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THE TRIAL OF JESUS CHRIST

Paul Tiefel, Jr.

What some would call the “trial of the decade” seems to come along every few years. And every few decades a headline-grabbing court case gets the name “Trial of the Century.” So goes the hype anyway. It can safely be said, however, that a so-called Trial of the Decade or Trial of the Century would have to yield in prestige to the Trial of the Millennium. Indeed, the trial of all time would have been the trial of Jesus Christ, if it actually had occurred. What follows is an attempt to examine what might have been if there had been at least a little semblance of justice in the matter of the Sanhedrin (and Pontius Pilate) v. Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet, one could ask, was there not a trial for Jesus? Scripture does record a sequence of six trials that were packed into the late hours of Maundy Thursday and the early hours of Good Friday. Three of those trials were under the jurisdiction of the Jewish leaders. They included:

- a. A preliminary trial or hearing before Annas
- b. The first trial (at night) before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin¹
- c. The second trial (in the morning) before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin.

Then another three were conducted under the jurisdiction of two Roman authorities:

- d. The first trial before Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea
- e. The trial before Herod, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea
- f. A second trial before Pontius Pilate.

In light of all the legal proceedings that the Bible records, can it really be said that Jesus did not have a trial?

1. The human authorities involved

It was not so much a matter that Jesus did not have a trial. Surely He did. But were the proceedings against Him fair and impartial? Were the trials administered justly? Before the Roman authorities, Pilate in particular, justice was lost when the trial judge declared Jesus to be innocent, but then sentenced Him to death. The holy transcript of those proceedings reads as follows:

Luke 23:4 *So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no fault in this Man.”*

Luke 23:13-14 *Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, said to them, “You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things*

of which you accuse Him.”

Luke 23:22 *Then he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go.”*

Matthew 27:24 *When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.”*

The matter of justice before the Jewish court was quite different. Here the verdict of guilty was predetermined, decided by the Lord’s opponents before the trials had even begun.

John 11:47-50, 53 *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.” And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” ... Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.*

Matthew 26:3-4 *Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him.*

Matthew 26:59 *Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death.*

In addition to the obvious prejudice against the defendant, historians point out at least four illegalities in the three trials before the Jewish judges, which include a few points of law that we have in our judicial system to this day.

- a. No one accused of a crime could be forced to testify against himself.
- b. Late-night meetings of the Sanhedrin were illegal.
- c. Any trial that involved the death penalty required a second trial to be held the following day if the verdict was guilty.
- d. False witnesses did not belong in the courtroom.²

Now what if justice had been served? What if Jesus would have had a fair trial after all? What follows is a look at such a trial based on the record of God’s Word in the four Gospels.

2. The charges against Jesus

Four indictments were brought against Jesus. Lost to the inquiry of historians are the accusations brought by the false witnesses, who could not agree in their stories. The indictments or charges fall into two categories. Three were of a political nature, and one was a question of religion or theology. The Jewish trials focused on the matter of religion. But since that would be of little concern to Roman authorities, different charges had to be brought against Jesus in the court of Pontius Pilate.

The religious question—the chief concern in the Jewish court—centered on two points. Was Jesus the promised Messiah? And secondly, what would the Messiah do when He came to His people? There was no denying that the Messiah would be a King. But what type of King? The endearing expressions of Psalm 72 had been lost to the minds of many, including the Jewish leaders at that time. We recall some of the Messianic terms and descriptions:

- Righteousness, righteousness, righteousness to “the king’s Son” (Psa. 72:1-3)
- He shall reign as “long as the sun and moon endure” (vv. 5, 7, 17)
- His “dominion from sea to sea”; “all nations shall serve Him” (vv. 8, 11)
- He shall “save souls” and “redeem” lives (vv. 13-14).

Of course, we could reference other prophecies that point to the same truths. Well known to us are:

Isaiah's "Prince of Peace" ruling His everlasting kingdom (Isa.

9:6-7);

Jeremiah's "The LORD our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:6);

Malachi's "Sun of Righteousness" who comes "with healing in His wings" (Mal. 4:2).

Yet many in Israel were expecting their Messiah King to establish an earthly kingdom—something political in nature, Jewish sovereignty restored to the people and their land—a kingdom that would last for a time perhaps, while sin and death would continue to reign over all everyday. With such expectations in the people's minds, we see King Herod scheming behind the backs of the wise men to kill in infancy what he fantasized was a potential rival in years to come. The Jewish misconception hung around for years with the result that the Savior had to refute it during His public ministry. It persisted beyond the Savior's ascension and was thriving among some of the Jews, even while the city of Jerusalem was being destroyed stone by stone. Rejection of the biblical truth about the Messiah's kingship would lead to the senseless slaughter by suicide at the fortress of Masada. And the misconception lives on today as one observes the false notion at work in the various teachings of dispensationalism and millennialism, which anticipate an earthly rule of Christ's Church in this world.

But back to our focus on the trial. Because Jesus was not the type of Messiah that many were expecting, He was rejected. The plain truths of Scripture, however, could not so easily be set aside. The teaching and miracles of Jesus gave indisputable witness to the truth, and it was displayed before all. Here in Jesus was teaching authority so different from the religious leaders. Here in Jesus were miracles never done or heard of before in the history of mankind. In fact, shortly before the Passover Jesus had performed the incredible resurrection of Lazarus in the nearby village of Bethany. News of this event would soon become the talk of the town in Jerusalem. And the impact it had on the enemies of Christ? John 11:47-48 reports:

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."

We should note that the Sanhedrin held their position of power (see endnote 1) only with the blessing and permission of the Romans. And Roman authorities in control of Palestine were well aware of the prevailing Jewish view that expected the Messiah to come and restore self-governance to the Jewish nation. Consequently Pilate, his officers, and the Roman garrison of soldiers became wary of any sign of Jewish revolt or uprising, especially in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin, meanwhile, had a sense of what the Roman authorities might do to squash a rebellion, and so to preserve their political power, they came to one conclusion: Jesus must die.

It is impossible to measure the depths of unbelief going on at this time. Think for a moment of the logic involved in John 11. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. While the religious leaders might try to twist the testimony of the blind man who received his sight from Jesus (John 9) and could even threaten the man and his parents, they were quite helpless against the miracle of Lazarus risen from his grave. So many witnesses to the death scene. Four days of decay and a stench too. A corpse bound in burial cloths. But now the man was alive! In response to this moving, breathing, talking witness to the power of Jesus over death, the leaders would decide: Let's kill Jesus, and Lazarus too (John 12:10-11). Did it ever occur to them that as often as they might kill Lazarus, Jesus could raise him from the dead again? Why not rejoice rather in the One who could overpower death, the last enemy of every human being? How could they hope to eliminate someone with that kind of power? Such is the depth of unbelief, which in a twisted way has, like faith, a walk of its own that is not by sight. And that, let's remember, is the same unbelief that we once had in our own hearts, until the Holy Spirit rescued us with His call to faith by the Gospel.

Such unbelief had fully taken hold and dominated the Jewish courtroom. The verdict had been decided: Execute Jesus. Well, what kind of charge gets the job done? It has to be blasphemy, argued along these lines:

- You say that you are the Christ.

- But you are not the Christ.
- To claim to be God when you are not is blasphemy.
- Blasphemy, according to the Law of Moses, is punishable by death.

Note that three of the points above are true; one is not. And the whole trial before the Jewish court would hinge on the one false bullet.

So the first indictment is set: Jesus has blasphemed since He is not the Christ. But such a charge would not fare well before Pilate. The Jewish leaders realize that Pilate would not get involved in a religious dispute. And the only way to get the death penalty would be a guilty verdict given in the Roman court. And so we note in John 18:31:

Then Pilate said to them, “You take Him and judge Him according to your law.” Therefore the Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.”

Thus the charges were modified to appeal to Pilate. Out go the concerns about the Messiah and the claim to be God and in come three charges that would surely get the attention of the Roman governor. These included:

- Inciting the nation to riot
- Forbidding to pay taxes to Rome
- Claiming to be the King of the Jews.

But no witnesses were called. No testimony was given on any of the charges made. In fact, it would seem that the Jewish court in great arrogance was of a mind that Pilate should simply accept their word that Jesus was an evildoer (John 18:30).

These were now going to be the three indictments brought against Jesus, in which the religious charge punishable by stoning had become a civil charge punishable by crucifixion.³

3. The defense

We are not left to wonder how Jesus would have defended Himself in the venue of a legitimate courtroom. For the Savior had told Annas in the very first hearing:

“I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said” (John 18:20-21).

Indeed, we who have heard the Savior teach us in our own time would, under a different set of circumstances, be just as qualified to serve as the kind of witness to which Jesus referred.

In tracing a legitimate defense of Christ, let's start with the three charges made by the Jewish leaders in the court of Pilate.

To the charge of inciting the nation to riot

As a first witness in His defense Jesus might have called Malchus, the servant of the high priest. It was only a few hours earlier that Jesus had told His disciples not to fight with the sword. He even put a stop to violent resistance by healing the man's ear, which Peter had cut off in his misguided zeal to defend Jesus (Luke 22:50-51). How big was the mob that came to arrest Jesus? Each one of them could have testified to the power of His Word that sent them falling backwards to the ground (John 18:1-6). Or to the fact that Jesus said He could call on twelve legions of angels for help, but would not do so. Jesus could easily have resisted capture or incited a rebellion. But He did neither.

To testify to His many deeds of kindness, Jesus could also have called upon thousands. During the Passover festival underway many of these could have been present in Jerusalem, with a firsthand knowledge of how Jesus had fed hungry crowds, healed every illness, cast out many demons, and even raised the dead. Also present in the city at the time were many more who had heard the doctrine of Jesus. They could testify to the fact that Jesus spoke not a single word that even hinted of rebelling against the Roman authorities.

And the witnesses for the prosecution? NONE.

To the charge of forbidding to pay taxes

Defense witnesses might have included the collectors of the temple tax in Capernaum (Matt. 17:24-27). These men questioned Peter, who affirmed that Jesus did pay such a tax. And just to make the matter clear, Jesus promptly paid the tax for Himself and Peter. Though the issue was that of the temple tax, mainly a Jewish matter, such testimony would have demonstrated the Lord's attitude of submitting even to a lower authority.

