

His Mercy and His Means

IV. Who receives this Sacrament worthily?

As a Lutheran congregation, we share the Sacrament only with those with whom we share the faith. This is our practice because it is what what Holy Scripture teaches; as when the holy Apostle Paul writes that Christians are *not to join yourself to anyone called "brother" who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, and certainly not to eat with such a person*, that is: someone who does not submit to the Word and will of God in the obedience of faith, but instead *teaches or lives contrary to God's Word*, as our Catechism says it, and thus *profanes the name of God among us*.

Until not that many years ago, this was the practice of pretty much all churches; it used to be but a natural and given thing that if you did not share the faith of a church, you would not share in the Sacrament there.

I think most of us have noticed that this is no longer the case. So often, we have seen visitors be indignant when we as a congregation did not, as the most natural thing in the world, invite them to share with us in the holy things, just because they did not accept and agree to our faith, and were, perhaps, even outright and outspokenly opposed to it. Again, this is a rather recent thing. But again, again, over the last half century or so, it has become common in most churches not to consider the things of God all that important; being Christian, if you want to call it that, and if you prefer not to, that is not a problem, either, and being church, well, it is all about being nice and polite and not offending anybody by saying something they do not want to hear.

Therefore is it that for some, even the most simple statement of the self-evident and obvious will be offensive, such as that if you will not accept the faith of this church, well, then this church is not *your* church.

And therefore is it, also, that it has become common to feel that for any congregation to share with me in what she considers *holy* is just common courtesy and should have nothing to do with religion; it is rude of any religious group not to relinquish its religion when I have chosen to stop by for a visit.

Again, again, again, this is a rather recent thing; the accusations raised against the Church of Christ in this regard are not recent, though. We heard it earlier how not quite the same accusations, but similar ones, were raised against our Lord Jesus Himself.

He stirs up the people, the Jews said to Pilate, for one thing, when He teaches throughout all Judea, from Galilee and even to this very place.

It is it worth noting, is it not, that with this accusation, nothing was said about *what* our Lord Jesus had been teaching: the complaint was that He was teaching at all! One can hardly help but wonder what would be so wrong about doing that, teaching; the Jews, though, made it to appear an obvious outrage, as if it went without saying that teaching is an evil thing to do; not entirely unlike how those who chastise the Church of Christ for not sharing the holy things with outsiders will often make it appear to be obviously offensive, not only that she believes that she should only share the holy things with those with whom she shares the faith, and that she is not ready to deny what she believes whenever an outsider demands it of her, but that she has teachings to begin with, and believes them to be true. To think that it is true, what God has given to you, that is to think much too highly of yourself; such arrogance!

And apparently it was even more offensive that our Lord Jesus was teaching *even at this very place*, that is: in Jerusalem. How outrageous that someone would teach the Word of God in His Holy City, of all places. Similarly, some find it outrageous that Christians think that *Church* somehow has something to do with faith and the Word of God. Well, in the Church there are those who generally accept that it does, but in this particular situation it is outrageous that the Church will not set the faith aside for someone special, a friend of mine who is visiting, or a grandchild or daughter-in-law, or someone who grew up in this church and has rejected the faith *deliberately* rather than never come to know it. Often, the visitor himself has no desire that the Church set her faith aside for his sake; only, an anxious church member *thinks* that maybe he *might*.

To Pilate there was not much rhyme or reason to this, nor to the Jews themselves. When he enquired into exactly what wrong our Lord Jesus had supposedly done, their reply was that he had to take their word for it, that He had done *something* wrong: *If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.*

And when it turned out that Pilate required an actual reason for putting our Lord Jesus to death, rather than giving any reason, they claimed the authority of the Emperor, who really had nothing to do with the whole thing: *If you release this man, you are not a friend of Caesar! Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.*

Not entirely unlike, again, how some will not only claim that the faithful Church of Christ is being *unkind* to those who do not share her faith in the Holy One by not sharing the holy things with them, but also appeal to the authority of God, claiming that His Church is sinning against *Him* by obeying His command: Jesus taught *love*, and love means to be *nice*; therefore, not to give everybody whatever they want is not only not being pleasant or polite, it is sin against God. So, there.

Now, Pilate probably did not find our Lord Jesus to be particularly polite to him; rather than speaking to him as one would normally speak to a superior, our Lord Jesus spoke the Truth of God to him, as if He knew the Truth of God, and were Himself God, which He actually was, and is. Pilate did not care about that, though. *Am I a Jew?*, he said, as if the things of God had nothing to do with him. Again, not entirely unlike those who feel above all matters related to faith, exempt from caring about the things of God, entitled to have no concern for the religious concerns of a church they visit.

It might also seem to some, and certainly it seemed so to Herod, that our Lord Jesus was not particularly polite toward him, either; He did not accommodate Herod in his lust for entertainment. Again, as it seems to so many that the Church of Christ is being rude by not setting her faith aside to make those happy, who want something other from her than what our Lord Jesus has given to her to give, to make *those* feel that they belong, who do *not* belong, and make sure that no one will come to think that they might in any way be missing out on anything good by not accepting the Truth of God.

My Kingdom is not of this world, our Lord Jesus said, though, as we heard it earlier. What He came to give, and what His Church has to give, because He has given it to her, it pertains to higher things than those of the world, friendship or family, feeling welcome, feeling good about yourself, or feeling good at all.

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world, He said, as we heard it earlier: *to bear witness to the Truth*. And the Truth to which He came to bear witness is this, as He had said it earlier, that *whoever believes in Him shall not be condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already*.

He is the Son of God, and Himself God, appointed from eternity as Judge of all. But He came into the world, out of the eternal goodness of God, to rescue sinners from suffering eternal dying and damnation in His judgement.

For this He gave Himself over, not only to the judgement of sinners, whose rightful Judge He Himself is, and shall be, but also to the judgement of God.

He had Himself baptised with sinners, and baptised into the sin of sinners. And clothed and covered with the sin of sinners He had Himself crucified, hung up high toward Heaven, presented to God for His judgement, and judged and damned, for the sin of all sinners, and with it, in our stead and on our behalf.

And thus having paid the price and penalty for the sin of all sinners is it that He now promises His salvation to sinners, rescue from eternal death and damnation unto eternal life instead, with Him, in His heavenly Kingdom, and, with this promise, gives His salvation to His Christians, and with His body and blood, in the festive meal of salvation. As He had said it on this very night, just a few hours earlier, about the festive meal of salvation He had instituted: *Take, eat, and drink; this is my body and this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.* And these words show us, as our Catechism says it, that *in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us.*

But then, He has also had His holy Apostle Paul write that *whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement upon himself.* And so, clearly, the faithful Church of Christ is not only being faithful to her Master, she is also being good to those who would only eat and drink judgement upon themselves, when she does not invite them to, but calls them, instead, to submit to the Truth of God, in the obedience of faith, and be saved.

For this very reason: that His salvation is given to sinners, fully and freely, for nothing and for real, with His body and blood, in His festive meal of salvation, out of His goodness alone, therefore is it such a serious thing to treat the holy things as if they were not that, holy, or otherwise treat them as if they were something they are not.

But what are we sinners to do, then? This is the question our Catechism asks: *Who receives this Sacrament worthily?* And although the Gospel itself is the answer, our Catechism, nevertheless, spells it out: *That person is truly worthy and well prepared, who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."*

By its very nature, His salvation is given to sinners out of His goodness alone, only on account of what He has done for us; no one who seeks His salvation will find damnation where He promises salvation. And that is that.

O Christ, our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us! *Amen.*