

LUTHER'S SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Sacraments in Luther's early theology

- no pronounced interest in the sacraments; medieval theory and practice of sacraments is taken for granted; efforts to deepen this theory and practice existentially (early penitential theology)
- multiple references to Christ as the one sacrament (i.e., the very gift of salvation)

Luther's new understanding of the Sacraments 1518–20

1517/18

- due to the indulgence controversy, Luther is driven into conflict with the papal church and expresses his criticism increasingly openly → the dispute over the theory and practice of the sacrament of penance (of which indulgences are a part) becomes the catalyst for the development of Reformation theology
- in the time of the lecture on the Epistle to the Hebrews (fall 1517, spring 1518), Luther's reorientation towards his Reformation insight condenses, which he also applies to the sacraments

1519

- fall: Luther writes three related sacramental sermons on penance, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, in which he formulates a preliminary stage of his Reformation understanding of the sacraments; Luther takes up the Augustinian distinction between sign (signum) and thing (res) and connects it with the Reformation belief in justification → the inner gift of salvation signified in the external sacrament is appropriated through faith; with regard to the church practice of the sacraments, Luther makes cautious proposals for reform (e.g. lay chalice).

1520

- spring / summer: church authorities and traditionalists turn against Luther's understanding of the sacraments, especially his statements about the Lord's Supper
- July: Luther's *Sermon on the New Testament, that is, on the Holy Mass* further develops his theological position on the Lord's Supper → normative for the theory and practice of the Lord's Supper are the words of institution, which define it as an event of promise and faith and thus place the catabatic (↓) before the anabatic (↑) direction of action
- August / September: *De captivitate Babilonica ecclesiae praeludium* → the third of the four main Reformation writings is the programmatic exposition of Luther's theology of the sacraments; the most important statements are:
 - "Principio neganda mihi sunt septem sacramenta et tantum tria [...] ponenda, Baptism, Poenitentia, Panis [...], quoniam, si uia scripturae loqui velim, non nisi unum sacramentum habeam et tria signa sacramentalia" (WA 6:501,33–38). "Proprie [...] ea sacramenta vocari visum est, quae annexis signis promissa sunt. [...] Quo fit, ut, si rigide loqui volumus, tantum duo sunt in Ecclesia dei sacramenta, Baptismus et panis, cum in his solis et institutum divinitus signum et promissionem remissionis peccatorum videamus" (WA 6:572,10–15).
- The church's theory and practice of the sacraments has to be guided by unambiguous, clear biblical texts understood in their literal sense.
- A sacrament is determined by two characteristics: 1. it has a sign (signum) instituted by Christ (institutio Christi), 2. it is connected with a promise (promissio) aiming at faith (fides) → only baptism and the Lord's Supper have these characteristics; penance belongs to baptism; all the other acts called 'sacraments' by the medieval church have no sacramental character; they are partly to be abolished, partly to be reorganized.
- Ultimately, there is only one sacrament (namely Christ), because all sacramental acts are about the appropriation of the one salvation of Christ, which is promised to faith through the word of th Gospel and brings about justification. Luther's understanding of the sacraments is an expression of his Reformation doctrine of justification.

Basic lines of Luther's understanding of the sacraments since 1518/20

Two phases of doctrinal development

1518–23 development of the Reformation understanding of the sacraments in the confrontation with the medieval theory and practice of the sacraments → Luther's main interest is the spiritual dimension of the sacrament in relation to justifying faith (promissio-fides relationship). This phase leads to the first attempts at a liturgical implementation of the Reformation understanding of the sacraments.

1523–46 Further development of the Reformation understanding of the sacrament in various internal disputes. Luther's main interest is the connection between the spiritual and physical dimensions of the sacrament: salvation is granted in a sensual and bodily way through the outer word and the sacrament.

Basic ideas

Definition A sacrament is determined by Christ's institution of an outward sign and the promise aiming at faith. This is true only for baptism and the Lord's Supper; repentance is understood as a return to the baptismal promise.

