

We Proclaim and Celebrate:

The Position of the AALC on the Lord's Supper

by

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[I was assigned the task of preparing a document outlining the position of the AALC on the Lord's Supper. The original paper was nearly 20 pages long. This document was edited down from that longer paper. It is succinct by design. This paper was then presented to the LCMS as part of the fellowship talks in 2006.]

We Proclaim the Holy Scriptures

The Lord's Supper is described in four different passages in scripture: Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; and I Cor 11:23-26. In all four passages, Jesus pronounces this to be a covenant, or testament (testament being a Latin word for a legal document or pledge). The basic words of institution (this is My body; this is My blood) are repeated verbatim in the gospels and in Paul's account. While each passage contains certain differences, or explanatory passages, the Holy Spirit chose to pass these words down to us without alteration. Legally, the words of a testament are to be taken in their plain sense and not given fanciful interpretations. Furthermore, the words of institution do not match other figures of speech used in the scriptures. Therefore we know these words are to be taken in their plain, literal sense. The actual body and blood of Jesus are present in the sacrament of the altar. We do not know how this happens, and are not given leave to speculate. We simply confess the plain words of Jesus in the words of institution.

We Proclaim His Death Until His Return

Jesus clearly states that the Lord's Supper has eschatological significance. Jesus states in Matthew that following that institution of the Lord's Supper, "I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink in new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt 26:29; cf. Mark 14:25). Paul states it this way: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor 11:26). In the Lord's Supper the church not only proclaims the death of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, but also celebrates his promised return in glory.

We Proclaim the Strengthening of our Faith

"This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28). Our Lord, on the night in which he was betrayed, proclaimed the promise of the forgiveness (remission) of sins in the sacrament. When we eat of his body and blood in the sacrament, we receive His promise of the forgiveness of our sins. This promise is given for the strengthening of our faith.

Likewise it is not our faith that effects our Lord's bodily presence, as though we had the power and authority to direct our Lord to do anything. Our faith does not create the sacrament; instead, the sacrament strengthens our faith. Our faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8), and is the power that enables us to respond to God. The Holy Spirit creates in us saving faith, through the

proclaimed word. The Holy Spirit also strengthens our faith through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is all God's work, and none of our own, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:9).

The promise of the forgiveness of sins, pronounced in the words of institution, reminds us of who we are in Christ and strengthen our faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Supper is the means through which God gives us his good gifts, of which one is the strengthening of our faith. Our faith is a gift from God, not a criteria by which God determines upon whom he bestows his gifts. Our faith is not the *cause* of the sacrament, but rather the strengthening of our faith is a benefit derived *from* it.

We Proclaim our Union in Christ

Christ's body and blood has reconciled us to God, that we might proclaim the word of reconciliation unto the world (2 Cor 5:17-19). In Christ we have been reconciled to God and to our brother, for which the sacrament of the Lord's Supper provides the sign and the seal, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship at the Lord's Table is a communal act (I Cor 10:16-17). When we eat of Christ's body and blood, we as a body of believers are knit together into one bread. This occurs because when we eat of Christ's body and blood, we receive the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Our sins have separated us from God, and from each other (Isa 59:1-15). But Christ has become our peace. Christ has broken down the wall between us, and has killed the hatred caused by the law, knitting two separated peoples into one flesh (Eph 2:11-16).

The vertical element of communion is the one emphasized by the American Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. But the scriptures teach that it is so much more. The Lord's Supper is not only a private matter between an individual and Jesus, but is a supper for the whole body of Christ. It is not a matter of "me and Jesus," but is more appropriately "we and Jesus." What we see in the Lord's Supper is God serving us with his good gifts, breaking down the middle wall of partition, and making "in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace" (Eph 2:14-15).

In I Corinthians 10:16-17 the Apostle Paul lays out the corporate nature of the Lord's Supper. The Apostle calls this the "communion" of the blood and body of Christ. In the sacramental eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood, we all share the same spiritual food. The word "communion" comes from the Greek word *koinonia*. In this context the word means more than mere fellowship. Instead, this *koinonia* is the sharing of the gift as an embodiment of fellowship.