Likewise, Jesus could have called some of the Pharisees or some of the Herodians who had come to Him on the Tuesday before the trial. Knowing the names and even the exact location of any such witness would have been no problem for the omniscient Savior. This group had brought the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Clearly at work here was a subtle plot to trap Jesus with a trick question. And depending on the Lord's answer, they just might get the evidence that Pilate would have to take seriously. But the answer Jesus gave had stunned the questioners, who went away marveling. The inspired account of Matthew reports:

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:18-21).

Meanwhile, witnesses for the prosecution were NONE.

To the charge of claiming to be King of the Jews

This term "King" is much like the term "Messiah." The correct response to such a charge would depend on one's definition of "King."

If taken in the sense of an earthly king with an earthly kingdom, then Jesus is not guilty. Again, we hear in the Savior's own words a decisive answer to the governor's inquiry: "Are you the King of the Jews?" The inspired account of John reports:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36).

Also relevant to the charge was the feeding of the 5,000, especially what the crowd was thinking after the miracle Jesus did. When the Lord knew that the people were going to take Him by force and make him their King, He removed their opportunity to act by withdrawing to the mountain (John 6:15).

Where were the witnesses that Jesus claimed to be an earthly king? There were NONE.

Pilate, meanwhile, had recognized the truth of the matter: that Jesus, whatever type of King He might be, was no threat to the Roman Empire—neither to its emperor Caesar nor to the local governor Pilate. But more would be said in the Lord's reply to a follow-up question from the governor. We hear the testimony given in John 18:37:

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

If the issue is this that Jesus claims to be the King that God promised to set on His holy hill of Zion (Psa. 2:6), then the Savior admits the truth: He was that King. He was, and is, the King who established His kingdom by His own death! That kingdom would bring spiritual blessings for all, which include the forgiveness of sins, defeat of the devil, and eternal victory over death. That kingdom would not consist of meat and drink, but righteousness (see Ps. 72 again), joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). That kingdom would rule in the hearts of sinners, dethrone the kingdom of Satan, and outlast all earthly kingdoms in this world.

And where are the witnesses for the prosecution to this charge of Jesus claiming to be a King? There are NONE.

4. The real charge and the Lord's defense against it

The three charges before Pilate were all smoke and mirrors. Pilate saw right through it, “for he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy” (Matt. 27:18). The governor declared Jesus not guilty of any of the charges made against Him, on all three counts. Then, with the trial and its guilty verdict on the verge of slipping away, the religious leaders brought out the real charge, as recorded in John 19:7:

The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”

This declaration by the Jews is the heart of the whole matter. Jesus did declare Himself to be the Son of God. If it’s true, there is no blasphemy involved and the religious leaders are the ones in error. But if it’s not true, then Jesus is indeed a blasphemer and should be punished as prescribed in the Law of Moses.

But let us hear the testimony of Jesus on the matter.

The case for the Lord’s defense

Jesus was not given the privilege of calling any witnesses to defend Himself in the human courts that tried His case. But had He been able to do that, there would have been no shortage of qualified candidates to speak favorably in His behalf. Imagine the compelling testimony that could come from the mouths of these:

- A once-dead but now living Lazarus, the youth of Nain, and the daughter of Jairus
- Thousands fed miraculously (5,000 men plus women and children and, again, around 4,000 people)
- Many with evil spirits delivered
- Thousands upon thousands who heard sermons “with authority” and not as the religious leaders of that day.

And yet the Savior in John 5 gives a hint that He would go in a different direction and call upon witnesses that we probably would not have suspected. As recorded in the fifth chapter, Jesus introduces these witnesses with a curious remark: “If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me ...” (John 5:31-32). By saying, “My witness is not true,” the Lord was only acknowledging an accepted principle of jurisprudence: that one’s own testimony, if that is all he has, is not sufficient to prove the claim. A defendant needs corroborating testimony from others. And in Jesus’ case the other witnesses were quite impressive.

In the rest of John 5 Jesus would call the witnesses who verify that He is the Son of God and the promised Messiah. We should note here the original audience who heard these words that Jesus spoke in the temple. They were His Jewish critics in Jerusalem who “sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). To these men, who might have included some members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus made His appeal on the sure basis of the following testimony.

The testimony of witness #1: *“There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth”* (John 5:32-33).

Jesus was referring to the testimony of John the Baptist, which the audience of John 5 had heard in their investigation of John’s ministry. The inspired transcript of an earlier chapter makes clear what the forerunner, John, had said about the Messiah, Jesus:

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?” He said: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,” as the prophet Isaiah said.’ Now those who were sent were from the

Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.” These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’” (John 1:19-30)⁴

The testimony of witness #2: *“But I have a greater witness than John’s; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form” (John 5:36-37).*

Living as we do after the fact, with all the revelation of the New Testament available to us, we can divide the second witness into two by separating the testimony of the Lord’s “works” from the testimony of the Lord’s “Father.” For those men who heard Jesus in the temple, however, they would have been familiar only with the Lord’s works, that is, His words and deeds, especially His miracles. What the Father said on behalf of His Son was not something they were privileged to hear at the Jordan River. But we, like John who was there, can hear the ringing endorsement spoken out loud from heaven:

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:16-17)

The testimony of witness #3: *“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. ... Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me” (John 5:39, 45-46).*

The Old Testament Scriptures were so vital in laying out God’s plan of salvation through the person and work of the Messiah. One marvels at the precision of the prophecies that foretold in great detail who the Savior would be and what He would do. That precision was something Jesus put to effective use when speaking to the two on the way to Emmaus:

“And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.” Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. ...And they said to one another, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:24-27, 32)

After His ascension the apostles and their helpers would do the same in their Gospel ministries—making the case that Jesus is the Christ on the basis of the prophecies that He fulfilled in their presence. As one example we note Philip’s witness to the eunuch of Ethiopia:

The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.” So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. (Acts 8:32-35)

No trial in the history of the human race could ever hope to have such an impressive set of witnesses. Only Jesus can point to the unimpeachable testimony of:

- 1) John the Baptist
- 2) God the Father
- 3) The Old Testament (and New Testament) Bible.

5. The jury (if there could have been one)

There was no possibility of finding a panel of peers to serve as jury in the case of Jesus. In fact, no jury at that time was ever impaneled. Still, we could point to a number of people who with great insight had made their own conclusions on the matter of whether or not Jesus was innocent. For the most part their conclusions were the result of direct contact with the innocent God-Man, who had conducted Himself in a way that no other defendant had ever acted before. Here is their testimony.

Juror #1: Pilate's wife

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." (Matt. 27:19)

Juror #2: Pontius Pilate

Then he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go." (Luke 23:22)

Juror #3: Herod Antipas

Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him." (Luke 23:13-15)

#4: Judas Iscariot

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." (Matt. 27:3-4)

#5: The penitent thief on the cross

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:40-41)

#6: The centurion overseeing the crucifixion

So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" (Luke 23:47)

Though they were not sequestered with instructions from a judge, though they did not deliberate together in a room, this jury was unanimous in their weighing of the evidence and their independent declarations. All six jurors were agreed that the prosecution did not prove its case and that the One accused, condemned, and sentenced was truly not guilty.

Sadly though, the man with the authority to carry out justice that day gave in to the pressure of the Jews and did the unthinkable. Fearing what the Sanhedrin might say about him to Caesar, Pilate authorized the crucifixion of Jesus without declaring Him guilty.

6. The Verdict of the Supreme Court

In our country it seems that a capital case has a number of avenues for appeal beyond the first trial. There was an appeal process in place in the days of Jesus. The Sanhedrin had a built-in protocol that required a second trial on the next day, which in the case of Jesus was deliberately bypassed, as mentioned earlier. There was also the possibility of appealing one's case to Caesar. But that was a right afforded only to Roman citizens. Jesus, therefore, would not experience what Paul did—years later as a Roman citizen, he would use this process and as a result bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Rome.

Every court on earth is to serve as God's representative, whether the court acknowledges the God-given nature of its responsibility or not. God intends with all judges and courts to maintain some semblance of justice and of law and order in this world. God intends for His representatives to punish evildoers. This plan is much more preferable to every one seeking his own revenge. But it remains an

imperfect system on several fronts. Because of sin and its curse, judges, juries, and witnesses are subject to mistakes, lying, bribes, and other evils. Every human lacks omniscience and so decisions are based on imperfect or incomplete knowledge. In the final analysis God controls the outcome of every trial, and a Christian will acknowledge that God works through and in spite of an imperfect system in place. In this sense, then, God is the supreme court, not just of our own land, but also of the whole world.

So how would the Supreme Judge rule in the trial of Jesus? We are not left to wonder or guess, for God reveals His decision.

On the charge of blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God: The guilty verdict of the Jewish courts is overturned. The Supreme Judge made the following rulings as recorded by the Supreme Court reporter, the Holy Spirit:

Psalm 2:7 *I will declare the decree: LORD has said to Me, “You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.”*

Isaiah 7:14 *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*

Isaiah 9:6 *For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Matthew 3:16-17 *When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*

Matthew 17:5 *While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”*

On the charge of inciting the nation to rebel: The verdict of not guilty rendered by the Gentile court is overturned.

On the charge of failing to pay taxes: The verdict of not guilty rendered by the Gentile court is overturned.

On the charge of claiming to be a King in the sense of a rival to Caesar: The verdict of not guilty rendered by the Gentile court is overturned.

How can any of that be? God tells us that to carry out our release from sin and the pending sentence of death in hell that hung over us all, He placed all of our crimes on the holy Jesus.

Isaiah 53:4-6 *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

2 Corinthians 5:21 *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.*

God even used the custom of a governor's pardon as a symbol of the spiritual exchange at work. Using the worst possible villain that he had in custody, Pilate stacked up the innocent Jesus against Barabbas, who was known to be guilty of rebellion and murder. The innocent Jesus is condemned. The guilty Barabbas is set free. In a similar way God accomplished the same for each of us and for every sinner. Jesus is made to be my sin, so that I become the righteousness of God. And in the resurrection of Christ the supreme verdict in our favor is made official, just as Paul has testified in Romans 4:24-25:

It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses and was raised because of our justification.

is the great marvel of the whole story of the various trials of Jesus Christ. Each human court got it wrong, but God got it right. And while our courts here on earth and their verdicts are being swept away in the flood of time, God's great courtroom weighing the verdict of humanity will never be swept away, changed, or overruled. The trial of Jesus goes beyond the trial of the decade, or the trial of the century, even beyond the trial of the millennium. It is for us and for all people the trial of time and eternity!