Salvific significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper The sacrament is the consummation of God's salvific action in the combination of sign and promise (catabatic direction of action), in that the sacramental sign, by virtue of the word of promise associated with it, brings about the appropriation of salvation to faith (namely, the mortification of the old man, the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, inner renewal and the empowerment for ethical practice). Thus, the sacraments are indispensable means of salvation whose significance lies precisely in the external communication of the word of promise. Man's response to God's saving action (anabatic direction of action) is not constitutive of the sacrament and is subordinate to the sacramental appropriation of salvation (namely, as Christian life on the basis of baptism and as thanksgiving to God and communion of love among Christians on the basis of the Lord's Supper).

Criticism of the medieval understanding of the sacraments Biblically based reduction of the seven sacraments to two; criticism of the theory and practice of the Eucharist (rejection of the idea of the sacrifice of the Mass, reorganization of the liturgy of the Mass, congregational communion under both kinds (sub utraque specie), doctrine of the unnecessary theological systematization in the form of the doctrine of transubstantiation); abolition or reorganization of marriage, confirmation, ordination and last rites.

Criticism of the Upper German/Swiss understanding of the sacraments Criticism of the tendency toward subjectivist spiritualization of the sacraments; literal rather than symbolic understanding of the words of institution; Lord's Supper not as human act of confession but as divine gift of salvation; real presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper (which, however, cannot be explained, but is to be believed as a paradoxical coexistence of the elements of the Lord's Supper and the body of Christ in correspondence to the paradoxical unity of the divine and human natures in Christ; connection of the doctrine of the real presence with incarnational Christology and the doctrine of ubiquity; manducatio impiiurum).

Criticism of the Anabaptist understanding of the sacrament Baptism as a divine act of salvation preceding human faith and confession; faith is given by God with baptism; possibility of infant baptism.

Liturgical consequences

1521/22 Luther rejects that immediate consequences are drawn from his understanding of the sacraments → no disorderly and hasty worship reforms, no iconoclasm; he largely retracts the Wittenberg worship reforms of spring 1522 and celebrates worship in the traditional form for the time being, but instructs the congregation in the Reformation's new understanding of worship and sacraments and prepares fundamental reforms

1523 Luther's *Taufbüchlein verdeutscht* (German baptismal liturgy) and *Formula missae et communiois* offer liturgical orders based on the traditional formularies but with changes according to Reformation theology (congregational orientation, sermon is central, communion in both kinds)

1526 The further reorganization of the church service in the spirit of the Reformation leads to the *German Mass* and *Order of the Church Service* and to a new edition of the baptismal liturgy.

Disputes about the Lord's Supper

Prehistory of the controversy

1523

Luther's *On worshipping the sacrament of the holy body of Christ* emphasizes the real presence and the literal understanding of the words of institution and criticizes a symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper. Zwingli's *Exposition of the 67 theses* formulates the basic ideas of his understanding of the Lord's Supper as a commemorative act of the congregation.

1524

Against Andreas Karlstadt's spiritualistic understanding of the Lord's Supper, Luther in *Against the heavenly prophets* emphasizes the oral word and the bodily sign of the sacrament through which the Spirit is conveyed.

Agreement with Karlstadt's theses by Zwingli and Oecolampad. Additional support of their understanding of the Lord's Supper by Cornelis Hoen, who interprets the "est" of the words of institution as 'significat'. Zwingli promotes his understanding of the Lord's Supper in Upper Germany (letter to Matthew Alber).

1525

Systematic presentation of Zwingli's understanding of the sacraments in the *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione*. Liturgical implementation of this understanding of sacraments in the form of the Zurich liturgical reform. Oecolampad's *De genuina verborum Domini expositione*. Zwingli and Oecolampad promote their understanding of the sacraments in Switzerland and Upper Germany.

Defense of the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper by Johannes Brenz and other Swabian theologians in the *Syngramma Suevicum* and by Johannes Bugenhagen in his epistle *Contra novam errorem*.

