

## **Martin Luther (1483-1546) on the Sacrament of the Altar**

### **Martin Luther, Babylonian Captivity (1520).**

Some time ago, when I was drinking in scholastic theology, the learned Cardinal of Cambrai [Pierre d'Ailly] 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 far fewer superfluous miracles—if only the church had not decreed otherwise. . . . [A]fter floating in a sea of doubt, I at last found real rest for my conscience in the above view, namely, that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and real blood are present in no other way and to no less a degree than the others assert them to be under their accidents. . . . For what is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.

For my part, if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ [2 Cor. 10:5], and clinging simply to his words, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ.

The third captivity of this sacrament is by far the most wicked abuse of all, in consequence of which there is no opinion more generally held or more firmly believed in the church today than this, that the mass is a good work and a sacrifice. And this abuse has brought an endless host of other abuses in its train, so that the faith of this sacrament has become utterly extinct and the holy sacrament has been turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business.

Let this stand, therefore, as our first and infallible proposition—the mass or Sacrament of the Altar is Christ's testament, which he left behind him at his death and distributed to his followers.

You see, therefore, that what we call the mass is a promise of the forgiveness of sins made to us by God, and such a promise as has been confirmed by the death of the Son of God. . . . According to its substance, therefore, the mass is nothing but the aforesaid words of Christ: "Take and eat, etc." [Matt. 26:26], as if he were saying: "Behold, O sinful and condemned man, out of the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of mercies [2 Cor. 1:3], apart from any merit or desire of yours, I promise you in these words the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And that you may be absolutely certain of this irrevocable promise of mine, I shall give my body and pour out my blood, confirming the promise by my very death, and leaving you my body and blood as a sign and memorial of this same promise. As often as you partake of them, remember me, proclaim and praise my love and bounty towards you, and give thanks."

We may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament. [T]here is greater power in the word than in the sign.

From all that has been said we conclude that the mass was provided only for those who have a sad, afflicted, disturbed, perplexed and erring conscience, and that they alone commune worthily.

## **Martin Luther, The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics (1526)**

[I]n foreign lands a large number are already pouncing upon [the sacrament] and maintaining that Christ's body and blood are not present in the bread and wine. . . . For we have before us the clear text and the plain words of Christ: "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Drink of it, all of you, this is my blood, which is poured out for you. Do this in remembrance of me" [Matt. 26:26-28]. These are the words on which we take our stand. They are so simply and clearly stated that even they, our adversaries, must confess that it is difficult to interpret them otherwise.

But whoever derives the right faith from the words will believe like this: Whether Christ enters into the bread or the cup or into whatever he will, God grant that as long as I have the words, I will not seek or speculate any further; what he says, I will keep. . . . For as soon as Christ says: "This is my body," his body is present through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. If the Word is not there, it is mere bread; but as soon as the words are added they bring with them that of which they speak.

He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way. Otherwise you are tempting God and committing idolatry. . . . Those people who say that it is unreasonable for Christ to be present in the bread and wine, do not know or see this at all, because they do not understand what Christ's kingdom is, and the sitting at the right hand of God. If Christ were not with us in dungeon, torture, and death, where would I be? He is present there through the Word, although not in the same way as here in the sacrament, where through the Word he binds his body and blood so that they are received corporeally in the bread and wine.

Therefore we too are preaching the death of Christ according to the words: "Do this in remembrance of me." However, a distinction has to be made here. When I preach his death, it is in a public service to a congregation, in which I am addressing myself to no one individually; whoever grasps it, grasps it. But when I distribute the sacrament, I designate it for the individual who is receiving it; I give him Christ's body and blood that he may have the forgiveness of sins, obtained through his death and preached to the congregation. . . . For when I say: "This is the body, which is given for you, this is the blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins," I am there commemorating him; I proclaim and announce his death. Only it is not done publicly in the congregation but is directed at you alone.

Thus everyone, especially when he is attacked or subjected to persecution, should know how to answer and be able to say: "This is how I understand the words, that in the sacrament his body and blood are given to me for the forgiveness of sins." For this reason every Christian must know these words, letter for letter: "Here my Lord has given me his body and blood in the bread and wine, in order that I should eat and drink. And they are to be my very own, so that I may be certain that my sins are forgiven, that I am to be free of death and hell, have eternal life, and be a child of God and an heir of heaven. Therefore I go to the sacrament to seek these things." . . . So much for the use of the sacrament: It is to strengthen the conscience against all distress and temptation.