The Apostle Paul indicates this sacramental eating and drinking is a fulfillment of the time when the Israelites ate of "the same spiritual meat" and drank of "the same spiritual drink" (I Cor 10:1-4). In the Lord's Supper, Christ is our spiritual meat and drink. We all partake of his one body; we all drink of his one blood. By that body and blood we receive the promise of the forgiveness of our sins. Through the body and blood we proclaim His death, and we proclaim his resurrection and imminent return in glory.

Christ's body and blood removes the middle wall of partition and binds us together into one bread. His body is our common food. His blood is our common drink. When His body and blood are ours, we have our Lord and Christ entire and complete. Nothing is left to our piety; all depends on His innocent body and blood.

We Proclaim the Words of Institution

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the same night in which he was betrayed, took the simple elements of bread and wine and, as he distributed the bread and wine to his disciples, he said, “This do in remembrance of me” (I Cor 11:24-25). The church follows our Lord’s command by proclaiming the words of institution. Apart from this proclaimed Word, our Lord’s body and blood are not present in the sacrament. It is the Holy Spirit by which such great things are done, working through the proclaimed Word.

We Proclaim the Recognition of the Body

The Apostle Paul cautions us to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup. We are told that unless we recognize the body of our Lord, we eat and drink judgment on ourselves. We are told that we are to judge ourselves, and that if we do not, we will have much weakness, sickness and death among us (I Cor 11:26-32).

What does this mean? How are we to become worthy of this great gift of God? The key phrase here is “discerning the Lord’s body.” Our Lord has finished his work on the cross (John 19:30), and we receive his body and blood “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. We are complete in him (Col 2:10). Therefore we confess with the entire church of God that we poor miserable sinners are by nature sinful and unclean, and have sinned against Him in thought, word, and deed. Our only hope is to flee for refuge to His infinite mercy, seeking and imploring His grace, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ (Service Book and Hymnal, p. 1).

It is clear from the entire context that the “body” being referred to here is Christ’s actual body. Scripture interprets scripture, and we determine the meaning of a particular passage from the surrounding context. The entire context of this passage is referring to the body that was broken, and the blood that was shed, and not the “church, which is his body” (Eph 1:22-23).

We discern the Lord’s body when we see him wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. We discern the Lord’s body when we understand that we have gone astray, that we have turned from Him and chosen our own way. We discern the Lord’s body when we see him stricken for our transgressions and see our iniquities laid upon Him. We discern the Lord’s body when we see that only His chastisement has led to our peace and that only through his death are we healed (Isa 53:1-11a).

The psalmist David declares it is the LORD who forgives our sins, heals our diseases, redeems us from hell, showers us with love and mercy, and gives us the desires of our hearts (Ps 103:1-5). We receive His benefits when we come to the cross and there bless the one who purchased us through his precious blood, taking our sins upon His body on the cross, and became the one through whom we come to the Father (John 14:6).

We examine ourselves, not to determine our own righteousness, but to determine our unworthiness. If we declare ourselves worthy of His body and blood, then we are relying on our own righteousness, and we come under the judgment of God. But when we see ourselves with the eyes of faith---as unworthy sinners who have put on Christ at our baptism---we are not judged of God, but receive his benefits, have our sins forgiven, and our diseases healed.

The church of God on earth is a mixed multitude (Ex 12:28). The church of God on earth contains both regenerate and unregenerate sinners. Not all who come to the Lord’s table have saving faith, and not all discern the Lord’s body. Both regenerate and unregenerate sinners receive the Lord’s body and blood at the Lord’s table. All eat of His body and blood: some, discerning His body, receive the promise of the forgiveness of sins; while others, without saving faith, or not discerning the body, receive only the judgment of God.

