherwise the Lutheran conception of the sacrament would come under the same verdict. For it is no less realistic in its assumption that Christ's body and blood are "substantialiter" present. The word "substantialiter" means in the Lutheran doctrine nothing else than "essentialiter" ("wesentlich"), as we speak of the "essentia" divina which is the same as the "substantia" divina...." *Op. cit.*, 43,44.

- 18 While it is likely that at this time Luther had accepted consubstantiation as a reasonable explanation, Sasse may nevertheless be correct: “Luther quotes d’Ailly in order to show that even distinguished Roman theologians would have liked to give up transubstantiation in favor of a theory which did not deny the existence of the substance of bread after consecration. If Luther had to choose among the various scholastic theories, he would perhaps have chosen the theory of consubstantiation.” Op. cit., 102.
- 19 Op. cit., 162.
- 20 Op. cit., 396.
- 21 WA 54:141-167; 38:287-319.
- 22 Hartmut Hilgenfeld, *Mittelalterlich-traditionelle Elemente in Luthers Abendmahlsschriften*, Zuerich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971 offers with remarkable thoroughness (478 pages!) an account of Luther’s use of his late medieval heritage. I find it difficult to imagine that such an extended use was merely accidental.
- 23 Hans Grass, *Die Abendmahlslehre bei Luther und Calvin*, Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1954, 127.
- 24 WA 19:482-523; 36:335-361.
- 25 *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: For tress Press, 1985, 125. For liturgical experimentation, Hermann Sasse has offered one of his numerous wise insights: “The Roman Catholic Church has neve been guilty of the heresy of modern Protestants who want to rediscover the sacrament by finding a mysterious quality in the natural things, water, bread, and wine. Op. cit., 167, 168.
- 26 WA 8:482-563; 36:133-230.
- 27 Cf. Egil Grislis , “The Courage of Faith at the Eucharist according to Martin Luther,” 147-161, and 244-248, in: Walter Freitag, ed., *A Festschrift: A Tribute to Dr. William Hordern*, University of Saskatchewan, 1985, and “Luther’s Courage of Faith,” 103-126, in: Egil Grislis, ed., *The Theology of Martin Luther: Five Contemporary Canadian Interpretations*, Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1985.
- 28 WA 38:195-256; 38:147-214.