



CHRISTIAN CHURCH

THEOLOGICAL NOTES

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KEY IDEA 1: CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THE BIBLE IS GOD'S WORD.

The Church accepts without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life. (LCA Constitution II1)

WORD OF GOD

God does not leave us to work out for ourselves who God is, what kind of God he is, what he wants from us, how he feels towards us, and what he does for us. God graciously communicates with us. The 'word of God' is God's self-revelation; it makes God known to us so that we can honour, love and trust him as our God.

'Word of God' can mean different things:

- Although God has spoken 'in many and various ways' (Heb 1:1), his final and definitive revelation is in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2–3). Jesus Christ is the living word who became a human being (John 1:14). In Jesus Christ, God has made known his will, purpose and nature.
- 'Word of God' also refers to the written word of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. This written word testifies to Jesus Christ, who is the living and incarnate word (John 5:39).
- 'Word of God' also refers to the gospel of Christ, the message about what God has done in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation.

'Word of God' is offered to us in three basic forms:

- the written word – the Bible
- the proclaimed word – the preached word and the spoken witness of one person to another. Luther in the Smalcald Articles (III,4) speaks in this regard of 'the spoken word, in which forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel) . . . the power of the keys [confession and absolution] . . . the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters' (Kolb, Wengert: 319).

[**Note:** in the first generation of the church, Jesus' followers (apostles, evangelists, prophets etc) proclaimed the word of God as they had learnt it from Jesus and as they were led by 'the Spirit of truth' (John 14:26; 16:13).]

- the sacramental word (cf **CC2**)

THE BIBLE – THE WRITTEN WORD OF GOD

So that we and all people of all time can know the word which God spoke through the prophets and apostles and through Jesus Christ, the Word who came in human flesh, God has also given us his written word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is a library of books, the written word of God, written in human words by human beings. [The number of books varies, for example, between the Protestant version (66 books) and the Roman Catholic version (which includes the apocryphal books).]

The Bible is human and divine

The Bible is both fully human and fully divine. It is a human book because God used the personality and style of the human writers (their language, literary methods, knowledge of nature and history, experience of God, etc). It is a divine book because the Bible was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and God is its author (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). How the Holy Spirit 'inspired' the writers is not explained. Just as Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, so too the Bible is human and divine in all its parts. This cannot be explained rationally, but is accepted in faith.

Christ is the centre of the Bible

The Bible is *christocentric* – its centre is Jesus Christ. Jesus challenged his hearers to recognise that the Scriptures testify to him (John 5:39). In Luke 24:25–27, Jesus also explained the Scriptures to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus in relation to himself. Although Jesus was speaking here about the Old Testament writings, his words apply equally to the New Testament.

Martin Luther continually stressed the insight that if Scripture is not seen in the light of Christ, then the Bible becomes just an ordinary book and its teachings will be misinterpreted.

The Bible is God's word

The relationship between the Bible and God's word can be viewed in different ways. Some people teach that the Bible **contains God's word** — that is, there are parts of the Bible which are not God's word. Others (sometimes called 'fundamentalists') teach that the Bible **is the word of God** — that is the Bible, rather than Jesus Christ who is *the* word to which the Scriptures bear witness, is the centre of faith. The position of the LCA is that the Bible **is God's word** through which God speaks particularly through Jesus Christ.

Some people (sometimes called 'liberals') view the Bible as purely a historical document and do not accept the authority of the Bible as a whole. Some Pentecostal groups see the Bible as being **potentially God's word**: only if the Holy Spirit breathes life into it does the Bible become more than lifeless words.

The authority of the Bible

All Christian groups recognise the authority of Scripture although they may understand this in different ways. However, there are two basic approaches to understanding the authority of Scripture.

- The 'formal principle': this sees the authority of Scripture based on its divine authorship — it is divinely inspired and its ultimate author is God.
- The 'material principle': this sees the authority of Scripture based on the fact that it testifies to Christ, the Lord of Scripture — he is the one who speaks through Scripture.

These two principles should not be played off against each other. To stress only the 'formal principle' ends in fundamentalism, where the Bible is put above Christ. To stress only the 'material principle' ends in liberalism, where Christ is played off against the Bible, and passages not speaking directly about Christ are ignored. [Note: this debate between the formal and material principles emerges from time to time in the LCA.]

Dr Jeff Silcock summaries as follows (111):

In Lutheran theology, following Luther, pre-eminence is given to the material principle, so that we can say that in the final analysis the authority of Scripture (and this is true especially of the OT) is to be found in Christ, to whom it testifies. In other words, Scripture's ultimate authority is located in its gospel content. Luther also taught us to look for Christ wrapped in swaddling cloths of the OT, for he is already present there in veiled form, for the OT contains nothing else than Christ as he is preached in the gospel.

Because the Bible is word of God, it is true, and is the ultimate authority for what we believe and teach and how we should live. The Lutheran Confessions state: 'that God's Word alone ought to be and remain the only guiding principle and rule of all teaching and that no person's writing can be put on a par with it, but that everything must be totally subject to God's Word' (Kolb, Wengert: 528–529). Luther said: '... the Word of God — and no one else, not even an angel — should establish articles of faith' (Kolb, Wengert: 304).

The Bible is inspired

The Bible is the inspired ('God-breathed') word of God (2 Tim 3:16). The Scriptures are Spirit-filled and breathe the Holy Spirit as they testify to Jesus Christ (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14). Human beings spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. This is a statement of faith which is simply assumed in the Bible (2 Pet 1:21) without any further explanation. It is pointless to speculate on how this inspiration occurred, just as it is futile to try to demonstrate the 'truth' of the Bible by historical or rational means.

Christians also believe that it was the Holy Spirit who guided the selection of the writings which make up Scripture (the 'canon' of Scripture) to the exclusion of other contemporary writings. The 'canon of Scripture' is the list of inspired books which the church regarded as composing the Bible.

The determination of the Old Testament canon probably began after the exile and was finally settled by the second century AD. There were differences in the Hebrew and Greek ('Septuagint') versions. The Greek translation was probably made during the last two centuries before the birth of Christ and contained additional books which are commonly referred to now as the 'Apocrypha'. There are also some other variations between the Greek and the Hebrew versions. The New Testament writers seem to have quoted from both the Hebrew and Greek versions. Both versions were used in the early church but at the time of the reformation the reformers rejected the Apocrypha whereas the Roman Catholic Church retained it. The apocryphal books of the Old Testament are still retained in Roman Catholic Bibles today.