Endnotes

¹ The history, identity, and authority of the Sanhedrin have been documented in several sources. In his *Bible History Commentary: New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Northwestern: Milwaukee, 1989), Werner Franzmann gives a helpful summary about the Sanhedrin at the time of Christ:

The Sanhedrin, or High Council, consisted of three classes of members, namely: 1. "the chief priests," which designated in part those who had once filled the office of high priest and, in part, the heads of the 24 classes or divisions of priests; 2. "the elders of the people," the heads of tribes or family groups (clans); 3. "the scribes," the experts in the law. Sometimes Scripture includes all three classes in the title, "Sanhedrin." ... But often a "shortcut" is employed. In Matthew 2:4 and 20:18 we have "chief priests and teachers of the law [scribes]." In Matthew 26:3 and 27:1 we have "the chief priests and elders ..." But in each case the omitted class is understood. The whole Sanhedrin is meant. ...

The Sanhedrin had 70 members, plus the president. Among its members were other officers. The High Council also had a "police force" under its command. These were the temple guards. ...

We should say something about the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. It was very extensive, since both ecclesiastical or religious and civil matters came under its domain. It was the court of appeals from all lower courts. It alone could pass judgment in matters affecting a whole tribe, in deciding questions of peace and war, and in trying a high priest or members of the Sanhedrin. Religious matters remained the primary concern of the High Council. It ruled in matters of doctrine. It passed upon the claims of any prophet who arose. It gave its verdict in cases where the charge was blasphemy. ...

It is a striking fact that the jurisdiction of the Council was not limited to Palestine, but extended to every place where the Jews had settlements. (Acts 9:1-3) At one time the Sanhedrin could inflict capital punishment, but it had lost that power. When Jesus was on trial before it, it could still pass the sentence of death on the accused, but the authority to execute such a sentence was reserved for the Roman governor. (I: 558-59)

² For further discussion on these points see Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 2 (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1959), pages 556-563 and Adam Fahling, *The Life of Christ* (Concordia: St. Louis, 1936), pages 628-632 and 637-639.

³ What looks like gross injustice was, of course, under God's control at every turn. An unjust stoning of Jesus as a blasphemer could never happen, for God would have His Son experience something far worse—the full curse of God's wrath as the full propitiation of all sin. In accord with the Old Testament provision of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "Christ crucified" would thus mean that the One *anointed by God* (Christ) would be the One *cursed by God* (crucified), even as Paul states in Galatians 3:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.") (Gal. 3:13)

⁴ The pivotal testimony of the forerunner, namely, his public identifying of the Messiah should be proof positive that Jesus is the One. John the Baptist serving as the predicted "voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Isa. 40:3) who "prepares the way of the LORD" (Isa. 40:3, Mal. 3:1) makes it clear that he was in the predetermined position of Messiah's forerunner. Therefore the One coming after John, the One whom John identified as the "Lamb of God," should be accepted by all, then and now, as the Christ.

THE NEW COVENANT OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST

A study of God's forgiveness as it relates to the Lord's Supper

Steven Sippert

* The following is a revised version of its original form as a 2011 CLC General Pastoral Conference essay. The 2011 essay was assigned to the writer with the *subtitle* above. All Scripture quotations are New King James unless indicated otherwise.

We look forward to our Confirmation services as a time when young Christians come into the communion of those deemed ready to receive the sacrament for their spiritual blessing. They, like we, are taught that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace to strengthen their faith in Christ. They are taught to recognize the Lord's body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine, as Jesus plainly said in His words of institution. They are also taught to embrace and trust what Luther set forth in the Small Catechism: "What is the benefit of this eating and drinking? The words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,' show us that God gives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through the Sacrament. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation" (Sydow 10).¹ It is our hope and prayer that the sacrament now available to them will bless the confirmands in the way our Savior intended when He gave His Supper as the new covenant for all of His disciples in the New Testament (new covenant) era.

The title I chose for this essay is due in large part to the institution words of Christ recorded by Luke and Paul. For me a study of these two texts in particular have helped to solidify what I learned in Confirmation class, reviewed in religion class, and studied in-depth in the seminary. And yet these words, along with those recorded by Matthew and Mark, are so brief in comparison to other *sedes doctrinae*, such as the proof texts that treat Christology or justification or conversion. To this writer it is striking that so few passages, only twenty-two verses (Matt. 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor. 10:16-17, 1 Cor. 11:23-32), have generated so much verbiage in the form of doctrinal confessions, dogmatics presentations, essays, articles, even entire books devoted to some aspect of the Lord's Supper. The literature on the subject is abundant and generally worth reading. But constraints of time do not permit us to explore or review at length a defense of the real presence or the moment of the real presence. Nor will we rehearse what constitutes a legitimate celebration of the sacrament or the judgment on unworthy communing that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 11. The scope and purpose of this essay will be a focused examination of the connection to be made between God's forgiveness of our sins and the sacrament Jesus gave as "the new covenant in My blood."

To that end the following outline will serve as our guide:

- I. The new covenant of God's forgiveness has been *established by the atoning death of Christ*.
- II. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is *dispensed through the means of grace*.
- III. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is *given personally in the Lord's Supper*.
- IV. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is *assured by the real presence*.
- V. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is *received only by saving faith in Christ*.
- VI. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is the *means and guarantee of all other spiritual blessings* available in the sacrament.

I. The new covenant of God's forgiveness has been *established by the atoning death of Christ*.

A word search for "new covenant" in the New King James yields only eleven passages, several of which are found in Hebrews.² Paul records only two, and one of them is parallel to Luke 22:20. If one follows the Majority Text, there are only three occurrences of "new covenant" in the Gospels, and all three are the Lord's words of institution.³ Yet Jesus was not the first to mention the "new covenant" as such. That was done by Jeremiah in recording the LORD's prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, the only prophecy using those distinctive words in the Old Testament.

This is not to say, however, that the “new covenant” was a brand new concept at the time of Jeremiah. What God had announced and foretold as His plan of salvation in Christ, going all the way back to Genesis 3:15, was essentially what the new covenant would be. When the promise of the woman’s Seed became the promise of Abraham’s Seed who would bless all nations, God took measures to attach His promise of a Savior to a covenant in which Abraham’s descendants were promised the land of Canaan. In the event recorded in Genesis 15, we are told that Abram “believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (v. 6). God’s covenant was decreed when Abram inquired of God, “How shall I know that I will inherit it?” When he carried out God’s directive to select and kill the five animals, Abram got the answer to his question, a detailed prophecy of the bondage and release of his descendants in Egypt, which God introduced to Abram with the words, “Know certainly ” (Gen. 15:13-16).

Notice that the covenant made with Abraham and attached to the gospel promise of a Savior involved the sacrificial death of animals—a practice that would continue when the Lord “remembered His covenant with Abraham” (Exod. 2:24) and liberated the Israelites in the aftermath of the first Passover. Accordingly, the Passover sacrifice and the many animal sacrifices of the Sinaitic covenant were established by God in deference to, in service of the original promise and covenant—what God intended to do in Palestine (Canaan) through Christ, His Passover Lamb, His once-for-all atoning sacrifice that would truly and completely take away the sin of the world.

So when the Lord announces through Jeremiah a future “new covenant” for Israel, it’s a prophecy declared after the Sinaitic covenant (what we know as the old covenant) had been in place for centuries. This new covenant would make the old “obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). It would effectively do what the old covenant could never do. And it would feature as its driving force and effective principle the forgiveness of sins. So says the LORD in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD.³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.³⁴ No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

Although a thorough exegesis of this text would be fitting for the purpose of this essay, a brief listing of the main exegetical points will hopefully suffice, as given below.

V. 31) What Jehovah here decrees will happen; it cannot fail. What He calls a “new covenant” will be one-sided in its dispensation, as the rest of the text makes clear. The LORD will provide the action and the gift, and His people will receive. And as we learn from certain passages in the New Testament, this new covenant will even have the character of a last will and testament. Cf. Galatians 3:15-18 and Hebrews 9:15-17.

V. 32) Unlike the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, the new covenant will not be broken. The terms it stipulates and the relationship it establishes will remain intact.

V. 33) Only by realizing that “the house of Israel” is the Holy Christian Church, i.e., all true believers in Christ, can we see the prophecy truly fulfilled. These believers will retain Jehovah as their God, and He will retain all of them as His people. One means of keeping this relationship perpetually intact is God’s act of internally inscribing His “law” on the mind and heart of every believer.

V. 34) This new covenant between God and His people will be all encompassing in the sense that all believers from small to great will know Him by faith in Christ. But note the subordinating particle “For.” The ongoing reality of all believers knowing Jehovah as their God will result from the fact that He forgives their sin.

The book of Hebrews helps to underscore how the new covenant would be established by the atoning death of Christ. For Jesus “is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the

redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15). As the eternal Son of God who also became Man, Jesus qualifies as “a priest forever” who is also the “surety” (guarantee) of the “better covenant” (Heb. 7:21-22). Of course, what makes Jesus so effective as Mediator, High Priest, and Guarantor of the new covenant is the fact that He’s the Sacrifice too, the sufficient propitiation that takes the place of all people. To His Father, the God who judges all and requires full restitution, full payment for all the sins of all the sinners, Jesus offers His perfect life and innocent blood as that satisfactory payment. For it takes nothing less than the blood of God’s Son to “cleanse us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). Only the blood of One who is God Himself can purchase us as His own (Acts 20:28).

Such is the mystery, the reality, the glory of Good Friday. As for the impact this once-for-all Sacrifice would have on the Judge, the heavenly Father, that is made clear three days later. For the One “who was delivered up because of our offenses” was also “raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Because of the sacrifice made by His own Son, a sacrifice completely sufficient to satisfy divine justice and pay off the debt that everyone owed Him, God has rendered His acquittal, His verdict of righteous on all people. That’s the good news that we know as objective justification, which in essence is the same as the forgiveness of all sins—a truth we learn from the parallel statements in Romans 4. When God “justifies the ungodly” (v. 5), it’s the same as God “imputing righteousness” to him (v. 6), which is the same as having “lawless deeds forgiven” and “sins covered” (v. 7).

