

## **Magic, Means, and Mystery**

What is happening when we celebrate the Lord's Supper? Is Jesus inviting us to His table, to dine upon food that He's providing, or do we initiate the meal ourselves, retracing important events of that evening as a reminder to ourselves of what we intend to do? Are the powers involved in the Lord's Supper comprehensible by the human mind, or are they beyond us? Who is really bringing the word to the element, and when does this happen?

A number of fellow ELS pastors and I have been troubled by certain practices and the underlying doctrine that we have observed among conservative Lutherans. Instead of arguing about what has been said or done, I'd like to have a discussion about the doctrine, as we find it originally in holy scripture and also in our Lutheran confessions.

First, let's compare the way Jesus performed His first miracle, in which He actually changed one substance (water) into another (wine), for consumption by wedding guests and by a newlywed couple. Here's what the Bible says:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!" This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him. (John 2:1-11, NKJV)

Now compare Jesus' words at Cana to the four accounts of what He said during the Lord's Supper. For the sake of brevity, I'll use the summary quotation from the Small Catechism, as provided in [the English translation of the Triglotta](#).

The holy Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul, write thus: Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread: and when He had given thanks, He brake it, and gave it to His disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Take, drink ye all of it. This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins. This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me.

Notice that Jesus has much more to say about the Sacrament of the Altar than He did about changing the water into wine. In fact, in John's account at Cana, Jesus never actually states what the water has been changed into. By contrast, in the words of institution, Jesus *does* say what the bread and wine are: His own body and blood.

Is this difference significant? It must be, because it was those words that Martin Luther wrote under the tablecloth at the Marburg Colloquy, when he was debating with Zwingli and Bucer about whether or not Jesus' body and blood are really present in the sacrament. If they had been debating whether the master of the feast was truly drinking wine instead of water, there would have been no analogous words for Luther to write upon the table.

What, then, is the significance of those words? Simply this. Jesus is telling His hearers what these things are that He is distributing for them to eat and drink. If He had not told them, then they would have assumed that they were receiving only the bread and wine of the Passover meal, and not His body and blood. But can we say more? Yes, we can.

Consider the efficacy of God's Word. When He speaks, His Words are always true, whether the thing they describe already exists or not. Thus, God created all things by speaking. Thus, Jesus healed the centurion's servant, and praised the centurion's faith, who had said, "Say the word, and my servant will be healed." Thus, even the weather rebuked by Jesus had to obey His Word. Thus, Jesus healed the lepers and the paralyzed man by giving a command with the prerequisite of healing. Thus, Jesus also turned the water into wine by speaking a command with the prerequisite that the water become wine.

In the case of the Lord's Supper, His Word is explicit. Again, He accomplishes His work by speaking His effective Word. Often we distinguish between passages that are meant to be *descriptive* and passages meant to be *prescriptive*. But Jesus' words "This is my body" are not contained within that dichotomy. Certainly, they describe the reality. But they also *effect* the reality.

Now, was Jesus performing magic? That question is unclear. What is meant by "magic?" If it's the same sort of thing that the Bible calls magic, then absolutely not. Those powers are demonic. To say that Jesus was performing that sort of magic is the same as saying that He casts out demons by Beelzebub. Yet if magic only refers to powers beyond human comprehension, then absolutely yes. Jesus is performing something miraculous, and involving His hearers by telling them to eat and drink His body and blood. It's not really magic to Him, because these are His own native powers as the Son of God, but they are not our powers. The Church has chosen not to call this sort of thing magic, because it muddies the waters of our vocabulary and misleads. There is something called magic, and it calls upon demonic powers. So with that definition in mind, we must say that Jesus' words are not magic, though they do use God's own miraculous power to effect exactly what they say.

If one asks, "How does Jesus offer His body and blood in the bread and wine?" then the answer must be restrained to what the Scripture reveals. He uses His effective Word. The rest is a mystery to us, but not to Him.

One might wonder whether Jesus' speaking of His words in the upper room applied as a consecration to every celebration of the Lord's Supper from that time until the end of the world. Here is how the Formula of Concord addresses that question, in article VII.

75] For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ which He spake at the first institution were efficacious not only at the first Supper, but they endure, are valid, operate, and are still efficacious [their force, power, and efficacy endure and avail even to the present], so that in all places where the Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Christ, and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received, because of the power and efficacy of the words which Christ spake at the first Supper. For where His institution is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup [wine], and the consecrated bread and cup [wine] are distributed, Christ Himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious by virtue of the first institution, through His word, which He wishes to be there repeated. 76] As Chrysostom says (in Serm. de Pass.) in his Sermon concerning the Passion: Christ Himself prepared this

table and blesses it; for no man makes the bread and wine set before us the body and blood of Christ, but Christ Himself who was crucified for us. The words are spoken by the mouth of the priest, but by God's power and grace, by the word, where He speaks: "This is My body," the elements presented are consecrated in the Supper. And just as the declaration, Gen. 1, 28: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth," was spoken only once, but is ever efficacious in nature, so that it is fruitful and multiplies, so also this declaration ["This is My body; this is My blood"] was spoken once, but even to this day and to His advent it is efficacious, and works so that in the Supper of the Church His true body and blood are present.

So the Formula distinguishes between the institution and the consecration of the elements in the Lord's Supper. Jesus provided His effective Word first when He instituted the sacramental meal, but the same effective Word is now brought to the elements every time the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

The Roman Catholic error in which their teachers refer to the special character of a man who has been ordained to the priesthood consists in their claim that the celebrant, the man who consecrates and distributes the elements, has the effective power to turn an ordinary meal of bread and wine into the Lord's Supper. (I'm not addressing other Roman Catholic errors at this point.) They give too much credit to the celebrant. As the Formula of Concord says, the celebrant's task is to speak the words of Christ, and it is those words, spoken first at the original institution, which effect the miracle.