Reaching an agreement with the Upper German reformers

1530 At the Diet of Augsburg, different confessions (*Confessio Augustana*, *Confessio Tetrapolitana*) with differently accentuated understandings of the sacraments are presented. In the following period, there are repeated attempts to bring about a theological understanding in the interest of the supporters of the Reformation in order to influence imperial politics (Schmalkaldic League, possible alliance with the Swiss).

1536 In the *Wittenberg Concord*, the Upper Germans, led by Martin Bucer, confirm their agreement with the basic statements of the Wittenberg theology of the Lord's Supper (catabatic direction of action: the Lord's Supper is a means of salvation, real presence, manducatio indignorum).

Disputes with the Anabaptists

1527 After the Anabaptist movement has formed in Switzerland, Upper Germany and Franconia in the mid-1520s, Luther reacts with his *Von der Wiedertaufe an zwei Pfarrer* (On Rebaptism to Two Pastors). Luther defends infant baptism with three arguments: 1. the baptism of the medieval church is valid and effective for salvation; it does not have to be replaced, but only understood in its original sense; 2. Baptism does not have to be experienced consciously, but it is sufficient if its consumption is witnessed by parents and godparents as an order set by God, and its consequences are experienced in their own lives; 3. faith cannot be the prerequisite of baptism, because it is not a human achievement, but a divine gift connected with the sacrament, which in its own way the baptized children already have.

1532 In his writing *Von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern* Luther criticizes the separation of the Anabaptist congregations and emphasizes the congruence of civil and church congregations and the public character of the church.

1530s Luther requires coercive measures by the authorities against Anabaptists (e.g., obligations imposed by the authorities, restriction of personal freedom, expulsion from the country, in exceptional cases the death penalty) for rebellion against the inner-worldly legal order (rejection of oaths and military service, dissociation from the secular authorities and the order of property), for public blasphemy of the basic religious consensus (infant baptism), and for disturbing the public peace (separation, preaching not controlled by the authorities). However, as long as the personal conviction of conscience does not become public and the individual lives according to the requirements of the community, no coercive measures are necessary.

First controversy 1526–29

1526

Spring In several small writings in German (Letter to the Reutlingen congregation, Preface to the translation of the *Syngramma Suevicum*), Luther distances himself from the understanding of the Lord's Supper of Zwingli, Oecolampad, Karlstadt, and Schwenckfeld, whom he criticizes as deniers of the sacrament without regard to positional differences and without detailed argumentation.

Autumn Luther's *Sermon on the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, Against the Swarming Spirits* contains theological arguments against the Swiss for the first time.

1527

Spring Zwingli's *Amica exegesis, i.e. expositio eucharistiae negotii ad Martinum Lutherum and Freundliche Vergliffung und Ablehnung über die Predigt des trefflichen Martini* Luther's *wider die Schwärmer* strive for a theological balance with Luther.

April Luther's response to Zwingli's writings, *That these words of Christ 'This is my body' still stand firm against the swarming spirits* offers a detailed discussion and criticism of Zwingli's understanding of the sacraments.

Zwingli's answer *That these words of Jesus Christ 'This is my body, which is given for you' have eternally the old same meaning* emphasizes the contrast to Luther more strongly than the preceding writings.

1528

Spring Luther's *Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis* emphasizes the opposition to Zwingli and also criticizes Oecolampad's, Schwenckfeld's and Wyclif's views on the Lord's Supper.

Zwingli and Oecolampad counter in *On D. Martin Luther's Book Called Confession, Two Answers*

1529

Oct. 1–4 Marburg colloquy. Agreement between Luther and Zwingli on basic lines of understanding the sacraments, with the exception of the real presence (which, however, is of fundamental importance, which is why the dissent recorded here calls into question the otherwise documented consensus).

In the period that follows, Luther repeatedly distances himself from the Zwinglian understanding of the sacraments.

1550s

1549 Consensus Tigurinus
1550s In the second controversy about the Lord's Supper among Protestants, the proponents of the Wittenberg Reformation rely on Luther's sacramental theology to criticize the Zurich and Geneva Reformations.