This good news of objective justification rings out clearly in other Scriptures that point to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) and to God “in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them...” (2 Cor. 5:19). Now the gospel of all sins forgiven in Christ is more than a truth of Scripture. It’s the foundational basis of the new covenant in that it provides the certainty of grace that is needed for every believer’s faith. That is, I know that I too am forgiven because I am part of the whole world of sinners, all of whom are forgiven because Jesus adequately took the place of all people. That same certainty extends to every sin we’ve ever done or will do. That is, because Jesus adequately paid for all of them, all of our sins (all of them!) are forgiven by God, who sees Jesus when He looks at the defendant (you and me) and regards His sacrifice as the established, unimpeachable reason why we are righteous, holy, spotless in His eyes.

The certainty of God’s forgiveness in Christ is the driving principle that makes the new covenant work, as the Apostle Paul also teaches in Romans 11:27: “And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.’” God’s covenant with us restores the broken relationship by effectively and completely removing all the sins, the very thing that caused the break. Likewise, the new covenant has the means to work faith in human hearts by providing full and complete forgiveness as ready-made, given for the taking, objectively true, and permanently established by the atoning death of Christ. This pivotal event of the past is the best kind of history, because no one—not even the devil—can go back in time and undo what Jesus did on the cross. This past accomplishment, more than any other, has far-reaching effect on the present and the future because it decisively establishes the forgiveness of sins as the sure basis of God’s relationship to us and our relationship to Him.

II. The new covenant of God’s forgiveness is dispensed through the means of grace.

The new covenant is not the exclusive privilege of the Holy Christian Church. In His unsurpassed love for the whole world, God intends His new covenant for all. Thus the sacrifice of Christ that won the forgiveness of all sins is to be proclaimed to all sinners. We hear no restrictions or limits made when Jesus decrees to His Church: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”; “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them ...” (Mark 16:15, Matt. 28:19). These two familiar texts of the Great Commission are parallel to a third: “Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). God’s covenant of forgiveness in Christ does nothing for anyone if it remains a secret. Only the dispensing of this forgiveness, a primary function of

the means of grace, can make the new covenant a plan that is realized, a prophecy that is fulfilled, and an everlasting relationship that is established between the heavenly Father and His children on earth.

Thus the Lord Jesus prescribes the worldwide preaching of sins forgiven, the gospel in Word, with no limits attached. The gospel Word is to go out to all nations in all the earth. The same can be said of the gospel in baptism; it too is meant for all people, “all the nations,” as He said in Matthew 28:19. With either of these means of grace the gospel at work not only imparts the forgiveness of sins; it also conveys the power of the Spirit to convert, to create faith in a once-dead heart with the result that the person believes in Christ and thus receives the forgiveness of sins offered in Christ.

Such power of conversion, however, the Lord did not give to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We must recognize this fact as we acknowledge that the gospel of the Lord’s Supper is limited to those who already believe. The Lord’s Supper is not to be the comprehensive teaching tool of indoctrination that the Word is going to be. But as it is with baptism and the gospel either preached or taught, the Lord’s Supper is still good news grounded in the forgiveness of sins won by Christ. It conveys the same grace from God, as noted by Luther and others when they asserted, “The Sacrament is the Gospel.” And so its saving effect on faith is to preserve and strengthen it in the hearts of believing communicants.

As effective tools of the new covenant baptism and the Lord’s Supper will serve somewhat different functions when God establishes the new covenant relationship with believers at their conversion and then maintains the relationship thereafter. Baptism is effective in initiating the covenant relationship between God and a person because of its power to create saving faith, which happens, for instance, in the heart of a baptized baby. Therefore this sacrament is performed only once—at the beginning of one’s spiritual life, the point when he or she enters the new covenant as one of God’s people.

The Lord’s Supper, on the other hand, will be repeated. It will serve through the power of the Spirit as a means of preserving and strengthening faith and so will help to maintain what the new covenant is destined to be: a steadfast link of grace between Jehovah and His people and a steadfast link of faith between His people and Jehovah. The role of the Lord’s Supper in this objective, however, will not involve something essentially different than what baptism and the gospel in the Word have to offer. It will be the same grace of God’s forgiveness there in the sacrament, which then serves as the appointed means of dispensing and assuring that forgiveness to all who receive the sacrament in the way Christ intended.

III. The new covenant of God’s forgiveness is given personally in the Lord’s Supper.

At this point we shall follow a progression that traces the issues at hand from the starting point of Scripture to Luther and the Confessions and then to confessional Lutheran explanations given in more recent times. It is imperative, of course, that the affirmations and explanations of Luther and all others since be nothing less and nothing more than what the Scriptures teach.

What Jesus says in His words of institution
(Matt. 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor. 11:23-25)

Some general comments are in order before examining specific texts. The variation of wording that we find between Matthew 26 and Mark 14, on the one hand, over against Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11 on the other is not a problem, not if we keep in mind the following points. 1) There is no essential difference in meaning between “My blood of the new covenant” and “the new covenant in My blood.” 2) Jesus (and the Holy Spirit too) has the right to convey the same meaning in different wordings. 3) Since Jesus distributed the sacrament to more than one disciple and had occasion to repeat His words, perhaps He did so with variation. 4) In the setting of the Passover meal Jesus likely spoke Aramaic, which if true, would make each of the inspired texts an accurate translation into Greek. It may also help to note this distinction: Matthew 26 and Mark 14 point to the essence of the sacrament, the real presence, when recording “This is My body ...; this is My blood. ...” Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11 point a bit more to the

purpose of the sacrament when the “new covenant” is highlighted and the command is given, “Do this in remembrance of Me.”⁴

As said at the beginning of the essay, our consideration of the Savior’s words will not involve a defense of the real presence. We will assume agreement on this matter that Jesus spoke clearly and literally and through His words caused it to be true that His body and His blood are indeed given and received in, with, and under the bread and wine that are consumed. That being said, some consideration of the details, especially the modifying phrases, should be helpful for the purpose of this essay.

In **Matthew 26:26-28** we read: “*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.’*” The underlined modifiers are relevant to the matter of how the forgiveness of sins is connected to the Lord’s Supper. As Jesus gives His blood in and with the wine in the cup, He defines it as “My blood of the new covenant” ($\tauὸ αἷμά μου τὸ τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης$).⁵ If the second article is original, it would highlight the genitive modifier along the lines of an emphatic attributive adjective; one could translate, “the blood of Me, which is of the new covenant.” Surely this is no ordinary human blood. This is the blood of the Messiah bringing into effect the covenant of salvation promised to Abraham and his descendants, the covenant that would be new according to Jeremiah 31. It’s also the blood of Christ that would be “shed for many for the remission of sins” ($\tauὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυνόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν$).

The prepositional phrase of this last modifier is unique to Matthew 26, for none of the other institution texts have $\epsilonἰς ἄφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν$. The preposition $\epsilonἰς$ with the action noun $\acute{a}φεσιν$ indicates purpose or goal and most likely is adverbial, modifying the participle $\acute{e}κχυνόμενον$ right before it. The entire participial clause further defines the blood of Christ given in the sacrament. It is His blood “being shed for many” so as to forgive sins. What Jesus gave and still gives in His Supper is the very blood of propitiation, that which has redeemed the world, the “many,” and won the forgiveness of their sins. As such this same blood of Christ, shed on the cross and dispensed in the sacrament, is the means of establishing the new covenant as in effect.

Given the similarity between Matthew 26:26-28 and Mark 14:22-24, we now turn to the words of Christ recorded in **Luke 22:19-20**, again with key phrases underlined: “*And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.’*” In distinction from the words of Jesus in Matthew and Mark, Luke records the attached modifier in connection with Christ’s body and also the command to keep doing this in His remembrance. From the command ($\tauοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν$) we know that the sacrament is to be repeated, done continually (note the present imperative). The participial clause $\tauὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διδόμενον$, which modifies $\sigma\omegaμα$, stresses the personal substitution aspect of Christ’s death, namely, His body “given in your place” (and also for your benefit).⁶

Similar to what Paul records in 1 Corinthian 11:25, Luke 22:20 has the non-verbal assertion, “This cup is the new covenant” ($\tauοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη$). The demonstrative $\tauοῦτο$ marks $\tauὸ ποτήριον$ as the subject. Since the predicate nominative ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη has the article, the assertion made by Jesus is what the grammarians call a convertible proposition. That is, “the subject and predicate are identical and interchangeable” (Hoerber 373). Of course, Jesus by synecdoche is referring to the wine in the cup, which, as we know from Matthew 26 and Mark 14, is also His blood. Now to think of the cup, or the drink in the cup, as the actual covenant is not the point. Rather, we should understand these words as Ylvisaker notes in *The Gospels*:

It is “the new testament” which is to be emphasized in Paul and Luke, to be projected, as it were, into the foreground, and it is this expression which determines the order of the words. When the Lord gave the institution of the Holy Supper to Paul ..., He would emphasize the fact that the drinking of the cup makes the recipient a participant in “the new testament.” ... When Paul and Luke speak of “this cup,” ... it is again the idea of appropriation which they desire to stress, and which determines

the form; for the cup is the medium wherein the drink is offered for acceptance. We realize therefore that the words in Paul and Luke do not stress so much the content of the cup from an objective point of view—this is also stated—but rather what the inside of the cup effects. ... Therefore the point is emphasized that the contents of the cup bring to the participants a share in the new testament. The concept “testament” is not used in this passage in its strictly objective sense; for, as Bugge says, a drink may never be a covenant, objectively speaking, but rather subjectively, the realization of the covenant upon men (Bugge). Therefore the drink may be said to be the testament, that is, the drink which “realiter” mediates the covenant. (667)⁷

In Luke 22:20 Christ’s reference to His blood comes as a prepositional phrase: ἐν τῷ αἵματι μου. Not all are agreed on whether the phrase modifies the whole statement, indicating how or why this cup is the new covenant (cf. Ylvisaker, pp. 667-668 and Pieper, Vol. III, p. 352), or whether it serves only to modify “the new covenant,” even though it lacks an article (cf. A. Just, *Concordia Commentary* on Luke, p. 835). That the statement in Luke 22 is parallel to “This is My blood of the new covenant” in Matthew and Mark leads me to favor the adjectival sense. But the difference in meaning seems to be one of emphasis, not one of substance. Of greater importance is the phrase itself, especially the sense of the preposition. Here there is general agreement that the phrase indicates “by means of” or “because of” Christ’s blood (Pieper 352).⁸ It is indeed the Savior’s blood, shed on the cross and dispensed in the cup, that puts the new covenant into effect and brings its benefits to the communing recipients.