The New Testament canon was not settled until the end of the fourth century. The 4 gospels and the 13 epistles attributed to Paul were accepted by the middle of the second century. Doubts were expressed about the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Revelation. One criterion used for selection was the suitability of the texts for reading in public worship.

The Bible is infallible

When we confess that the Bible is the infallible or inerrant word of God, we are confessing that it is truthful in its content and it says what God intended it to say. It is completely trustworthy in all matters which relate to our salvation. It does not mislead us in our relationship with God. This is a statement of faith: when the Holy Spirit leads us to faith, he also gives us confidence in the Scriptures as God's word.

While we believe that the Bible is infallible in relation to all matters of salvation, this does not mean that it is infallible in matters such as history and science. Nor does it mean that there are no inconsistencies or that it is necessary to try to harmonise various accounts which are recorded from different perspectives (eg the creation stories, the dating of the crucifixion, etc). 'Rather, these features are a reminder that *God has condescended to give us his divine words in servant-form by using the weak, frail words of human beings*' (Silcock 110). This is another example of theology of the cross — that God's power is concealed behind human weakness.

The purpose of the Scriptures

In the Bible God makes known his marvellous plan for saving the fallen world ('salvation history'). God called Abraham and gave him the promise that he would be the father of God's chosen people through whom God would bless all people. God rescued his people Israel from slavery and made his gracious covenant with them. Israel was not faithful to God, yet God remained gracious to them and preserved a 'remnant' from whom the promised Savior would come.

God's saving plan reached its climax in the coming to earth of his Son, Jesus Christ, to live, die and rise again as the Saviour of all people. Jesus is the focal point of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible's chief purpose is to lead us to Christ, to give us 'the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim 3:15 TEV).

[**Note:** It is important that students become familiar with the whole of Scripture. There is a danger that students are introduced only to parts of Scripture (eg the early chapters of Genesis, the stories in the gospels) and that the story of God's dealings with his people in Old Testament times, and the historical and cultural background to the whole Bible is not sufficiently developed. There is also a danger that 'salvation history' jumps from creation and fall to the life and death of Jesus Christ, without addressing all that happens between these events. The significance of Jesus' life, work, death and resurrection can be fully understood only against the totality of revelation in the whole of Scripture.]

THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

The interpretation of Scripture (called 'hermeneutics') addresses how we are to understand Scripture and apply it to the current context. This is not simply an academic exercise. We are dealing with the word of God and so it is also a spiritual exercise. Any study of the Bible should always be accompanied with prayer, as we need the help of the Holy Spirit, the chief interpreter of the Bible, to open us up to the truth.

As indicated earlier, the Bible is both human and divine. Because it is a human book, it makes use of various literary forms in order to present God's word to people from differing generations, cultures, historical backgrounds, etc. For example, there are narratives, parables, pictures, visions, poetry and symbols. Some things are meant to be taken literally, other things are obviously figurative. Interpretation of Scripture begins by trying to understand what the text says within its historical and cultural context. For this purpose, we can use appropriate techniques and processes of analysis. We can then proceed to try to determine what the text *means* for our current context. This may not always be easy.

In the process of interpretation, the interpreter always stands *under* the biblical text, not *over* it. The first step, therefore, is to listen to the text to try to hear what it says and try to bracket out any preconceived ideas or cultural presuppositions. It is difficult even for the most faithful interpreter to exclude personal agendas, and so 'the whole life of the interpreter of the Scriptures must be a life of repentance' (Kolb 203).

Since the time of Luther and the reformation, there are a number of principles which are applied to the interpretation of Scripture.

Scripture is clear

Scripture is clear in its message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible does not use any secret or mysterious language. However, this does not mean that all passages of Scripture are immediately clear and comprehensible. God's wisdom is 'unsearchable' and his ways are 'inscrutable' (Rom 11:33). Peter complains that some of Paul's writing was 'hard to understand' (2 Pet 3:16). Some passages (for example, in Revelation) will always remain a puzzle. We cannot ever claim mastery over Scripture, but the Holy Spirit always brings to us from Scripture the clear message of all we need to know for our salvation.

Scripture is sufficient

Because Scripture tells us all we *need to know* for our salvation (Luke 16:29; John 20:30–31), it is 'sufficient'. The Bible may not tell us all we *want to know*, about God and his creation, but that is not the purpose of Scripture. We have no need for further writings to supplement the Bible (cf the Book of Mormon).

Scripture is powerful

Scripture is powerful (Jer 23:29; Heb 4:12), because through it the Holy Spirit brings people to faith and strengthens them in their faith and Christian life.

Scripture interprets Scripture — the unity of Scripture

A key principle of interpretation is that ‘Scripture interprets Scripture’. The assumption behind this is that, in spite of the rich diversity in scripture, there is an overarching unity of Scripture. The interpretation of a particular passage should not be in contradiction with what the Bible teaches as a whole. This also means that, viewed from the perspective of faith, there is unity between the Old and New Testaments.

This principle means that where a passage is seen to be obscure, it is understood in the light of clear passages. Clear Scripture is used to help interpret more difficult passages. This also leads to the use of study resources such as commentaries, concordances, word studies, parallel passages, similar images, etc, to help understand particular passages or concepts.

Where there is a passage which is difficult to explain, it is the Lutheran approach not to base a major teaching or practice on the text. While every effort is made to understand what God may be saying to us, this approach frees us from having to try to find an explanation to everything which is said in the Bible.

Scripture is ‘christocentric’ (centred on Christ)

Since Christ is the centre of Scripture, all passages must finally be interpreted in the light of Christ and the gospel. No interpretation can be in conflict with the gospel. This is central for Lutheran hermeneutics. It guards against Scripture being misunderstood as a book of teachings, wise sayings, etc which are unrelated to Christ. While all Scripture is authoritative word of God, not all statements in the Bible are of equal value and importance. For example, while Old Testament dietary laws or family tree details have their place in the total message of the Bible, they do not have the same importance and value for us as does the witness to Jesus’ resurrection.

