

The Reformation of the Lord's Supper

In the name of him who gives us his body and blood to eat and drink, dear friends in Christ: As part of our observance of the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, in our Lenten meditations this year we've been reviewing what are called the "Sola's" or "alone's" of the Reformation that are critical for maintaining a correct exposition and understanding of the Christian faith. We derive our teaching from Scripture alone. We have no other source of spiritual truth in the Church. And from the Scripture we learn that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in the accomplished work of Christ alone. And God alone gets all the glory for it.

The "Sola's" were important back then and remain so today because what was undermining the true Gospel and causing the Church to go so far astray was that little word "and". This *and* something else. Spiritual truth was being derived from Scripture *and* tradition *and* papal decrees *and* ongoing revelations of mystic monks and nuns. With these additional sources of "truth" it was being taught that salvation was achieved by faith *and* good works, by Christ's accomplished work *and* ours. *And* since we play a part in our salvation, some of the glory goes to us too. It's only fair: glory to God *and* to humans. That word "and" was ruining everything.

And one of the worst "and's" that had to go was the one that dealt with penalties for sin. You see, a basic notion underpinning Roman theology is that each and every sin committed incurs two kind of penalties: one eternal, to be paid by the sinner forever in hell; and the other temporal, to be paid by the sinner in life or if not dealt with here then after death in Purgatory. The teaching is that on the cross, Jesus paid the eternal penalty. For the believer, that's done: no more worries about facing eternal hellfire. It's the temporal penalty you need to worry about. And it's best if you take care of as much of it as you can during your life because here it's easier and less costly in terms of time and effort. If you wait until later it means suffering for a long, long time in Purgatory.

And in a big way that's what the Church is for in this system: to provide you the added graces you need to earn the merits that will take time off your sentence to Purgatory. So, you go to confession, get absolved by the priest, and do the satisfaction he assigns you. Or you spend so much time venerating some saint's relic. Or you buy an indulgence which is basically a check for some of the left-over merits that someone else earned but didn't need to stay out of Purgatory. There are all kinds of ways the Church has to help you earn the merits that will cancel part of the temporal penalty you owe.

And perhaps the biggest and most effective way is through what they call the Sacrifice of the Mass; that is, Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. The thought is this: when the priest consecrates the sacramental bread and wine, it becomes the body and blood of Christ. So far, so good – we pretty much agree with that (though we disagree on exactly how it happens). But then they take it step further *and* say what's happening is that the priest is sacrificing the body and blood of Jesus on the altar all over again and, presenting this sacrifice to the Lord to earn merits that cancel part of the temporal penalty of the sins of those who are present and who partake of the elements. Remember, they say that when he was actually on the cross Christ only paid the eternal penalty of sin. Now, through the Sacrifice of the Mass he's being re-

sacrificed to pay temporal penalties. So, from this point of view each and every celebration of the Lord's Supper is a business transaction.

What's more, the merit earned by the re-sacrifice of Jesus on the altar can be credited to others who aren't present – in most cases to those who have died and are assumed to be in Purgatory. This is why the Lord's Supper is always celebrated at funerals in the Roman Church. Usually there's one celebrated a week later and again on the first anniversary of someone's death. And again, the idea is that the merit earned in the Sacrifice of the Mass is going to get dear departed Uncle Fred out of Purgatory quicker.

The thought behind this led also to the practice of holding private masses. That's when a priest stands at the altar all by himself; nobody else is present for the service. He consecrates the elements and only he communes – but the merit for the sacrifice is being credited to someone else. Of course, it's only right to pay the priest for his services. And that's what was happening all across Europe. If somebody you loved died, you'd pay a priest to stand at an altar and do the Mass over and over again however many times you could afford (or were willing to spend). In this way the Mass became a business transaction on more than one level. And if you think this is a practice that ended as a result of the Reformation, you'd be wrong. I did some price checking online recently. For a little more than \$300 you can have 30 Masses said for anyone you choose – to be performed upon their death. That's just \$10 a Mass to save somebody you care about a whole boatload of suffering in Purgatory. I'd say it's a real bargain.

And hopefully by now it's abundantly clear why the reformation of the Church and the restoration of the Lord's Supper to its true meaning and purpose were so desperately needed. Christ suffered and died once for the sins of all humankind. When he said, "It is finished", it was. And now as a pledge and reminder of that sacrifice, through his gift of the Lord's Supper he delivers to us under the form of bread and wine the very body and blood he offered up on the cross. In this way he communicates to us the fruit of his suffering and death: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, and he strengthens the faith that apprehends them. You ask, "How do I know for sure that what Christ did on the cross so many years ago is for me and my benefit?" The answer is right there at the communion rail: "Take and eat. This is my body given *for you*. Take and drink. This is my blood shed *for you*." You want proof? There it is. "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And not just for you, but also for everyone else who receives. We eat and drink together, and all of us together receive the same benefits. The peace we receive from God from knowing that *our* sins are forgiven, we extend to each other knowing that their sins are forgiven too. Christ has forgiven them. Who am I then to hold a grudge or to accuse?

The correct understanding of the Lord's Supper gives the peace of the Lord to those who partake. The Roman understanding only gives doubt. Sure, I know I'm making a payment; but I don't know how much I owe. So I've got to do it again and again to keep making payments; but I can't ever know if I've done enough. And note that the focus of faith has shifted from Christ's accomplished work to my doing, my participating, my eating and drinking. Instead of a gift from God, the Supper becomes a work I do to earn merit before him. At first brush, it would seem that Satan himself could not have come up with a better way to deceive people and rob them of the comfort and assurance that Jesus intends to give through his holy Supper.

Ah, but he did. Never underestimate the devil. Almost as soon as the Reformation began, there arose a dispute among some of the reformers. The Roman teaching on the Supper was clearly an abomination. All the reformers agreed on that. But in rejecting the

Roman position, some of the reformers went too far – so far as to reject the very words of Jesus: “This is my body. This is my blood.” In so doing, they were essentially asking the same question as the unbelieving Jews who argued with Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” They couldn’t figure it out. And they concluded that Jesus *can’t* actually give his body and blood to believers under bread and wine. They decided that he must have meant it figuratively. And so, for them and for their theological heirs – basically all “other than Lutheran” Protestants – the Supper has only symbolic meaning. By it Jesus is remembered, but there is no sense that through the Supper Christ is actually present in his body and blood, nor is there any forgiveness, assurance, or peace with God being offered. It’s a ritual to observe, not a gift to receive; a work to perform, not a reception of Christ’s accomplished work. Thus, the true purpose and meaning of the Supper is thwarted and undone.

How much less complicated, refreshing, and blessed it is to simply take the Lord Jesus at his word, trusting that he who is able to do all things can deliver through his Holy Supper precisely what he says. And this is what he says: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me ... Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

And so, we pray: Lord, give us this bread, now and ever. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!