The final modifier contained in Luke 22:20, τὸ ὑπὲρ οὐμῶν ἐκχυνόμενον, is a curious one. For unlike its parallel in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, it seems to modify τὸ ποτήριον, with which there is full grammatical agreement, rather than τῷ αἵματι, which is not in the same nominative case as the participle. Francis Pieper (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III) explains that the phrase in question “though in the nominative, is best referred to the immediately preceding τῷ αἵματι μου. The *irregular case* emphasizes the thing stated of the blood of Christ, namely, that this blood is shed for us, more than had the dative been repeated” (fn 92, p. 352, emph. mine). Not to be overlooked is Luke’s second use of ὑπὲρ οὐμῶν, by which Jesus once again directs His disciples then and now to regard His blood present in the sacrament as shed personally “in your place.”

As we now reach the words recorded in **1 Corinthians 11:23-25**, we see in contrast to the preceding texts no mention of the disciples⁹ and a minimal use of attached modifiers. Paul writes to the congregation he founded in Corinth and to whom he taught “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20, 23): “*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’*” (vv. 23-25).

The underlined sentence points to the main difference between this text and Luke 22:20, namely, the repetition of the command, “This do … in remembrance of Me,” which Jesus said in reference to the cup. The doubling of the command frames the approach that the Christian Church is to take in its repetitious use of this sacrament. Both the bread and wine, both the body and blood of Christ are to be continually given and received “in remembrance of” Him (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν). Like a similar construction in Matthew 26:28, the preposition εἰς with the action noun ἀνάμνησιν expresses purpose or goal. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper so as to remember Him. In 1 Corinthians 11:26 Paul explains what that means: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.”¹⁰ In our remembrance of Christ in the sacrament, we focus especially on His death, not in mere honorary memoriam of a past sacrifice, but in proclamation (especially to ourselves) that this death for us (ὑπὲρ οὐμῶν) has brought the new covenant (ἡ καὶ νὴ διαθήκη) of God’s forgiveness to us.

For the first time in the entire New Testament record the Lord has now mentioned “the new covenant” and done so in the setting of instituting His holy Supper. Surely in choosing those distinct words He has specified the prophecy of Jeremiah 31. More than that, on the night before His death He set in motion the fulfillment of that new covenant, of which the Lord’s Supper was to be such an integral

part. It needs to be said that the new covenant so-called is both the gospel covenant to Abraham renewed and the last will and testament of Christ. On the night before His death Christ gave His will to the Church.¹¹ Upon His death, the death of the testator, the Church participates in His will as His heirs and beneficiaries. Thus states the writer of Hebrews: “For this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator” (Heb. 9:15-16).

Do we not have in the prophetic utterance of “the new covenant” in Jeremiah 31 and the subsequent reference to the “new covenant” by Jesus and the book of Hebrews a solid link between God’s forgiveness of all our sins (Jer. 31:34), the death of Christ as our redemption (Heb. 9:15), and the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25)? Do we not receive in and through the Lord’s Supper the benefits of the new covenant, which include the forgiveness of sins? Are not these same benefits guaranteed to us as bought and paid for, since we also receive in the sacrament the very body and blood of our Benefactor, our Testator who has redeemed us?

Our confessional Lutheran forefathers certainly believed so and said as much, including Luther himself. But before we examine their words of confession and explanation on this doctrine of God’s Word, we set forth a proposition. The foundational blessing of the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins, is not only offered in the Lord’s Supper. It is delivered directly and given personally to the communicants. The vehicle of delivery is both the body and blood of Christ, in and with the bread and wine, and also the words of Christ in which He says to the communicants about that body and blood, “Given for you,” “shed for you,” “shed for the remission of sins.” The forgiveness of sins dispensed, however, is not something partial or piecemeal, but full and complete—God’s forgiveness of all our sins as the core blessing that establishes and maintains the new covenant relationship between Him and us.

What Luther and others affirm about this, particularly in the Lutheran Confessions

The quotations below are meant to be representative, not comprehensive, and include an excerpt from *Luther’s Works*.

From the Small Catechism (Enchiridion: under the heading “The Sacrament of the Altar”)

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer. That is shown us in these words: *Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins*; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things? —Answer. It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them, but the words which stand here, namely: *Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins*. Which words are, beside the bodily eating and drinking, as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins. (*Triglot* 557, ital. orig.)

From the Large Catechism

Thus we have briefly the first point which relates to the essence of this Sacrament. Now examine further the efficacy and benefits on account of which really the Sacrament was instituted; which is also its most necessary part, that we may know what we should seek and obtain there. Now this is plain and clear from the words just mentioned: *This is My body and blood, given and shed FOR YOU, for the remission of sins*. Briefly that is as much to say: For this reason we go to the Sacrament because there we receive such a treasure by and in which we obtain forgiveness of sins. Why so? Because the words stand here and give us this; for on this account He bids me eat and drink, that it may be my own and may benefit me, as a sure pledge and token, yea, the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death, and every calamity. (*Triglot* 757, ital. and emph. orig.)

Thus we have the entire Sacrament, both as to what it is in itself and as to what it brings and profits. Now we must also see who is the person that receives this power and benefit. That is answered briefly, as we said above of Baptism and often elsewhere: Whoever believes it has what the words declare and bring. For they are not spoken or proclaimed to stone and wood, but to those who hear them, to whom He says: *Take and eat*, etc. And because He offers and promises forgiveness of sin, it cannot be received otherwise than by faith. This faith He Himself demands in the Word when He says: *Given and shed for you*. As if He said: For this reason I give it, and bid you eat and drink, that you may claim it as yours and enjoy it. Whoever now accepts these words, and believes that what they declare is true, has it. (*Triglot* 761, ital. orig.)

For here in the Sacrament you are to receive from the lips of Christ forgiveness of sin, which contains and brings with it the grace of God and the Spirit with all His gifts, protection, shelter, and power against death and the devil and all misfortune. (*Triglot* 769)

From the Book of Concord

Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII (V):

Meanwhile, in temptations this faith is nourished in a variety of ways: through the declarations of the Gospel and the use of the Sacraments. For these are signs of the New Testament, that is, signs of the forgiveness of sins. They offer the forgiveness of sins as the words of the Lord's Supper clearly testify, "This is My body, which is given for you. This is the cup of the New Testament," and so on. (See Matthew 26:26, 28.) So faith is conceived and strengthened through Absolution, through the hearing of the Gospel, through the use of the Sacraments, so that it may not give in to the terrors of sin and death while it struggles. (*Concordia* 162-163)

Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VII:

Therefore there is no doubt that also concerning the other part of the Sacrament these words of Luke and Paul: *This cup is the new testament in My blood*, can have no other meaning than that which St. Matthew and St. Mark give: *This* (namely, that which you orally drink out of the cup) *is My blood of the new testament*, whereby I establish, seal, and confirm with you men this My testament and new covenant, namely, the forgiveness of sins. (*Triglot* 991, ital. orig.)

In the administration of the Holy Supper the words of institution are to be publicly spoken or sung before the congregation distinctly and clearly. They should in no way be left out. Obedience should be rendered to Christ's command, "This do." The hearers' faith about the nature and fruit of the Sacrament should be aroused, strengthened, and confirmed by Christ's Word (about the presence of Christ's body and blood, about the forgiveness of sins, and about all the benefits that have been purchased by the death and shedding of Christ's blood that are bestowed on us in Christ's testament). (*Concordia* 575)

From Luther's Works (American Ed., Vol. 37)

Where now are all the others who babble that there is no forgiveness of sins in the Supper? St. Paul and Luke say that the new testament is in the Supper, and not the sign or figure of the new testament. Figures or signs of the new testament belonged to the old testament, among the Jews. He who admits that he has the figure or sign of the new testament admits that he does not yet have the new testament. ... Christians ought to have the new testament itself, without figure or sign. They may have it hidden under an alien form, but they must have it truly present. Now if the new testament is present in the Supper, then forgiveness of sins, Spirit, grace, life and salvation must be there. All these are embraced in the Word. For who would know what was in the Supper if the words did not proclaim it?

See, then, what a beautiful, great, marvelous thing this is, how everything meshes together in one sacramental reality. The words are the first thing, for without the words the cup and the bread would be nothing. Further, without bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ would not be there. Without the body and blood of Christ, the new testament would not be there. Without the new testament, forgiveness of sins would not be there. Without forgiveness of sins, life and salvation

would not be there. Thus the words first connect the bread and cup to the sacrament; bread and cup embrace the body and blood of Christ; body and blood of Christ embrace the new testament; the new testament embraces the forgiveness of sins; forgiveness of sins embraces eternal life and salvation. See, all this the words of the Supper offer and give us, and we embrace it by faith. Ought not the devil, then, hate such a Supper and rouse fanatics against it?

Now since all this constitutes one sacramental reality, one can truly and properly say of each part, as for example the cup, "This is Christ's blood; this is the new testament; there is forgiveness of sins; there is life and salvation." (337-338)

Explanations from other confessional Lutheran sources

Small Catechism editions

Gausewitz:

402. What blessing is given us in the Lord's Supper? The forgiveness of sins is given us in the Lord's Supper. 403. How do we know this? That is shown us by the words of Christ, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins. 404. How, according to these words, was the forgiveness of our sins achieved? Christ gave His body into death and shed His blood for us. (Second Article.) 405. Why, then, does Christ give us this same body and blood in the Sacrament? Thereby Christ gives and seals unto each communicant personally the forgiveness of sins purchased for him on the cross. (223)¹²

Evangelical Lutheran Synod:

367. How is forgiveness of sins given us in the Sacrament of the Altar? When Jesus gives us His body and blood in the Sacrament, He thereby brings us and assures us of the forgiveness which He has won for us on the cross by offering up *this very body and blood*. 368. How are life and salvation given us in the Sacrament? In the Sacrament we receive the forgiveness of sins; and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. (215, it. orig.)¹³

Lutheran dogmatics textbooks

Hoenecke, Volume IV (under Point 7):

In regard to human beings, the special and foremost purpose of the Lord's Supper is salvation.