In order to keep this focus on Christ and justification by grace through faith for the sake of Christ, Lutherans see **law and gospel** (promise) as the central teaching of the Bible. God is seen as working in the world through his word in two ways — as law and as gospel. Through the law God maintains and preserves the world (‘political use’), but particularly through the law (‘theological use’) he exposes sin. Through the gospel, God reveals salvation by declaring the forgiveness of sins. The law is sometimes seen as Christ’s ‘strange work’ (as judge and lawgiver) rather than his ‘real work’ (as saviour of the world). The proper distinction of law and gospel is necessary to ensure that the focus always remains on what God in Jesus Christ has done for us. Confusion of law and gospel inevitably leads to a focus on our own part in trying to ‘earn salvation’. However, separating law and gospel also leads to problems: without the gospel, the law will either produce pride or arrogance in the person who does not recognise his/her sin, or despair in the heart of the repentant; without the law, people do not recognise their need for the gospel (Matt 9:12).

Scripture is interpreted within the context of the church

The Bible does not belong to an individual. There is a history of interpretation of the Bible within the Christian church. It is the task of the church, through the office of public ministry, to teach people how to read and interpret Scripture. To ignore the tradition of interpretation places one in danger of ending up in error.

For the Lutheran church, the **Lutheran Confessions** provide a summary of the teachings of Scripture. Their authority is derived from the authority of Scripture and they need to be continually tested against Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions see themselves as continuing to teach what the church has always taught and confessed (they begin with the three ecumenical creeds). They continue to guide people as they interpret Scripture. They define what it means to be ‘Lutheran’: this is why teachers in Lutheran schools promise to teach according to the Lutheran Confessions when they are installed as teachers.

THE PROCLAIMED WORD OF GOD — THE LIVING VOICE OF GOD’S WORD

The word of God is dynamic. It is not only to be read and studied; it is to be proclaimed as good news to all creation (Acts 1:8). This happens through the preaching of God’s word, through confession and absolution, through ‘mutual conversation and consolation’ (Kolb, Wengert: 319) of Christians with each other as they speak God’s word to each other, and through witness to the gospel to those who have not yet come to faith.

It is important, however, to retain the close connection between the written and the proclaimed word of God. The written word remains the ultimate authority for the church in determining doctrine and as the basis for the proclaimed word.

In preaching the word, the preacher applies the written word to people’s hearts and lives through the proper distinction of law and gospel. ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me’ (Luke 10:16). One of the main reasons for coming together for worship is to *hear* God’s word read and proclaimed. Luther called the church a ‘mouth-house’ rather than a ‘pen-house’

(Silcock: 113) to emphasise that the church does not assemble around a book but around the proclaimed word of God, which is, however, based on, and must be faithful to, the written word of the Bible.

The proclaimed word of God (as with the written word of God) is not simply conveying information. It has power to do what it says, both as law and as gospel (Isa 55:11). It is a *performative* word. As law it confronts the sinner and accuses and judges. As gospel it forgives and frees and rescues us from the wrath and judgement of God. This is much more than simply speaking about law and gospel; it is proclaiming law and gospel, the living voice of God's word.

God's word is also a living word, since it is contemporary and speaks to all people today as it has spoken to, and been contemporary for, all people throughout history. While the message remains the same, the word needs to be reinterpreted and reapplied to address a variety of conditions and specific cultures.

The public ministry

While all Christians ('priesthood of all believers') have the responsibility to proclaim the word of God to each other and to witness to those not yet members of the body of Christ, Christ has instituted the office of the ministry for the public proclamation of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments (AC V, Kolb, Wengert: 41). On the basis of his call and ordination, the pastor carries out ministry of word and sacrament publicly on behalf of the congregation. He exercises this ministry in and for the congregation on the authority of Christ [cf CC2].

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- The Lutheran church stresses the importance of the Bible in the life of the church and its members. How would you assess the use of the Bible in your school and congregation?
- How can we encourage students to develop a love for the Bible?
- How much do we work in schools with the actual text of the Bible, and how much do we speak 'about the Bible' rather than use it? In what ways do we mask the scriptures by our use of secondary material?
- What is the place of telling Bible stories in the school context?
- What use is made of the Bible in the formal rites and rituals of the school (eg valedictories, presentations, sports day, school assemblies, installation of school leaders, etc)? What does this show about the place of the Bible in the day-to-day life of the school?
- How are students helped to become familiar with the totality of Scripture and not just particular sections?
- In what ways is God's word heard and proclaimed in the school context?
- What is meant when a Lutheran school says that it is 'gospel centred'?
- How might law and gospel be understood in the Lutheran school context?

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KEY IDEA 2: THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS SHAPED BY AND SHAPES ITS CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The Holy Spirit . . . calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins — mine and those of all believers. (SC II,6; Kolb, Wengert: 355, cf LC II, 61–62)

THE CHURCH

When the Bible talks about church, it does not mean a building or a worship service or an organisation created by human beings. The church is people — the people of God. The church consists of all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour.

The Greek word for 'church' in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which refers to an assembly of people called together for a particular purpose. In the New Testament it has the basic idea of a group of people who are 'called out' to form God's special community. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were God's special people called out from all the nations, set apart ('holy') to receive God's gracious blessing and to be a blessing to all nations. In the New Testament this privilege is given to Christians (1 Pet 2:9–10). The *ekklesia* belongs to God, because God has called it into being and works through it (Acts 20:28). The *ekklesia* can be a specific community (or communities) of believers from a household (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Phlm 2), a city (1 Cor 1:2) or a province (Gal 1:2).

The New Testament uses a number of designations for the church to emphasise different aspects of the nature of the church: for example 'saints' (2 Cor 1:1), 'believers' (Acts 2:44), 'servants/slaves' (1 Cor 7:22), 'people of God' (Acts 18:10), 'household' or 'family' (Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15), 'bride of Christ' (Eph 5:25), 'body of Christ with Christ as the head' (Rom 12:5; Eph 1:23; 1 Cor 12:12). Other pictures for the church include a living temple in which Jesus is the cornerstone and Christians are the bricks which have been laid on the firm foundation and support each other (Eph 2:20–22; 1 Pet 2:5), the vine and the branches (John 15:1–7) and the shepherd and his sheep (John 10).

Created and maintained by the Holy Spirit

The church is created and maintained by the Holy Spirit working through the 'means of grace' — the gospel and the sacraments. Augsburg Confession Article VII states: 'The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly' (Kolb, Wengert: 43). The church has been called into being and is preserved by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, but the church is also the divinely appointed means by which Christ, through the Holy Spirit, creates the church.

