

Hearing the Words of Institution

At the time of Luther, the practice of the Sacrament of the Altar by papists inflicted many abuses upon the laity. These included withholding the cup from the laity, selling masses, masses for the dead, and more.

But perhaps the greatest abuse was *warping the Sacrament from being a sacrament into being a sacrifice*. In a sacrifice, people offer something to God. In the case of the papists, it was the priests who sacrificed, and there was no role for the laity to either participate in the sacrifice or even hear or believe what was being said in the sacrifice. The sacrament was supposed to operate without the Word being spoken to the laity and without the hearing of faith by the laity.

The Zwinglian error was essentially the same. While the Zwinglians thought they corrected the error of the papists by ridding the sacrament of the exclusive work by the priests, they simply substituted the work of this group of humans for that group of humans. Instead of the priests alone offering the sacrifice, the laity offered a sacrifice of memorialising Christ. To them, the bread and wine were not the true body and blood of Christ but only memorials of His body and blood. They changed what “in remembrance of Me” means. They made a work by the laity of memorialising Christ into the central, sacrificial reality. We see this teaching in Reformed churches today (e.g. Anglican church).

In the errors pressing in on Luther from both sides, what they both shared in common was making the sacrament a work and sacrifice of some class of humans. They differed only in which class of humans was to do a human work and what the work was. That was, however, only playing musical chairs, with humans and humans working on all the chairs. Neither side upheld the sacrament as the work of Christ for us, which we receive both by hearing and believing the Word and by eating and drinking the true body and blood of Christ.

In contrast to those errors, Luther recovered what a sacrament is. In a sacrament, God promises forgiveness, life, and salvation; He attaches His Word to a visible sign and makes the Word-and-sign actually deliver the promise. The sign is important, but its importance depends upon the Word, and without the Word of promise, there is nothing for the people to hear and believe.

Without the Word of God, there is no work of God, and all that is left is some work of man, which is pointless for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The papist version of the human works error strips the Word and faith from the sacrament. This theological error produces a devilishly destructive error of practice: the priests mumbled, whispered, or silently recited the Words of Institution of the Sacrament into the cup, purposely withholding the Word from the laity. The papists literally, with their mouths, hushed the Words of Institution of the Sacrament.

Luther, many times and in many ways, said the Words of Institution are a complete Gospel. They say everything we need to know to awaken faith, strengthen confidence, and lovingly comfort troubled hearts and consciences. So, when Luther gave instructions for the proper administration of the Mass, he commanded that the Words of Institution be said so that everyone could hear them. He said, “*If then these words are the gospel (i.e. justification) in a nutshell, then they must be proclaimed. Instead of a silent recitation, the words were to be intoned.*” (Spinks, Bryan. *Luther’s Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove, 1982), p. 34.)

But today, some Lutherans have their own way of hushing Jesus’ Words of Institution. Some modern-day Lutheran theologians have openly questioned:

- Whether Christ’s institution of the Sacrament was actually “on the night He was betrayed.”
- Whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal so that Jesus could be seen as the Passover Lamb that takes away the sin of the world.
- Whether the Last Supper was one event or a composite of multiple events. Three events are given as probable. In some treatments, even post-resurrection events are folded into the composite.
- What Jesus actually did during the institution of the Supper.

Others also say we don’t know:

- Whether it was an actual event or something created retrospectively by a subsequent theology of the cross.
- Whether Jesus said, “Do this.” Instead, this is seen as being added to the text for liturgical necessity.
- Whether all of the disciples drank of the cup because it is too hard to believe, and it must be an embellishment by the evangelists.
- Whether Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, since that may have been added to the text for the sake of liturgical parallelism.

By all this, the Sacrament is nothing more than table fellowship that Jesus practised with sinners and disciples on multiple occasions, interrupted by the crucifixion, and resumed in the resurrection. As such, it is unrelated to the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Also by this, the body St. Paul admonishes us to discern is not the body of Christ, the man who hung on the cross. Instead, *it is a humanist body of Christ, the church*.

Some say the whole notion of Real Presence revealed in the Words of Institution is Paul's concoction based on Hellenistic mysticism, so that the meal Paul describes is not the same as the evangelists describe or what Jesus actually did in the upper room. They say Paul dreamt up a parallel supper, which cannot benefit us because Jesus never instituted it.

As bad as all that is, here is the main thing: ***They say we do not know what Jesus actually said.***

This is the sure mark of the Devil, who began his transactions with humans by challenging, "*Has God really said,*" (Genesis 3:1), and continued on the same course when he challenged the baptismal Word of the Father to Christ. When Christ was baptised, the Father said, "*You are My beloved Son*" (Mark 1:11) and immediately in the wilderness, Satan challenged that Word, saying, "*If You are the Son...*" (Matthew 1:3). The Devil does this to us too, challenging the Word we received in our baptisms, that we are adopted as sons of God, brothers of Christ, and joint heirs with Christ of eternal life. He does it by hushing the Words of Institution of the Sacrament to attack our faith that Christ gives us His true blood to drink and, with His blood, what it was shed for, the forgiveness of our sins.

By an elaborate scheme of higher criticism of Scripture and other haughty academic devices, those so-called Lutheran theologians have, in their own way, done like the papists. They have, with their own tactic, hushed Christ's Words of Institution of the Sacrament.

Which is worse, to retain the exact Words of Christ but withhold them from the people by whispering, or to tell the Words to the people saying, we don't know if this is what Jesus said, or if He ever said anything like it at all? One is no better than the other.

From Genesis 3:15 onward, the Holy Spirit, by the mouths of the prophets, repeatedly foretold of the coming of the Saviour. He foretold that there would be a New Testament (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12). Finally, in the fullness of time, Christ in the upper room said, "*This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you*" (Luke 22:20). Was God so haphazard and negligent in His prophecies and fulfilment that Christ had not chosen His words carefully in advance? In the fullness of time, after centuries of desire and expectation, did Jesus just wing it off the cuff, impromptu? Did He not take care to say everything He meant to say exactly as He meant to say it? Did He never quite get around to actually giving us the New Testament, even though that was why He had come?

Luther's treatment of the Words of Institution and his practice of giving the Words to the people are completely unlike either of those abominations, the abomination of papist withholding of the Words and the abomination of pseudo-Lutheran erasure of the Words. Rather, he strips down his sources for what doctrine to believe about the Sacrament and what way to minister to the people by the Sacrament to the very Words of Institution and those Words alone. He divided all passages of Scripture that possibly are about the Sacrament into two groups:

1. The Words of Institution themselves alone; and
2. All other passages that might foreshadow, reflect upon or be allusions to the Sacrament.

Without rejecting the usefulness of the second group of passages as supplements, illustrations, and allusions after the right doctrine of the Sacrament is established, he excluded them from having any part in originally establishing the doctrine of the Sacrament. He realised the right doctrine of the Sacrament and the right administration of the Sacrament entirely from the Words of Institution alone.

Further, he delved deeply and thoroughly into each and every word of the Words of Institution, treating every word as a vein out of which much ore could be mined and treating none of the Words as incidental, surplus, or insignificantly spoken.

Then, he commanded that the Words of Institution be said aloud for the people to hear, as a brief but complete sermon of the Gospel, to be heard and believed with the hearing of faith. In this, the Mass rightly is retained among us, as bread and wine made the true body and blood of Christ by His Word, a sacrament in which Christ works for us, and neither priest or laity works.

If a pastor were to preach for a whole year on nothing but the Words of Institution, there would be enough there in those words to use all the preaching time. The hearers would know everything they need for forgiveness, life, and salvation and to discern the true body and blood of Christ in worthy reception of the Sacrament.