... But according to the words of institution, the Lord's Supper is also instituted for man, in order to make him a partaker of the forgiveness of sin in an especially convincing way. In this regard the purpose of the Lord's Supper is, properly speaking, the salvation of man.... Calov has a similar analysis: "The chief purpose of the Holy Eucharist on the part of God is the remission of sins and the sealing of grace. On our part it is the proclamation of the Lord's death."

Faith receives the forgiveness conveyed by the sacrament.¹⁴

But the great, gracious blessing of forgiveness is received *mediately* in the Lord's Supper. We partake of the body and blood of the Lord, and thereby have covenant fellowship and also the covenant blessing, forgiveness. And in addition to that, insofar as we receive the gracious blessing under visible signs, the Lord's Supper is a means of grace that makes the forgiveness of sins certain in a special way. This purpose, however, is really attained only in the case of those who partake of the Lord's Supper in faith. (142, ital. orig.)

F. Pieper, Volume III:

The Lord's Supper is no more and no less than a means ordained by Christ to offer and impart to all who partake of this meal the forgiveness of sins which Christ secured for men.... It is a work through which He assures us that by His reconciling death we have obtained a gracious God. This is clearly the sense of the words Christ used at the institution of His Supper.... In the Apology: "The Sacrament ... was instituted for the purpose of being a seal and testimony of the free remission of sins, and that, accordingly, it ought to admonish alarmed consciences to be truly confident and believe that their sins are freely remitted" (*Trigl.* 401, XXIV, 49). ...

Again, like private absolution and Baptism, the Lord's Supper is a pledge of the remission of his sins given to an individual.

On the other hand, Scripture very clearly indicates the *differentia specifca*, that which is peculiar to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper confirms and seals the private absolution to the individual by making him the recipient of the very body of Christ which was given for him and of the very blood which Christ shed for him. This is the feature distinguishing the Lord's Supper from the other means of grace. (293)

In part 8, "The Purpose of the Lord's Supper," Pieper states:

The purpose of the Lord's Supper is the remission of sins, as has been shown repeatedly and fully, particularly in the chapters "All Means of Grace Have the Same Purpose and the Same Effect" and "The Relation of the Lord's Supper to the Other Means of Grace" (pp. 108ff., 293ff.). This purpose of the Lord's Supper is ascertained not by deduction from extraneous passages of Holy Writ or by theological conclusions, but from the words of institution themselves, where it is clearly stated. See pp. 293, 111. When Christ adds, "which is given for you," to the words: "This is My body," and adds, "which is shed for you for the remission of sins," to the words: "This is My blood," His purpose was to call forth...this conviction, that because of the propitiatory death of Christ they [the communicants] have a gracious God, that is, have remission of sins. Other meaning these words absolutely cannot have. We have likewise noted (p. 351) that in the statement ..., "This cup is the new testament in My blood," the *finis cuius* of the Lord's Supper is directly expressed, since according to Scripture the new testament, or covenant, is nothing else than the remission of sins. Accordingly, we maintain that the Lord's Supper brings forgiveness of sins, the same forgiveness which the Word of the Gospel and Baptism offer.

Peculiar to the Lord's Supper, however, is the wonderful feature that Christ confirms and seals His assurance of the remission of our sins by giving us His body to eat, which was given into death for us, and His blood to drink, which was shed for the remission of our sins. In the Lord's Supper the remission of sins is therefore signed over and sealed to us by giving us the ransom paid for it. (373-374)

Lyle Lange, *God So Loved the World*:

The Lord's Supper assures us that our sins are forgiven. It does more than that, however. It also gives us the forgiveness of our sins. The Lord's Supper is a means through which Christ distributes to us the blessings he won for us on the cross. It is a sign of God's grace, but it is also a means of grace.

The Lord's Supper, as does Baptism, personalizes the forgiveness of sins. It is an individual application of forgiveness. It is as though God takes us aside from the business of life and gives us his personal assurance that our sins are [sic] forgiven. That assurance comes through the forgiveness Christ distributes through the Sacrament. (507)

IV. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is assured by the real presence.

Should we sense a redundancy here? Is it redundant to claim from the Lord's words of institution "that Christ is conferring His body and blood upon us in order to assure us of the forgiveness of sins" (Dorr 32), while also saying that the Lord's Supper actually gives us the forgiveness of sins? For that matter, is it redundant to hear in the same service the forgiveness of sins announced in the liturgical absolution, then proclaimed in the sermon, and again brought up in Holy Communion? Consider the input of Pieper (and Luther) in reply:

Both Scripture and experience teach that men who feel the weight of their sins find nothing harder to believe than the forgiveness of their sins. Hence the repetition of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins in various ways through the means of grace meets a practical need of Christians. This need Luther, too, pointed out in the Smalcald Articles: "This Gospel not merely in one way gives counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the

peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. ..." (*Trigl.* 491, Part III, Art. IV.)¹⁵

The both-and approach alluded to above—that the Lord’s Supper gives both the complete forgiveness of our sins and the assurance that all our sins are forgiven—is, I believe, the result of gathering, considering, and confessing all that Scripture says on the matters of Christ’s vicarious atonement, justification and forgiveness, the means of grace, the real presence, and the intended blessing of the Lord’s Supper. A paragraph quoted from Pieper (III: 374) in part III above points to the real presence of Christ’s body and blood as the link of assurance between the atonement of Christ and the forgiveness of our sins. All that God reveals in the Gospel teaches us to realize that our absolute, ironclad certainty of His forgiveness depends on the assurance of complete atonement, i.e., that all of our sins have been completely paid for to God’s satisfaction. Thus the Apostle John declares: “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.”¹⁶ That is, since the blood of God’s Son has atoned for all sin, it has removed all of our sin and made us clean before the Father.

Now in the sacrament Jesus gives His very blood that was shed to cleanse us, along with His body given into death in our place. Though His words of institution sufficiently declare that His body and blood are present with the bread and wine, we also have 1 Corinthians 10:16 affirming the same truth: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” Thus in a tangible way, something that we eat and drink, we receive from Jesus the assurance of our atonement, the assurance that all of our sins are paid for. Though written in a different context than that of the sacrament, Paul’s words in Ephesians 1:7 still come to mind: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” By receiving His body and blood in the sacrament, we receive and continue to have redemption, which Paul says, by way of an apposition, is the same as the forgiveness of sins.

Assurance statements in the Lutheran Confessions and from other similar sources

Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII

It [this most venerable Sacrament] was to be an abiding memorial of His bitter suffering and death and all His benefits. It was a sealing and confirmation of the New Testament, a consolation of all distressed hearts, and a firm bond of unity for Christians with Christ, their Head, and with one another. (*Concordia* 570)

The other eating of Christ’s body is oral or sacramental, when Christ’s true, essential body and blood are orally received and partaken of in the Holy Supper by all who eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine in the Supper. This is done by the believing as a certain pledge and assurance that their sins are surely forgiven them and that Christ dwells in them and is at work in them. (*Concordia* 573)

Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent: Part II

Moreover, in temptation the mind is troubled chiefly about this question, whether, in view of the fact that the promise is spoken in general, I also, who believe, have forgiveness of sins; whether I have it truly, surely, and firmly.... For this use therefore God, who is rich in mercy, which He pours out abundantly on the believers, instituted beside the Word also the use of the sacraments.... Nevertheless the Eucharist, which contains the basis for the remission of sins, namely the body and blood of Christ, is not excluded from also this use. For the Son of God testifies in the Eucharist by a most extraordinary and sure pledge, namely by exhibiting His body and blood, that He surely communicates, applies, and seals to each and everyone who uses this sacrament in faith, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and all the other benefits which He obtained for the church by the offering up of His body and the shedding of His blood that they might be offered in the Word and

sacraments and be accepted by faith. And so faith has in the use of the Eucharist a firm anchor of consolation, trust, and certainty concerning the forgiveness of sins. (239)

“The Theology of the Lord’s Supper,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*

It has been asked why we need forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper when we have already received forgiveness through the preaching of the Gospel, Holy Baptism, and Absolution.... Anyone whose heart has been terrified by his sins knows how important it is to believe in the forgiveness of those sins and will readily appreciate the greatness of divine mercy in providing not only one but many means through which we receive the forgiveness of sins. Therefore just as certain as we are that we receive with our lips the body and blood of our Lord which were given into death for our sins, just as certain should we be that the forgiveness of sins is ours. (Schmeling 57)¹⁷

F. Pieper, Volume III

Hence we must maintain...as to the purpose of the Lord’s Supper: The proffer, pledging, and sealing of the free and full remission of sins is the chief and prime purpose of the Lord’s Supper. Christ makes us certain of this fact by adding to the words “This is My body” the words “which is given for you,” and to the words “This is My blood” the words “which is shed for you.” (379)

Sydow edition of the Small Catechism

269. What blessings are ours in the Sacrament of Holy Communion? a. Christ assures us of forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. b. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. (175-176)¹⁸

V. The new covenant of God’s forgiveness is received only by saving faith in Christ.

That God intends His new covenant for all people we have already stated. Indeed, it is the God-given function of the Gospel to distribute this covenant, the forgiveness of sins, to the entire world. But not everyone who hears the Gospel receives what is offered. Those who hear and do not believe in effect reject what is offered, of whom it is said in John 3:18 that they are “condemned already, because” they have “not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Only believers—all those in whom the Spirit has worked saving faith in Christ—receive the forgiveness of sins, which is offered to them ready-made, there for the taking, in the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen.