Note that the Augsburg Confession defines the church liturgically — as the people of God gathered for worship around the means of grace. It begins with God's action towards his people. The church is not simply a 'club' of like-minded people who get together but, as each person is brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, they are also brought into the family of the church. Luther says, 'God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and "the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd"' (SA III,12; Kolb, Wengert: 324).

A confession of faith — the true church is hidden

We confess, 'I believe in . . . the holy, catholic church'. The church is always an object of faith, because it can never be empirically verified. 'True believers' cannot be identified by any kind of test. However, we can be sure that where the Holy Spirit is active through the preaching of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ's institution, there the church is present. God has promised that his word does not return to him empty (Isa 55:11). God's word and the sacraments are therefore recognised as the 'marks of the church'; where these are present, the church is present.

However, the church as an institution also includes non-Christians, hypocrites and even public sinners (those who do not intend to deal with their particular sin) (AC VIII; Kolb, Wengert:43). Only God knows who are really true members of the church, because only he can see into human hearts. Jesus uses the parables of the net in which both good and bad fish are caught (Matt 13:47–50) and the field of weeds among the wheat (Matt 13:24–30; 36–43) to indicate this situation and also to warn against trying to separate these two groups. Only at the end of time will this judgement take place (Matt 25:31–46).

For this reason, the church is in the strict sense 'hidden'. While we can be confident that those who faithfully hear the word of God and receive the sacrament are members of the 'true church', it always remains hidden within the local congregation with all of its turmoil, pride and factionalism. It remains a confession of faith.

Attributes of the church

The Nicene Creed speaks of the church as 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'.

one

The church is 'one' because all believers are united in Christ. Even though there is outward division and disunity within the church, there is only one 'communion of saints'. The church, the body of Christ, is one, just as Jesus and the Father are one (John 17:20–23). The unity of the church is a gift of God and does not depend on human efforts (see further **CC3**).

The church is also one across all time. It exists in time and also outside of time. It consists of all who have been, all who are, and all who will be members of the body of Christ. We catch a glimpse of this in the liturgy of holy communion when we are invited to praise God 'with angels and archangels, and with the whole company of heaven'.

holy

As mentioned above, the church as a human institution cannot be described as 'holy'. However, the church as the body of Christ is holy because Christ is holy. This holiness is a gift of God, an article of faith, a theological fact. Through the working of the Holy Spirit those who make up the church are 'saints', even though they still remain sinners living by the grace of God until the day of resurrection.

There is the temptation by some Christians to try to 'cleanse' the church of those who are not showing the fruit of faith in their lives and to make the church 'holy'. This exercise of 'theology of glory' tries to demonstrate the 'holiness' of the church as a visible reality. Silcock comments (p 164):

The task of sifting the wheat from the weeds, or separating the sheep from the goats (Matt 25:31–46) belongs to the Lord of the church, and he will do that on the last day when he returns to judge the living and the dead. Meanwhile he warns us not to try weeding out those whom we think are not Christians in case we pull up the wheat with the weeds. Christians follow Christ in showing patience and love, just as the gardener gave the barren fig tree a second chance before even thinking about cutting it down (Luke 13:6–9).

Although the church must not try to make the church more 'holy', the church does have to exercise discipline where individuals remain impenitent of obvious and open sin. The church follows the principles laid down by Jesus Christ in Matthew 18:15–18, but in doing so must be very careful not to become judgmental and spiritually proud. The last resort in this process is excommunication — refusing to allow the person to receive holy communion. The ultimate purpose of church discipline is to help the individual to acknowledge their sin and seek forgiveness. This leads to restoration of the person back into the community (cf the whole chapter of Matthew 18).

catholic

There has been some reluctance in Lutheran circles to use the word 'catholic' as an attribute of the church because of association with the Roman Catholic church. The word 'universal' is sometimes used instead.

The designation 'catholic' emphasises that the church exists all over the world, wherever Christians gather around word and sacrament. A congregation is the church of Jesus Christ in a particular locality. There are members of the holy, catholic church in all Christian denominations and local communities. In Revelation (7:9) we see a vision of the universal and international character of the church.

The Lutheran church is sometimes described as a 'confessional movement' within the church catholic. Even though the reformers had to break with the institutional church of their day, they were insistent that their teaching was thoroughly 'catholic' because they taught what the church had always taught. They simply wished to correct what they saw as false teachings which had crept into the church. For this reason, the Book of Concord begins with the three ecumenical creeds which have been confessed by the church through the ages.

apostolic

The church is 'apostolic' because it is founded on the apostolic word and it has the task of preaching and handing on the word to each new generation (Eph 2:19–22). The apostolic character of the church emphasises the historical roots of the church and the continuity between the church and Jesus Christ through the apostles whom he appointed; it also stresses the ongoing mission of the church.

[Denominations such as the Anglicans and Roman Catholics speak about the 'apostolic succession' in a particular way. This relates to the 'laying on of hands' by a bishop in the rite of ordination, which is seen as ensuring the historic continuity of the apostolic teaching through the ordained ministry of priests and bishops. Lutherans see the apostolic succession through the teaching of the apostolic word.]

Functions of the church

Traditionally the functions of the church are listed as worship, witness, nurture, fellowship and service. Sometimes the function of preaching is also identified separately.

worship

Worship is the central activity of the church as God's people respond to what God has done for them. From it flow the other activities of the church. [A more extensive treatment of worship is given in **CC3**.]

witness

The church continues the mission which Christ began while on earth when he commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20). Just as the Father sent the Son, and the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit to continue the ministry of Jesus, so Jesus sent his disciples (John 20:21) to evangelise the world.

This is not an optional task. We are called to be witnesses to the gospel in our homes, schools, communities, and wherever we interact with others. Mission is the work of every Christian and every congregation both in the immediate situation as well as globally. Only when Christ returns will the mission task of the church be over.