We Proclaim our Common Confession

Earlier we proclaimed the unity we share in Christ, created as we all partake of His body and blood. But it is not enough for us to say that unity is created through this sacrament. We must also say that unity of confession is required *at* the Lord's table. This sacrament was created for the use of the church of God on earth. The church of God in heaven has no need of this sacrament, for this corruptible shall have put on incorruption (I Cor 15:53-54). But who belongs to the church of God on earth, and how is unity of confession to be obtained?

The Mixed Multitude

Our Lord Jesus instituted this sacrament for the benefit of His church on earth. But it is important to understand that the church of God on earth is always a mixed multitude (Ex 12:38). This is one reason why Paul writes in 2 Cor 13:5 that we are to examine ourselves, whether we be in the faith. Many are those who fasten themselves to the church. We cannot separate the wheat from the tares (Matt 13:24-30), for they all look alike to us---they all share a common confession, meaning they all say the same things about Christ. But God knows the condition of men's hearts, and knows who are His own. At the harvest God will separate the wheat from the tares; the regenerate from the unregenerate.

Although we are not given the authority to or means of judging a man's heart, yet we may judge a man by his words and deeds. Indeed, the exercise of that judgment is part of the priesthood of the believers, whose public exercise is done through the pastoral office. The pastor, as a steward of the mysteries of God (I Cor 4:1), is responsible to separate out the mixed multitude, insofar as it is possible.

The steward of the mysteries of God is charged with exercising care when admitting people to the Lord's Supper. Those who through word and deed have made it clear they are not part of the communion of saints are not welcome at the sacrament of the altar.

The Marks of the Church

The marks of the church are the right teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. When we come to the altar, we make a common confession of faith. We confess the same Gospel, and confess the same understanding of the sacraments. We discern His body and proclaim his death until He comes. This common confession is the Unity of the Gospel as proclaimed in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

We must go to the scriptures for guidance as to the exercise of our Christian unity. May we unite in fellowship with everyone who professes the name of Christ, understands the Gospel in its narrow sense (that which is essential for salvation), and professes a belief in the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine? Or must we limit our fellowship to those who confess to the entire body of sound doctrine---that is, to the Gospel in its broad sense?

The Corinthian Problem

Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is the only place, apart from the synoptic gospels, where the Lord's Supper is discussed. In the first ten chapters Paul discusses multiple manifestations of disunity within the Corinthian church. Only after these are discussed does Paul begin to address the Lord's Supper itself. Before he can address the Lord's Supper in chapter 11, he must first address yet another manifestation of their disunity *at the Lord's Table itself*. Seen in context, almost two thirds of I Corinthians consists of a polemic in favor of Christian unity as a prerequisite for the Lord's Supper.

The Unity of the Gospel

The church of God on earth is never perfect. We as Christians are exhorted to walk with him in the same manner in which we received him: that is, by grace, and through the gift of faith. We are to remain rooted in Christ (John 15:4-8). In Christ alone do we become established in the faith, which is created through the proclaimed Word of God. The unity of the church of God on earth is never perfect, but is rooted, built up, and established by our Lord (Col 2:6-7; with Eph 4:3, 11-13). Wherefore we are to remain on guard, for the devil seeks to destroy our faith (I Pet 5:8-9).

In the waters of baptism we receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. In the bread and wine we receive the promise of the forgiveness of our sins. We have been crucified with him, died with him, buried with him, and raised again to newness of life (Rom 6:4). Our sins have been forgiven. The LORD laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, and by his stripes we are healed. The judgment that had been meant for us was instead nailed to His cross. We are complete in Him (Col 2:10).

Yet we are always to remain on guard against false doctrine and the wisdom of men. The apostle Paul, in writing to the Colossians, describes our Lord's victory at the cross (Col 2:14-15). Then straightaway he begins laying out the many ways in which the believer may be beguiled away from the simplicity of faith. We see traditions, rites & ceremonies; we see asceticism; we see false doctrine. All these things are additions to, and detract from, the purity of the Gospel of Christ.