Already in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 it was implied that believers only, the spiritual Israel of the Holy Christian Church, would be the ones predicted as benefiting from and receiving what God offered in the new covenant. Other Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, delineate this point quite clearly. In reference to the Gospel proclamation of Christ in the Old Testament, the Apostle Peter said: “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43 NAS). It may indeed boggle the mind that forgiveness, an act of God that removes our sins from us and from His sight, is at the same time something we can receive. And, as Peter makes clear, believing in Christ is the means of receiving that forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul taught the same truth. As he evangelized in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, his presentation of objective forgiveness was followed by a declaration of subjective justification: “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). Also, in the context of objective justification Paul declared in Romans 5: “For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (5:17). The words underlined are the translation of οἱ τὴν περισσείαν τῆς χάριτος καὶ τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης λαμβάνοντες. Of note here is the present participle, which usually indicates ongoing action. In that present participle Paul describes believers in Christ as “receiving the abundance” of two things: “the grace” and “the gift of the righteousness.” If we remember that in these early chapters of Romans “righteousness” means being justified or acquitted by God and is the same as being forgiven by God, we

have here in verse 17 a statement that believers *continue to receive* what the gospel brings, that is, God's abundant grace and righteousness (forgiveness) as a gift. Wouldn't the communing of Christians at the Lord's Table be a fitting manifestation of what the second half of Romans 5:17 presents—receiving God's grace and gift of forgiveness through the sacrament?

It is true that no explicit passage states in so many words that only believers receive the blessings offered in the Lord's Supper. Like several other doctrines of Scripture, that truth is inferred from what Scripture reveals about the means of grace, the role of faith, and the effect of unworthy communing recorded in 1 Corinthians 11. And so we know that Luther was not making an unwarranted leap when he taught in his Small Catechism:

How can bodily eating and drinking do these great things? It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them, but the words here written, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." Which words, beside the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the Sacrament. And he who believes these words, has what they say and declare, namely, forgiveness of sins. (Gausewitz 16, 224)

This is the same point Luther made in his Large Catechism:

Now we must also see who is the person that receives this power and benefit. That is answered briefly, as we have said above about Baptism and often elsewhere: Whoever believes the words has what they declare and bring. For they are not spoken or proclaimed to stone and wood, but to those who hear them, to whom He says, "Take, eat," and so on. Because He offers and promises forgiveness of sin, it cannot be received except by faith. This faith He Himself demands in the Word when He says, "Given ... and shed for you," as if He said, "For this reason I give it, and ask you to eat and drink it, that you may claim it as yours and enjoy it." Whoever now accepts these words and believes that what they declare is true has forgiveness. (Concordia 435)

VI. The new covenant of God's forgiveness is *the means and guarantee of all other blessings available in the sacrament.*

As a means of grace the Lord's Supper has the function of preserving and strengthening our faith in Christ. This strengthening takes place through the power of the Spirit at work in the believing communicant's heart. This strengthening also takes place in direct consequence of having the forgiveness of sins offered and assured in the sacrament—a point that Pieper underscores in conjunction with the Confessions:

We find the same teaching in our Lutheran Symbols. They stress emphatically that the Sacraments have no other purpose than the Word of the Gospel, namely, the attestation and conferring of the forgiveness of sins and the engendering and strengthening of faith in this forgiveness. Listen to the Apology: "... For when we are baptized, when we eat the Lord's body, when we are absolved, our hearts must be firmly assured that God truly forgives us for Christ's sake. And God, at the same time, by the word and by the rite, moves hearts to believe and conceive faith, just as Paul says, Rom. 10:17: 'Faith cometh by hearing.' But just as the Word enters the ear in order to strike our heart, so the rite itself strikes the eye, in order to move the heart. The effect of the Word and of the rite is the same, ... because the rite is received by the eye and is, as it were, a picture of the Word, signifying the same things as the Word. Therefore the effect of both is the same." (Trigl. 309, XIII, 4f.) Just so the Augsburg Confession declares that the purpose of the Sacraments is "to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them" (Trigl. 49, XIII). This terminology of the Augsburg Confession, that the Sacraments are "signs and testimonies of the ... will of God toward us" and therefore awaken and strengthen faith, rests on the universal objective reconciliation and deserves to be called classic. (III: 111-112)

As for the proposition that God's forgiveness is the guarantee of all other spiritual blessings, we hear Pieper once again:

Moreover, is not the forgiveness of sins the real and chief good (*Hauptgut*), "the new testament," so that he who has remission of sins forfeits nothing? Scripture presents all other spiritual gifts and

activities as resulting from the forgiveness of sins: the state of grace, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the *unio mystica*, sanctification, the love of God and the neighbor, membership in the Christian Church and all privileges which this includes. If, therefore, we content ourselves with the purpose of the Sacraments as God determined it, namely, that they are means of transmitting the forgiveness of sins and for this reason also means of creating and strengthening faith, the reception of all remaining goods and gifts is guaranteed us. (III: 112)¹⁹

At a later point in his third volume Pieper resumes discussion of the doctrine that other spiritual blessings derive from the forgiveness of sins conveyed in the Lord's Supper:

All other effects of the Lord's Supper are not co-ordinate, but subordinate to the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins. These other effects have been listed as follows: (a) strengthening of faith, (b) communion with Christ, (c) communion with the spiritual body of Christ, the Church, (d) furtherance in sanctification, (e) kindling of love of God and the neighbor, (f) growth in patience and in hope of eternal life. But all these effects rest not in part only, but entirely on the fact that the Lord's Supper is a means of remitting sins. Christian faith in its very nature is faith in the remission of sins provided by Christ's substitutional satisfaction. For this reason Christian faith can be strengthened only by relating it, through the divinely appointed means of grace, to the object which generates and sustains it, namely, the promise of the remission of sins. ... Since, now, in the Lord's Supper the divine forgiveness of our sins is sealed to us with Christ's body and blood, and is thus offered to us in an especially impressive and comforting manner, the spiritual effects mentioned result from the Lord's Supper in peculiar measure. (379-380).

Like Pieper above, John T. Mueller in his own *Christian Dogmatics* has made a similar point:

All these blessed effects are due to the fact that the Lord's Supper is ... a means by which we receive forgiveness of sins; for in proportion as the believer is assured of the forgiveness of his sins, his faith is strengthened, his love is increased, and his hope of eternal life is confirmed. Assured of his adoption as God's child in Christ Jesus, he also struggles against sin and lives unto Him who died for him and rose again. In short, he loves God because He first loved him, 1 John 4, 19. (536)

Conclusion

To this writer it is clear that our Lutheran forefathers held to both ideas and confessed them both, namely, that in the Lord's Supper we receive the forgiveness of our sins and also the assurance that all of our sins are forgiven. To find both statements in the Book of Concord is no small thing, to be sure. But more importantly, a study of the pertinent Scripture texts leads me to the conviction that *both assertions are true*. As a core part of the new covenant the Lord's Supper delivers God's forgiveness, won at the cross of Christ, directly and personally to the communicant. And at the same time, because of the real presence of Christ's body and blood—the very means of our propitiation—we receive the assurance that all of our sins are truly forgiven by God. Both of these realities make this sacrament a precious means of grace to be used continually and confidently in our walk heavenward. For as Luther said so briefly and yet so well: "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

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Endnotes

¹ The citation of quoted material throughout the article will, for the most part, be given parenthetically according to MLA guidelines. See Works Cited on page 45 for authors, titles, and publishing information. Most of the subsequent endnotes will give explanatory or supplemental information.

² Jeremiah 31:31, Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:6, Hebrews 8:8, Hebrews 8:13, Hebrews 9:15 (two times), and Hebrews 12:24.

³ According to the text of Nestle-Aland/United Bible Society (UBS) the number of occurrences in the Gospels is only one—Luke 22:20.

⁴ This helpful observation is made by Francis Pieper in Volume III of *Christian Dogmatics*, pages 351-352.

⁵ The 27th edition of Nestle-Aland has a shorter reading: τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης. Note the omission of the second article τὸ and the omission of the adjective καὶ νῆς.

⁶ While ἀντί is used to indicate simple substitution or exchange, ὑπέρ is also capable of expressing substitution in the New Testament. An observation by Trench (*Synonyms of the New Testament*) is to the point: "We obtain a perfect right to claim such declarations of Christ's death *for us* as also declarations of his death *in our stead*. And in them beyond doubt the preposition ὑπέρ is the rather employed, that it may embrace both these meanings, and express how Christ died at once *for our sakes* ... and *in our stead*; while ἀντί would only have expressed the last of these" (qtd. in Wallace 388).

⁷ Pieper offers this explanation in *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, on page 352:

This manner of speaking, that the cup is the new covenant, or the remission of sins, is not unusual, but occurs frequently in Holy Writ; for instance, in John 11:25 and John 6:64 [sic]. Christ is the Resurrection and the Life, and: Christ's words are spirit and are life. The sense is not that Christ merely signifies, or is a sign of, the resurrection and the life, but that through Christ the resurrection is ready and to be had. Again, Christ's words do not merely signify spirit and life, but through Christ's words, or in Christ's words, spirit and life are provided. So, too, the cup in the Sacrament of the Altar does not signify the remission of sin, but in and with the cup the remission of sins is ready and to be had by virtue of, or because of, the blood of Christ, so that everyone who partakes of the cup can also by faith take or appropriate from this cup the remission of sins.

⁸ Likewise, Ylvisaker contends in *The Gospels*: "The preposition 'in'—ἐν—expresses causality from the locative point of view" (668).

⁹ Consider the following as an exegetical opinion. By leaving out any explicit reference to the disciples (as the Synoptic texts surely do), Paul seems to make Jesus' words on Maundy Thursday echo down to the Corinthians (and to us), inviting them even grammatically to focus on themselves as the "you" when hearing or reading the second plural forms in verses 24 and 25.

¹⁰ The Greek of verse 26 has τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε—a direct object that fronts an intensive verb.

¹¹ Speaking in defense of the real presence, confessional Lutheran polemics have made the point that since Christ was stating His last will and testament, it was necessary that He speak plainly, literally—not in figurative terms—so that His will would be clear. Consequently, it is affirmed that as part of His last will and testament the words “This is My body” and “This is My blood” have to be understood literally.

¹² Under question 405 the Gausewitz catechism has as supporting “Scripture Passages” 1 Corinthians 11:24-25, Luke 22:19-20, and Ephesians 1:7.

¹³ Under question 368 the ELS catechism has John 5:24.

¹⁴ On page 142 this sentence is a centered heading in boldface print.

