

Reformation Reflections

SACRAMENTS



In 1520, Luther wrote three pivotal documents that profoundly impacted the direction of the Reformation. The second, which he wrote in October of that year, was entitled *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In it, Luther likened the tyranny of the Roman church to the Old

Testament captivity of Israel under Babylon. But the church's tyranny was spiritual. It had usurped the very Word of God and replaced it with the words of a man — the pope.

To make his case, Luther addressed the matter of the Sacraments. Christ had established Baptism and the Lord's Supper, along with Absolution (the word of forgiveness), as His special means of bringing grace to His people. The Lord even joined physical, tangible, "sacramental" signs to the first two to help us receive His words of promise, namely, water in Baptism and bread and wine in the Supper.



But the church added others along the way: Marriage, Confirmation, Ordination (of priests), and Last Rites. Luther noted that these are commendable practices in and of themselves, but with them there is no divine promise of grace and forgiveness. Instead, Rome used all seven to burden God's people and hold them captive.

A closer look at Luther's analysis of the Lord Supper is helpful here, where he detailed three abuses, or "captivities," of it by Rome. The first, contrary to Christ's own words, was the withholding of the cup from the laity in the Lord's Supper. Luther responded:

Christ says, "This is my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." Here you see very clearly that the blood is given to all those for whose sins it was poured out... Does He not give it to all? Does He not say that it is poured out for all?



The second was Rome's peculiar doctrine, called *transubstantiation*, that they demanded the faithful believe. In it, they declared that only Christ's body and blood were truly present in the Mass, and merely appeared to be bread and wine. For Luther, this was nonsense based on **"an absurd and unheard of juggling with words."** It is enough, he declared, **"that it**

is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and real blood are present."

The third and worst, however, was how Rome took this most wonderful gift of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins and changed it into a human "good work" and sacrifice to be performed by us, through the church, to earn God's favor. God's grace was upended. The Gospel was transformed into law, and not even God's Law, but human law. To Luther, this was Rome's greatest travesty.

Thanks to the Reformation, however, we rejoice to know that, through the Sacraments, our Lord still comes to us. Born again by water and the Word in Holy Baptism, we live in the divine promise that, **"He who believes and is baptized will be saved"** (Mark 16:16). We receive our Lord's promise of forgiveness and everlasting life given with His real body and blood in the Supper. And, as often as we hear God's own Word of Holy Absolution, we trust that our sins are most truly forgiven.

Luther declares, "Who would not shed tears of gladness, indeed, almost faint for joy in Christ, if he believed with unshaken faith that this inestimable promise of Christ belonged to him?"

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