The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that he is jealous over them with a Godly jealousy. He is afraid that they will accept into their midst those who proclaim false doctrine. He is afraid the devil will corrupt the simplicity of their doctrine by preaching another Jesus, another spirit, another Gospel (2 Cor 11:1-4). The apostle Paul declares those who teach false doctrine are Satan's ministers, and not ministers of God (2 Cor 11:13-15).

The pastor, therefore, as steward of the mysteries of God, is responsible to see that only those who share our common confession are admitted to the Lord's table. Those who do not hold to sound doctrine are not to be tolerated, as Revelations chapter 2 makes clear. Those who are not of us (I John 2:18-19) are not to participate.

As a steward, it is required that the pastor remain faithful to this charge (I Cor 4:2). No matter the pressures placed upon him to be tolerant and charitable to those of differing confessions, the pastor is to remain faithful (Acts 20:28). While the pastor must not allow those of differing confessions to partake of His body and blood, this does not require the pastor to know their hearts. The pastor is required only to look upon the outward appearances, for only God knows what is in a man's heart (I Sam 16:7). Therefore examine a man's words (which are his confession of faith), and a man's deeds (which are made manifest) (I Cor 14:25).

We Proclaim His Death

Our Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, told his disciples that they should partake of His supper often. He did not initiate a feast day like the Passover to be held only once a year. He also did not create a new law, telling us we had to partake of this supper every time we come together. If that were the case, our Lord would have said, "As often as ye come together." Instead, our Lord said "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup," thereby setting no limits on the frequency (I Cor 11:26). Nevertheless, it is clear we are to partake of the Lord's Supper often.

We proclaim the Lord's death *not* out of compulsion. Paul tells us the law condemns, but the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ sets us free from the law (Rom 8:1-2). The law kills, but the spirit makes alive. We therefore proclaim the Lord's death and receive, through the Holy Spirit, the promise of the forgiveness of our sins. With grateful hearts we gather together regularly and often to proclaim his death until he comes again.

We Proclaim in Two Kinds

Our Lord Jesus, on the same night in which he was betrayed, took both bread and wine and gave it to his disciples (Matt 26:26-28). In the sacrament of the altar we receive his true body and blood in the "bread and wine set within God's Word and bound to it." Our Lord Jesus instituted this supper in both kinds (or with both elements). Yet his body and blood are not divided in the sacrament, such that it is not efficacious if served in only one kind. We therefore reject the idea that anyone may command this sacrament to be taken in one kind only, for our Lord Jesus said "Drink ye *all* of it." Our Lord does not require that all should take of one kind but only some take of the other.

Nevertheless, we do not require everyone to partake of both kinds. If someone has a weak conscience, then we do not insist they drink wine (I Cor 10: 31-32). Likewise, if someone is an alcoholic, or is allergic to wine, we do not insist they drink of it. But we do not provide them grape juice (that is, grape juice that has been treated to prevent fermentation,) for our Lord instituted bread and wine, and does not give us leave to substitute our own false elements.

Grape juice is not a valid part of the sacrament of the altar. Rather than provide a false sacrament, it would be better to serve the supper in only one kind. But as our Lord requires both bread and wine, we do well to follow his command without substituting our wisdom for His, and without providing substitute elements which are no part of this supper, thereby showing contempt for His body and blood and drinking judgment upon ourselves.

We Proclaim the Responsible Administration of Communion

A faithful steward of the mysteries of God sees that each communicant has the tools to examine himself or herself, whether he or she be in the faith (I Cor 11:28; with 2 Cor 13:5). The faithful steward knows who among his flock has been catechized in the faith, who has transferred their membership from elsewhere, and who is living in open and unrepentant sin. Visitors are handled in the same way as any other communicant; the faithful steward sees that they share the confession of the church within which they wish to commune, knows whether they are engaged in open and unrepentant sin, and ensures they have the tools with which to examine himself or herself. Nevertheless, exigent circumstances exist; we do not bind a man's conscience in such matters. We call this, our practice, "Responsible Communion".

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria