

## 6. Sacrament

Some early followers of Luther were eager to throw away everything associated with the Roman Church. In their fervor for reform they wanted to destroy all that reminded them of the traditional church: the distinction between laity and clergy, vestments and symbols, paintings and statues, and even in some cases church buildings themselves. In spite of being a courageous reformer in many ways, Luther was also conservative and moderate in others. He argued that even where theological argument pointed one way that practical concern for the experience of common people might point in another. So on many issues Luther tried to preserve the patterns that tradition had established.

The Roman Church had maintained there were seven sacraments. Some reformers questioned all of them. Luther used the test of Scripture when it came to examining the issue of the sacraments. What had Christ instituted? What served as a means of grace? Luther argued that using those two tests there should be fewer sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist, the meal in which Christ's body and blood were shared. The traditional Roman understanding of the Eucharist was that the bread and the wine of the meal were literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ in the process of the Mass. Some reformers, by contrast, argued that the language of the words of institution—"This is my body," "This is my blood"—should be understood only symbolically. The Eucharist was, by this reading, simply another occasion to remember Christ's saving grace. Luther argued that Christ's words meant what they said, that Christ was present in the bread and wine. But rather than seeing the Eucharist as the working of a transformation, i.e., what *had been* bread was *now* the body of Christ, Luther saw it as a both/and. For him no magical transformation had taken place. What was bread was still bread and at the same time the body of Christ. It was the real body and blood of Christ, as Luther put it, "in, with, and under" the real bread and wine.

Luther addressed the nature of the sacrament by using the same principle that Christians use in addressing the incarnation. Christ is both truly and fully human and truly and fully God. He is not really one and only apparently the other, as some had argued, nor is he first one and then later the other. The assertion of the incarnation is truly a simultaneous assertion of opposites. Jesus is fully God by being fully human. At this point Christians have been willing to say that logic's principle of noncontradiction must take a back seat. Lutherans would say the same thing about the Eucharist. A paradox or tense conjunction expresses reality more faithfully than any single proposition can.

Though the historical arguments about this issue may seem to contemporary Christians like verbal hair-splitting, the Lutheran affirmation of this both/and has had far-reaching effects in shaping Lutheran thinking. Because of this affirmation Lutherans continue to do several things. (1) They continue to question the absoluteness of apparent opposites: sacred/secular, heaven/earth, the divine/the worldly. So, when asked, "Is it this or is it that?" Lutherans are very likely to answer, "Yes." (2) It has fostered a tendency among Lutherans to find the transcendent in the ordinary, the eternal in the temporal. This can be witnessed to a certain degree in Lutheran architecture, hymnody, art, and literature and in the ways Lutherans understand vocation. (3) It has nurtured in us a kind of earthiness, a reverence for the ordinary that is not so pronounced in more "heaven-bound" forms of Christianity. (4) It has kept us in ecumenical conversation with other sacramental traditions. (5) It has made us suspicious of logical consistency as an end in itself, and willing to explore things that can be affirmed only paradoxically or dialectically.

What is most important to me about sacrament is not to think of it primarily as a separate ceremony but as a way of seeing, a way of regarding all of creation. Sallie McFague expresses something like this as well:

The Christian eye usually does not need any help seeing God. [I'm not so sure of that as she is.] But it does need help seeing the world. . . . My idea of sacrament: holding on hard to the huckleberries, to see all things in God.<sup>20</sup>

Affirmation of incarnation and sacrament is a recognition of God present in the world. Lutherans are not so likely to be supernaturalists (seeing God as above nature) so much as we are sacramentalists—seeing God in nature, in history, in bread and wine and water and word, in the lives of humans, in the life of the church.