Someone may object, saying that the Words of Institution that we use were not all spoken by Christ. In fact, we don't even know exactly how Jesus blessed the elements or gave thanks. True enough. But the words of Jesus' blessing are not nearly as important to us and to the sacrament as the words by which Jesus declares and effects the sacramental reality: "This is my body." Those words *are* repeated in the Words of Institution. The fact that they are written in all four biblical accounts of the Lord's Supper, but not the specific blessing or thanksgiving that Jesus spoke over the elements leads us to the same conclusion.

Who speaks the effective words of Jesus? The Formula again provides the answer: "The words are spoken by the mouth of the priest," or as we would prefer to call him, the pastor. But it continues: "but by God's power and grace, by the word, where He speaks: 'This is My body,' the elements presented are consecrated in the Supper." Note well that this happens by God's power and grace, by the word spoken: "This is My body." Exactly what I've been describing. The words are spoken by the pastor, but that's not the end of the story. If it were, then we'd have to agree with the "special character theory" of the Roman Catholics. No, the words don't obtain their efficacy from the pastor, but by God's power and grace, because they were first given and spoken by Jesus Himself in the institution of the Lord's Supper.

This does not mean that the pastor does anything magical. Instead, he obediently assumes the role of Isaiah in Isaiah 7:10:

Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above."

You might wonder, where is Isaiah in this? He's not mentioned. You have to look earlier in the chapter, to verse 3: "Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out now to meet Ahaz... ." The point is this: the pastor is there only because He's been called by God to offer the holy things for holy people. God's Word and Sacrament, the means of grace, are to be the focus of attention, because through them, *God* is really the one speaking and acting. That is not to say that the pastor has no role. His role is that of Isaiah in chapter seven, verse ten. It's an important role, but it does not define what's happening there.

## **Application to the Doctrine of the Ministry**

I won't make this a full application. The topic really merits a paper, at least. I'd like to point out, however, that if we consider the doctrine of the ministry beginning from a faulty or incomplete understanding about God's working through His effective word, as it's spoken by those whom He calls to do so in the present time, then we will easily go wrong.

In particular, note the importance that God attaches to the sending or calling of His ministers. Those who are not called or sent are false prophets, regardless of their piety or intentions. The same principles apply to the OT priesthood. To engage in priestly work without God's authorization incurs His displeasure and possibly even death. On the other hand, Jesus instructed His disciples to obey the word of the scribes and Pharisees, despite their hypocrisy, because they sat in Moses' seat (Mat 23:2). They were the authorized teachers of God's Word. In the NT, great care is taken by the Church to select a replacement for Judas, because of their proper and great respect for the office he held. Likewise, in the perpetuation of the pastoral office through men like Timothy and Titus, we see careful attention paid to their calling or sending by God (1 Tim 4:14, Titus 1:5).

The reason it's so important that God's ministers be sent or called by Him is because their particular task is to speak His Word. Again, this isn't to be considered a magical formula, but rather the exercise of God's power through His effective Word, according to His command and promise. He has bound Himself to His Word, and also continues to provide the human instruments for bringing that Word where it will accomplish His gracious purpose. This is what we call the office of preaching or teaching His Word and administering His sacraments.

If in the Lord's Supper, we were to say that the consecration of the elements has no bearing upon the sacramental presence of our Lord's body and blood, then we would fail to account for the fact that God works through means, particularly His Word. Remember, His Word makes things real by His power, even to the point of conferring forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. We would also fail to account for the reality of what we call the pastoral office. (This is not identical with the parish pastorate, but rather the office Jesus established for His apostles and those following whom He has also called to teach/preach and administer His sacraments.) Furthermore, we would misappropriate the teaching of Formula of Concord, article VII. All of these things would be symptoms of a misguided theology of the means of grace and the ministry of those means. Such a theology, taken as an *a priori* assumption, would prevent a scriptural understanding of the doctrine of the ministry.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Confessions at 10:18

Your opening paragraph reminds me of the difference between what is called "The Common Table Prayer" and what we inherited from Luther. The former (seemingly in conceit) invites Christ to be our guest, the latter reveals that we, as all other creatures, stand before God as beggars--"The eyes of all look to Thee, O Lord...". Truly He is not our guest, but we His. "Invited, Lord, by boundless grace, I stand a guest before Thy face; As host Thou spreadst no common food: Here is Thy body and Thy blood" (TLH 308)

Anonymous on Jun 1 2007, 16:07

"Seemingly in conceit" Steven? Come, lad. Thou revealest thine own heart here. It can be said plainly, humbly, without conceit. Are we not "as beggars" when we ask "come, Lord Jesus"? But I digress.

And, I nitpick. While Bucer was present at the Marburg Colloquy (Reports have between 24 and 60 present at any given time) and while it was indeed Bucer that Luther refused to recognize, the debaters were Zwingli and Oecolampadius on one hand, and Luther and Melancthon on the other. As I said...

I confess that I am intrigued, or more likely, just confused by your reference to certain "conservative Lutherans." Are you speaking here of a certain receptionism that has crept into the practice or doctrine of certain pastors? You seem to be hinting at some disconnect between the administration of the sacrament and

the office of the holy ministry. I'm, as is often the case, confused.

Anonymous on Oct 26 2008, 18:27