Within the Lutheran school community, the witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ is crucial. While this is not the prime function of a school as an educational institution, it is the responsibility of Christians as they live and work in the context of the school.

nurture

While the church does not have a responsibility for general education, it does have the task of nurturing its members in the Christian faith (John 21:15–17). This function, which is related to the sacrament of baptism (Matt 28:19–20), is sometimes called 'catechesis'. The church which baptises must also teach. This responsibility of the Christian community cannot simply be transferred to the Lutheran school. However, the Lutheran school may be able to assist in the nurture ministry of the congregation.

fellowship

Human beings are created for relationship (cf **CL1**). When the Holy Spirit leads a person to faith, that individual is also incorporated into the fellowship of the church. This is not a fellowship established by human beings for their purposes, but brought together by the Holy Spirit for God's purposes. Luther (SA III,4; Kolb, Wengert: 319) speaks of aspects of this fellowship as 'the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters'. Within this fellowship, Christians support and encourage one another, particularly with the word of God.

The New Testament uses the term *koinonia* to refer to the way the early Christians 'were together and had all things in common' (Acts 2:44). This 'sharing' includes sharing 'in Christ' (1 Cor 1:9), 'in the gospel' (1 Cor 9:23), sacramental sharing 'in the body and blood of Christ' (1 Cor 10:14–17) as members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31). This sharing also includes fellowship in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13).

service

The early church was sufficiently concerned with service (*diakonia*) that seven deacons were appointed to attend to it (Acts 6:1–6). This function of service is explored in **CL2**.

The church as a human organisation

As stated above, in the strict sense, the true church is hidden. However, the church is also a human organisation which operates within a cultural and historical context. As such, it is influenced by that cultural and historical context, and, in turn, it influences that context. Hence the church and the way it works in the community can vary greatly from place to place. It can also be difficult at times to separate the message of the church from the cultural accretions which may have developed around that message. The question can sometimes be asked: 'Are we handing on the message of the word of God, the culture of the church, or some mixture of both?'

history of the church

The history of the church shows the church interacting with society through the ages. It shows how God is present with and for his people. But that history also shows the sinfulness of human beings and the way God preserves his church despite human failures. There are many examples of great faith, but there are equally many examples of stories of human frailty and shortcomings. It is a miracle of God's grace that the church has survived in the face of countless threats from inside and outside the church. As Christians today struggle to be God's faithful church and wonder about its future in an indifferent and hostile world, Jesus' promise remains sure: 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' (Matt 16:18).

There have been many different phases in the history of the church. For the first three centuries, the Christian church experienced persecutions until the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion in 312. Since then,

in the so-called 'Christian East and West', the church has been an important part of society. More recently, people have begun to speak of the 'post-Christian' era in the West with the decline of the church and its influence, while the church has become much more important in the continents of Africa, South America and to some extent Asia.

In looking at the history of the church, students will be able to gain some insights into the complexity of the church and the various ways in which different groups have expressed their Christianity. It will also allow the consideration of issues such as religious intolerance, the relationship between religion and learning, church/state relationships, and the impact of Christianity in such matters as slavery, religious wars, social justice concerns, and politics (cf also **CL3**).

Christian denominations

Although the church of Jesus Christ is one, various Christian denominations have arisen as human beings have disagreed in their interpretation and application of the word and will of God. Every denomination must constantly check its teachings and practice against what the Bible says to ensure that it is being true to God's revelation. At the same time every denomination must acknowledge that the good shepherd has his sheep not only in one denomination but wherever the shepherd's voice is heard (John 10:16).

ecumenism

While there is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church', all denominations should be prepared to dialogue with each other on the basis of Scripture, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will lead them to know and understand the truth of God more clearly (John 16:13) and so bring them into greater outward unity. While the unity of the church is a gift of God, this does not absolve us from the task of trying to work towards the unity of the various denominations. This unity is therefore both a gift from God and a task to which he calls us.

The Lutheran Confessions stress that different ways of doing things in the church do not destroy the unity of the church created by the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:1–5). Church unity or church fellowship must, however, be based on agreement in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession states (Kolb, Wengert: 43):

It is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.

There has been considerable discussion about the phrase 'it is enough' in this article. Some people understand this as implying agreement with the whole Book of Concord, while others interpret this as agreement just in the means of grace (word and sacrament).

church and culture

While the church will try to develop culturally appropriate expressions of Christianity, there is always a degree of tension between the message of the church and the culture. In important ways the gospel is always counter-cultural. It challenges assumptions and values which are part of any culture, since all cultures reflect the nature of sinful human beings. As the church reaches out with its message of salvation in Jesus Christ, it needs to ensure that it is engaging the community in culturally appropriate ways, even though the message of Christ crucified is 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23–24).

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- How can we speak of the church being present in the school community? What images or concepts might be helpful?
- In what ways can a Lutheran school demonstrate that there is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'?
- How can Christians within the school context witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?
- How do/can Lutheran schools and Lutheran congregations relate to each other?
- What is the relationship between nurture within the Christian community and the teaching of Christian Studies in the Lutheran school?
- What role does Lutheran 'culture' rather than Lutheran 'faith' play in the Lutheran school context?
- In the current multicultural context of Lutheran schools, what must be retained from the Lutheran tradition and heritage, and what can be discarded?
- In what ways can Lutheran schools foster interdenominational dialogue?
- In what ways can the school reach out with the gospel to the various sub-cultures within the school?

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KEY IDEA 3 : CHRISTIANS PRAY, WORSHIP AND CELEBRATE THE SACRAMENTS

WORSHIP

Worship begins in God's action towards his people. In worship God comes to his people and serves them by what he says to them (in the word) and by what he does (in the sacraments). The focus of Christian worship is the Lord Jesus Christ, because through Jesus God most clearly shows himself as the God who loves us, accepts us, forgives us and cares for us.

The second aspect of Christian worship is our response to God's words and actions. We recognise and acknowledge that God serves us, and we show by our words and actions that we believe God is worthy of praise, honour, loving obedience and willing service. We pray to God for mercy and for all our needs. We praise and thank God for his loving mercy. At the same time we acknowledge our own unworthiness (confession of sins).

Worship is sometimes called 'divine service', because in worship God serves us and this prompts us in turn to serve him. This highlights an essential difference between Christian and non-Christian worship. In non-Christian worship the initiative tends to be with the worshippers, who try to establish the connection with their god and demonstrate their own worthiness by the earnestness and intensity of their prayers and other ritual acts (contrast the worship of the prophets of Baal with that of Elijah, 1 Kgs 18:16–39; also the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14). [There is also an emphasis in some forms of Christian worship on what we do, rather than on what God has first done for us!]