¹⁵ *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 114; words in brackets are Pieper’s.

¹⁶ Cf. also Hebrews 9:22: “And without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (ESV).

¹⁷ At the end of this paragraph, which is not punctuated or indented as a quotation, a parenthetical reference is made to pages 64-65 of *Der Kleine Gebets-Schatz*.

Also of note is the origin and scope of the whole essay. “The Theology of the Lord’s Supper” was originally prepared as a paper of the ELS Doctrine Committee to the 1988 ELS General Pastoral Conference. In its current form it comprises an entire issue of the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*.

¹⁸ Bible passages used to support part A are Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:19-20, and Romans 11:27.

¹⁹ For a fuller development of how Scripture describes “the many blessings which follow in the wake of justification” (II: 406), see pages 406-415 in Volume II of Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*.

BOOK REVIEW

Johann Gerhard: *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry—Part One (Theological Commonplaces XXVI/1)*, translated by Richard Dinda, edited by Benjamin Mayes. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 2011, hard cover, 346 pages, plus 15 pages of preface material.

Concordia Publishing House has undertaken the mammoth task of putting the *Theological Commonplaces* of Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) into English for the first time. Several volumes are already available, including the one in review here. Johann Gerhard is often considered the third of the great Lutheran theologians of the Reformation, following the first Martin (Luther) and the second Martin (Chemnitz). There can be no doubt that he was a pious, faithful, and hard-working student of Holy Scripture and of the earlier fathers of the Church, including Luther and Chemnitz. He was thorough in his presentation of Christian dogmatics, covering the whole area of Christian doctrine in the many volumes of his *Loci Theologici*, written in Latin from 1609 to 1622. The *Theological Commonplaces* are the English translation of this masterpiece of systematic theology.

The volume entitled *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry—Part One* discusses many of the questions that come up in discussing what is called the public ministry. Gerhard proves from Scripture that the public ministry is God’s will for His Church. He points out that every minister must have a call from God in order to have the privilege of serving in this ministry. “This call to the ministry is utterly necessary for those who desire to be engaged in this office according to the will of God, with a good conscience, and to the benefit of their hearers” (p. 73). This call may come directly from God, as in the case of the prophets and the apostles, or indirectly from God through His Church, as is the case today.

With regard to the call of ministers Gerhard says many fine things that would be helpful to those considering a call into the ministry. For example, he states: “Anyone who offers his work to the church should allow others the free judgment of himself and should not push himself in with secret tricks and illegitimate means. He should rather wait for an ordinary and legitimate call” (p. 171). He also says: “No one should nominate or designate a certain place for himself. Rather, let him leave this to the judgment of others ...” (p. 171). “Nor should anyone allow himself to be substituted in place of one who has been removed from his position without the legitimate procedure of judgment” (p. 171).

Throughout his discussion Gerhard takes aim at the false claims of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to the public ministry. In particular Gerhard rebuts the arguments of the prominent Catholic

theologian Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), who wrote many volumes in defense of the papal system and against confessional Lutheranism. The Roman church, of course, claimed that Christ established the pope as the head of the church on earth, and that the right of calling ministers belongs to the bishops under the pope. To this claim Gerhard responds: “From Christ’s statement [concerning the keys] it is indeed right to draw a conclusion against the Papists that the right [*jus*] to call ministers belongs to the entire church, to which Christ gave the Keys” (p. 95).

What did Gerhard contend about the so-called apostolic succession? Bellarmine claimed: “Among the Lutherans there are no bishops, for they do not have ordination nor succession from the apostles. Therefore among them there is no church” (qtd. in p. 193). Gerhard responds: “A distinction must be made between personal and doctrinal succession. The latter succession alone is both necessary and sufficient for a legitimate call” (p. 194). In other words, what is important is that we follow the apostolic doctrine. That is the only kind of apostolic succession that God requires.

On the question of ordination Gerhard maintains: “Nevertheless we deny that ordination is necessary by reason of a particular divine precept, which cannot be demonstrated; or by reason of the sort of effect that the Papists attribute to it, as if it impressed an indelible character or conferred gifts required for the ministry just by working the work ...; or by reason of an absolute and simple necessity, as if a man legitimately called by a church could not perform the ministry before being ordained and consecrated, ... for nothing can be set forth from the Scriptures about such an absolute necessity” (p. 210).

May women be called and ordained to the public (pastoral) ministry? Gerhard’s answer is clear. Referring to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12-14, he maintains: “The apostle Paul with clear words removes the female gender from the public office of teaching in the church” (p. 271).

On the question of whether Christ’s Church is still present among those who tolerate false teaching, Gerhard states: “Even in those places in which the ministerium is not pure in every respect and free of all errors, the church is still gathered and preserved to God, as long as it retains Baptism, the Decalogue, the Apostles’ Creed, the history of the Lord’s Passion, and other substantial and fundamental points of Christian doctrine” (p. 229).

At the same time Gerhard understood the vital importance of teaching God’s truth without mixing in human teachings. “For since the pastor’s primary and principal duty is to teach pure and uncorrupted doctrine to the people entrusted to his care (Mal. 2:7, Matt. 13:52, etc.), therefore it is certainly required that he who is going to be in charge of this office be free of fanatical opinions and heretical errors. ... A bishop, then, is required to be constant in the truth of doctrine which he knows fundamentally and correctly, and not to allow himself to be ‘carried about by any wind of new opinions’ (Eph. 4:14). He is also required to be able to guard the truth of doctrine against the adversaries ...” (p. 243). In this connection Gerhard has suggested that it might be advisable for a pastor to be examined not only before he accepts his first call, but also when he is called to another position (p. 244).

Since Johann Gerhard is generally considered an orthodox Lutheran theologian, it is good that in the editor’s preface to this volume Benjamin Mayes points out two aspects of Gerhard’s presentation that require correction. “First, Gerhard emphasizes that the call to the ministry is a call restricted to a certain place. By emphasizing the uniqueness of the apostolic office, he does not seem to make room for any office of missionary or evangelist in the present church” (p. xi).

Even more serious is the second concern: “Gerhard redefines the doctrine of the three estates (church, state, and household) in a way that led to secular control of the church” (p. xi). Mayes’ point here is that Gerhard argues for three parties being involved in the call of a minister. These three are the clergy, the laity, and the Christian magistrate. He assigns the primary role to the clergy, but insists that the members of the congregation must also be involved at least to the point of giving consent. But then he claims that if the magistrate is a Christian, then that magistrate should be involved in the calling, transferring, and removing of ministers. Mayes summarizes Gerhard’s position in these words: “Gerhard intended to argue instead for a church governance balanced between the Christian magistrate, the clergy, and the laity. He argues for a consistorial church government, in which the clergy and lay representatives or ‘elders’ exercised church discipline, served as a court of appeals, made call assignments, etc., on a regional basis. Yet in reality, the secular ruler often appointed both the lay and the pastoral representatives

to such consistories, and thus the laity's voice in particular was suppressed by the voice of the secular rulers" (p. xii).

In practice, then, it seems Gerhard and other Lutherans of his generation were beginning to depart from Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession, which states: "One should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular" (*The Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert, p. 92). As proof for his point Gerhard refers only to Old Testament passages that are not applicable to the New Testament age. He recognizes that the secular government had no role in calling the ministers of the earliest Christian congregations. He explains by stating: "The fact that there is no mention of the magistracy in that practice is because the magistracy at that time was not yet Christian nor did it embrace the doctrine whose preaching was being entrusted to the ministers" (p. 117). He goes on to say: "From the fact that the magistracy is not mentioned in the matter of calling ministers of the church in the first apostolic church and the church that immediately followed it, one must by no means infer that also today the Christian magistracy has no right to call ministers of the church" (p. 118). On the contrary, we do infer it and insist on continuing to infer it. In the words of the *Brief Statement* of 1932 we confess: "We condemn the policy of those who would have the power of the State employed 'in the interest of the Church' and who thus turn the Church into a secular dominion" (¶34). Gerhard goes so far as to state that it is the duty of the Christian magistrate "to see to it that the exercise of divine worship flourishes pure and uncorrupted, to establish salaries for ministers of churches and of schools, to keep wolves out of the Lord's fold, and to remove false worship" (p. 117). We doubt that the previous two Martins, Luther and Chemnitz, would have altogether agreed with Gerhard on this point.

For many years Lutheran seminary libraries have had Gerhard's *Loci Theologici* on their shelves in those huge, ancient Latin volumes, mostly untouched. We hope that pastors today, ministerial teachers, and their students will welcome Gerhard in English. *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry—Part One* is an attractive work, complete with table of contents, editor's preface, an understandable translation, a glossary, a person index, a Scripture index, and a list of works cited (which in itself must have taken an enormous amount of research). It seems there will be seventeen volumes in all. Those already in print include: *On the Church*, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, *On the Nature of God and on the Trinity*, and *On Christ*. Individual volumes in this set are quite expensive, but as is true with *Luther's Works*, the cost is much less if one subscribes to the whole set in advance.

Johann Gerhard has been one of God's great gifts to His Church, and through this English edition we are blessed once more. Gerhard's method is always to start with Scripture and then move on to the testimonies of the fathers. After quoting 1 Peter 5:2, 1 Corinthians 4:1, Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Luke 12:42-43, and Matthew 13:52, Gerhard concludes this volume:

So also, according to the diversity of his hearers, a minister of the church treats some and then other parts of heavenly doctrine. To the stubborn, inflexible, and impenitent he sets forth the threats of the Law; to the contrite and those with terror-stricken consciences he sets forth the Gospel. Likewise, he discusses one and the same doctrine in one way before the less educated and simpler people and in another way before the educated and more advanced. ... [A] minister of the Word, according to the diversity of his hearers, must at one time use gentler reprimands; at another time, harsher ones. In fact, when necessity so demands, he must even cut off a dead member with the sword of excommunication. He has received especially four instruments, given to him by God, for performing his office correctly and salutarily: *the mysteries of the Word and Sacraments, church discipline, and church property*. In the management and administration of these according to the diversity of persons with whom he deals, he conducts himself in such a way that he may one day hear the very joyful words of Christ, Matt. 25:21: "Well done, good and faithful servant; because you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of the Lord." (pp. 278-279, ital. orig.)

- David Lau