Worship as God's action

Public worship brings us into the presence of the triune God and incorporates us into the heavenly worship (cf the 'invocation' at the beginning of worship).

Jesus Christ is our worship leader who brings us into the presence of the Father, representing us before the Father in intercession and thanksgiving (Heb 7:25; 9:24), and representing the Father to us in proclamation and praise (Heb 2:12). Jesus leads us together with the angels and the whole communion of saints in the performance of the heavenly liturgy (Heb 2:11; 8:2; 12:22–24; 13:15). In this way, Jesus continues to serve us as he served people during his ministry on earth (cf **CB2** — Jesus as 'priest').

Christ's continuing service to his people comes through the 'means of grace': God's word, baptism, absolution, and holy communion. These are the channels through which the Holy Spirit brings the blessings of Christ's service to us. Through these means, the Holy Spirit continues the ministry of Christ in and through the church.

Worship as response

God serves us, and we respond. However, even this response is created in us by the Holy Spirit; God not only serves us first, but God also initiates and enables our response.

Our response in worship occurs at a number of levels:

- in praise and thanksgiving, celebrating what God has done for us (the emphasis here is on the glory of God, not the 'performance' of the worship);
- in confession because we know of forgiveness in Jesus Christ;
- in public profession of faith (the creed);
- in prayers and intercessions for the church and the world;
- in free-will offerings;
- in offering our whole lives in service to God (Rom 12:1).

The form of Christian worship

Worship has its roots in scripture. Already in the Old Testament we see people like Noah and Abraham building altars and praising God for his gracious actions. Worship was also conducted at special places where God had appeared (eg Bethel). Although God cannot be confined in buildings (2 Chr 6:18), God instructed his people to erect the tabernacle and then later the temple as the meeting place for God with his people in worship. God instituted the cult of sacrificial worship, which was administered by the priests, who also mediated God's word to the people and interceded for them before God. These sacrifices of the Old Testament were temporary and pointed ahead to the final and all-sufficient self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God also gave his people the sabbath day as a special day set aside for worship and special worship festivals (eg Passover, Day of Atonement) which allowed the people to focus on God's mighty acts of deliverance.

Jesus and his disciples observed the worship patterns of the Old Testament. However, like the prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus called for worship that was not mere empty ritual but was sincere devotion (Matt 6:5–13; 15:1–9), 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). As God in human flesh, Jesus himself is the New Testament tabernacle and temple — the 'place' where God's glory is fully revealed (John 1:14; 2:19–21). Jesus promised his followers that he would be present even when only two or three of them came together in his name (Matt 18:20). Christian worship is not restricted

to certain rituals at particular places and times (Col 2:16). The sabbath having fulfilled its purpose, Sunday came to be observed as 'the Lord's day'. On this day Christians celebrate God's supreme work of deliverance through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus did not institute a particular order or pattern of worship for the church. However, he did give directives about essential features of Christian worship: baptism, confession and absolution, reading and preaching of the word, prayer, thanksgiving, the sacrament of the altar, and blessing (Matt 28:19; John 20:23; Luke 24:46–47; Luke 10:16; 11:1–13; Matt 26:26–28; Luke 24:50–51). Jesus also instituted the public ministry (John 20:21–23) for the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Although there are elements of worship which are essential, since they are commanded in scripture, no particular form or style of worship is commanded by God. Christians are free to choose in the area of forms of worship. [These non-essentials which have been neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture are sometimes referred to as *adiaphora*.] However, decisions in these non-essentials must be made in genuine concern for the welfare and unity of the body of Christ and in Christian love for all members of the body. The Lutheran confessions state:

We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such [worship] practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church. (Kolb, Wengert: 637)

Lutheran worship is **liturgical**. Together with denominations like the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches, the Lutheran church uses common forms based on scripture to express worship. The liturgy helps to maintain the proper focus of worship and allows worship to be carried out in an orderly way (1 Cor 14:40). It is important, however, that the liturgy doesn't become mechanical routine. The liturgy also follows the structure of the traditional church year, which is arranged around the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Vestments, liturgical colours, altars, lecterns, pulpits, candles, etc are also part of liturgical worship.

Whatever forms worship takes, worship leaders must strive for excellence in worship to make the experience as effective and meaningful as possible. It needs to be sensitive to the particular context, relevant to those who are participating, but it cannot compromise the biblical focus and the centrality of the gospel. In the school context it is vital that appropriate emphasis, attention and resources are given to planning and leading of worship.

The scope of Christian worship

Christian worship transcends the boundaries of time and space. It unites us with God's people of all times and in all places. In this way worshippers anticipate their life with the triune God in heaven (Isa 6:1–5; Rev 4). In worship we also join with the angels in praising God (Heb 12:22–24) and anticipate the time when the whole of creation will perfectly praise God in heavenly glory (Ps 96:10–13; Rev 5:13). [This is seen, for example, in the liturgy of holy communion, where we join with 'angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven' in praising God.]

Worship and fellowship

Public worship is basic to the fellowship which Christians share (Heb 10:24–25). In worship, the Holy Spirit continues to develop the community into which each Christian is incorporated when they come to faith in Jesus Christ (cf **CC2**). Fellowship is strengthened as Christians are fed through word and sacrament and as they share in prayer. Christian fellowship also provides support for Christians as they seek to live a life of worship.

The life of worship

Public worship happens as Christians gather together for worship in the name of the triune God to hear his word, to pray, to sing and to receive Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. Private worship is the daily worship of Christians as they pray, read God's word, worship as family, say grace at meals, etc. It also happens through daily life lived in service to our neighbour. Here worship is linked with vocation. Paul says that we offer our body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (1 Cor 12:1), and we respect our body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20), using it to the honour of God in service of other people. In this way our public and private worship are intimately tied together

PRAYER

Christian prayer is an expression of the relationship God has established with his people through Jesus Christ. It is a conversation with God which God initiates. Christians speak to God because God has spoken to them and invites them to speak with him.

Christian prayer flows from Christian faith. Christians don't have to pray in order to get close to God, because in Jesus Christ, God has already come close to them. Some Christians tend to see prayer as a 'means of grace'. They believe that they get God's love and forgiveness by praying for it. However, God's love and forgiveness come to them through God's word and the sacraments; prayer is not the reason these gifts come to them, they are given by the grace of God.

God's invitation and promise

Christians pray because God invites them to do so. The Holy Spirit, who has made them God's children through adoption, teaches them to call God 'Abba Father', a very intimate and personal form of address (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15) (cf Luther's explanation to the introduction to the Lord's Prayer).

Jesus invites his followers to pray (Matt 7:7; Luke 18:1; 21:36). He gave them his own prayer (cf below). He has also given his promise to answer those prayers (John 16:23–24). Praying 'in the name of Jesus' recognises that prayer to God is possible only because Jesus has given Christians that access (John 14:6; Matt 27:51; Heb 10:19–22). He has removed the barrier of sin which prevents God from hearing and answering prayer. Jesus intercedes with the Father on behalf of the members of his body (cf **CB2** – Jesus as 'priest'). Praying 'in the name of Jesus' is not using some magic formula, but it is recognising the basis on which Christians can approach God – with Jesus' credentials and not their own.

The New Testament writers repeatedly urge Christians to pray (eg Rom 12:12; Col 4:2; I Thess 5:17; 1 Tim 2:1; Jas 1:6; 5:13).

God answers prayer

Christians pray with confidence, because God promises to answer prayer which is based on faith in Jesus Christ (John 14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23; Matt 7:7–11; Ps 50:15).

God's answer may be something which God *does* (eg healing, protecting, forgiving). In this situation, God may also work through the person who prays to bring about the answer to their prayer. God's answer may be something which he *says* through his word or through another person. God may respond in a way which is direct and clear, but he may also drive us back to his word in the Scriptures. This is why there is such a close link between prayer and reading and hearing God's word. However, it is important that God's answer to prayer is not seen as being dependent on the level of faith of the person who is praying (eg 'God will answer your prayer if only you believe more fervently, pray more earnestly, trust him more fully, etc').

Christians believe that God's answer to prayer comes in God's own way and in his own time. Often the answer to prayer will be recognised only as people look back on a situation some time later. Christians trust God in his love and wisdom to answer in the way which is best for the situation (Matt 6:32b).

Corporate prayer

Prayer is corporate in nature. Through faith and baptism Christians are united in fellowship with all God's people. Prayer is an expression of that relationship, the 'communion of saints'. The members of the body of Christ pray through Jesus Christ, who is their head and who represents them to the Father. The model for corporate prayer is the Lord's Prayer with its emphasis on 'our', 'we', and 'us'.

Private prayer

Private prayer grows out of corporate prayer. Jesus Christ urges his followers to pray privately for those things which are of concern to them (Matt 6:5–6; Luke 11:1–13). For the Christian, private prayer is an essential aspect of Christian spirituality (cf **CW2**).

The Bible also speaks of the Holy Spirit praying with and for the individual (Rom 8:26–27). This prayer of the Holy Spirit may be at a subconscious level, as the Spirit prays with the Father for those things which the individual may not be able to articulate.

The Lord's Prayer

Jesus has given his own prayer to his followers (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4). Rather than simply teach about prayer, Jesus gave Christians his own prayer which they can pray with him, knowing they are praying for those things which Jesus himself prays for.

It is important that the Lord's Prayer does not become simply a convenient 'space-filler' in worship. Here the treatment of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Small and Large Catechisms can be very helpful for ongoing study both privately and in groups.

THE SACRAMENTS

The sacraments are central in the worship life of the Lutheran church. Together with other 'sacramental churches' such as the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican churches, Lutherans celebrate the sacraments as the word of God in visible form (water, bread, wine) and visible action. In a very special way through the sacraments God is present for his people, giving them his grace and blessing. [The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, using a different understanding of some aspects of sacraments, also include confirmation, marriage, ordination and blessing of the dying as sacraments.]

What is a sacrament?

The Bible does not give a definition of a 'sacrament'. According to Lutheran understanding, a sacrament is a sacred act or rite that has the following components:

- a physical element or elements (water, bread, wine)
- the command of Christ (Matt 28:19 – baptism; 1 Cor 11:24–25 – holy communion)
- a promise attached to the command (Mark 16:16 – baptism; 1 Cor 11:24–25 – holy communion)

Sometimes in the Lutheran tradition absolution is also considered to be a sacrament, even though it lacks a physical element (apart from the human voice and the laying on of hands). However, it has been instituted by Christ and has his promise (John 20:22–23).

While baptism and holy communion have things in common, they are also different. For example, baptism is performed only once in a person's life, while Christians celebrate holy communion repeatedly.

Lutherans tend to use the phrase 'word and sacrament' in a way which could suggest that God's word (read and preached) is somehow different from the word of God which is combined with the elements in the sacraments. However, it would be correct to say that there is one 'means of grace', the word of God (the word of gospel or promise), which comes to us as written word, preached word and sacramental word ('visible word').

What makes the sacraments valid?

The sacraments are valid only because of the command of Christ and the word of God which is added to the elements. Without the word of God, we have simply water, bread and wine. The sacrament remains valid even if it is wrongly received or used, or if faith is lacking, because the validity 'is not bound to our faith but to the Word' (Kolb, Wengert: 463). The validity of the sacrament also does not depend on the faith of the person celebrating the sacrament.

The sacraments are an objective means of bridging the gap between the death of Christ on the cross and our own time. Each one of us is made contemporaneous with Christ: he baptises us and he offers himself to us in the bread and wine, as he did to his disciples in the upper room during the last supper. The sacraments therefore give us certainty that God is really at work in our lives. Christ establishes and maintains an individual relationship with each one of us while at the same time incorporating and keeping us in the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the church, the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16–17).

What makes the sacraments effective?

The benefits of the sacraments are received by faith. Faith does not make the sacrament valid, but it trusts in and draws on the blessings which the sacrament offers. The sacraments do not operate automatically or magically; they become effective in the life of the Christian by faith. This faith is also the gift of God. God gives faith in baptism, and this faith receives the blessings of baptism and the benefits of holy communion.

Incarnation and the sacraments: linking creation and redemption

Christians believe that in the incarnation, God became a human being. The creator became part of his own creation. Creation and the work of redemption are linked. This mystery continues through the sacraments, where earthly, created elements take on special significance, bearing the gifts of salvation. Here again we see theology of the cross – Christ hidden in, with and under the elements of water, bread and wine.

Baptism

Luther's Small and Large Catechisms most clearly set out the Lutheran understanding of baptism and its benefits. However, a few specific aspects can be highlighted.

God is the one who baptises

Baptism is the action of God. However, God uses human hands to perform baptism. Some denominations, however, particularly those who do not practise infant baptism (eg Baptist), see baptism as something which we do as a public declaration of our faith. According to this understanding, baptism is simply a sign of faith, and the emphasis falls on what the person does rather than on what God does. For Lutherans baptism is a means of grace through which God claims the baptised as his own and gives them his gifts. Because it is God who performs the baptism, Christian churches recognise the validity of each others' baptisms, providing water is used (either sprinkling or immersion) in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

infant baptism

Infant baptism arises as an issue in Lutheran schools because of the different teachings of the various Christian denominations. This is partly due to the fact that the Lutheran church recognises that there is no clear directive in the Bible to baptise infants. However, it is equally true that Scripture says nothing to prohibit the baptism of infants.

While the Bible does not command nor prohibit the baptism of infants, it does offer the blessings of baptism to ‘all nations’ (Matt 28:19). Including infants in these blessings is consistent with Jesus’ command to let the little children come to him, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them (Matt 19:14) and the preaching of Peter (Acts 2:39) that the promise of the gospel is ‘for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him’. The Bible also speaks of the baptism of the households of Lydia (Acts 16:15) and the jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:33); it is highly likely that infants and small children were included.

The theological understanding of baptism is also consistent with the practice of infant baptism. The promises of the gospel cannot be denied to anyone on the basis of age. Just as infants share in the universality of original sin, they are included in the universality of God’s grace. God who gives the gift of faith can give that gift also to an infant. As indicated above, it is God who is active in baptism, giving the blessing of baptism and also the faith which receives those blessings.

There are also historical arguments for the practice of infant baptism (the tradition of the church). There is no evidence in the history of the early church of any controversy over infant baptism. The introduction of a new practice, such as infant baptism, would have raised some level of discussion in the early church. From the earliest documents relating to the church it is indicated that infant baptism was practiced at least as early as the second century. God has preserved his church through history also through the practice of infant baptism (cf Luther’s Large Catechism, Kolb, Wengert, 462–464).

baptism in the Holy Spirit

The separation of so-called ‘water baptism’ and ‘spirit baptism’ is a recent development in the church. However, the New Testament does not make this separation. While a person may receive the Holy Spirit apart from baptism, those who are baptised have received the Holy Spirit. The New Testament sees ‘water baptism’ and ‘spirit baptism’ as one and the same (1 Cor 12:13). Baptism is also carried out in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus the Spirit is present and active in baptism.

living in one’s baptism

In the Large Catechism, Luther expresses the life of the Christian in this way (Kolb, Wengert, 466–467):

Thus we see what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God’s own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory.

Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians, and let those who fall away return to it. As Christ, the mercy seat, does not withdraw from us or forbid us to return to him even though we sin, so all his treasures and gifts remain. As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the old creature around our necks.

Holy communion

Luther’s treatment of the sacrament of the altar in the Small and Large Catechisms is the starting point for a consideration of a Lutheran understanding of holy communion. Luther clearly sets out the blessings received in this sacrament as ‘forgiveness of sins, life and salvation’.

Christ’s presence in the bread and wine

Lutherans believe that in the sacrament of the altar Christ gives his ‘true body and blood’ ‘in, with, and under’ the bread and wine. Christ is truly present in the consecrated elements. Those who receive the sacrament, whether or not they believe, receive the body and blood of Christ. This is a mystery which is based on the words of Scripture (John 6:51–58; 1 Cor 10:16–17). Lutherans do not try to explain how this happens but accept that it does on the basis of Christ’s word and promise. Lutherans reject that Christ is only symbolically, or figuratively, or spiritually present in the sacrament. Lutherans also understand holy communion as more than a ‘memorial meal’, remembering what Jesus has done for us. Since Jesus commanded ‘do this in remembrance of me’ (1 Cor 11:23–26), Lutherans believe that they participate in the body and blood of Christ because Christ himself is present as he has promised.

being ‘worthy’

The close link in previous Lutheran practice of confirmation and first communion has often led to the perception that readiness for communion and ‘being worthy’ is related to an intellectual understanding of the sacrament. This has been based on a particular understanding of Paul’s words in 1 Cor 11:27–34 which speak about ‘examining’ oneself before partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. However, what Paul is concerned about in this passage is rather that individuals recognise that the consecrated bread and wine is more than ordinary food and is in fact the body and blood of Christ.

Luther stresses that the real concern is not the ability to somehow 'understand' what is happening in the sacrament, but simply to trust what Christ is saying, when he says, this is my body 'given for you' and this is my blood 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins' (Kolb, Wengert, 363). True 'worthiness' is the recognition of our own 'unworthiness' and the need for repentance. What makes us 'worthy' to share in the sacrament is nothing in ourselves, but simply Christ's invitation to come and receive his gifts.

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- Why do Lutheran schools retain the policy and practice of 'compulsory worship'? Is 'compulsory worship' a contradiction in terms?
- Why do we begin public worship with the 'invocation' ('In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.')?
- Can a non-Lutheran pastor preach in a Lutheran worship service?
- How can we encourage the school community to participate actively in worship without turning worship into a 'performance' which draws attention to the participants?
- What elements of worship are appropriate in Lutheran school worship where not all members of the community profess faith in Jesus Christ?
- In what ways can students see their life as students as part of worship?
- Is there a difference between prayer and meditation?
- People sometimes speak about the 'power of prayer'. What do they mean? Where does the power lie?
- Does prayer change God or us or both?
- How can members of the school community be helped to develop their practice of corporate and private prayer?
- Does God answer the prayers of non-Christians?
- What is the place of the celebration of the sacraments in the school?
- Can we help baptised students celebrate their baptism without discriminating against those who are not baptised?
- Is baptism necessary for salvation?
- Would you be concerned if you learned that the pastor who baptised you had been a hypocritical unbeliever?
- What understanding is there of the sacrament of the altar in the school community?
- How are children in the school community prepared for first communion? What emphasis is there on 'worthy reception'?
- Does God's use of earthly elements in the sacraments have any implications for our understanding of creation and our approach to ecology?

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