The communion of saints in Luther's 1519 sermon on 
*The blessed sacrament of the holy and true body of Christ*

Rev. Dr. Dean Zweck

Dean lectures in church history at Australian Lutheran College and serves as Lutheran co-chair of the national dialogue between the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Roman Catholic Church in Australia.

Half a century ago "Holy Communion" was the term commonly used among Lutherans in Australia for the sacrament of the altar, and the written abbreviation "HC" was ubiquitous in Lutheran circles, especially in church notices and on church noticeboards. While that term is still used widely, nowadays you will also hear Lutherans calling it "the Lord's Supper" or, more rarely, "the Eucharist". "Holy Communion" or simply "communion" is used also by other church bodies, Anglicans in particular. In the 16th century "communion" did not refer to the full eucharistic rite, but only to part of it: the reception. This differentiation is actually reflected in Luther's title for his first revision of the mass: *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg*, 1523 (LW 53:19). The same distinction continues to be reflected in Roman Catholic usage; for example, while the entire celebration is called "the Mass", the first time catechised children receive the sacrament is called "First Communion".

When people say, "Is there communion today?" or "I am going to receive communion", what do they understand by the word "communion"? That would make an interesting study in itself, but my hunch is that older Lutherans who were well catechised and had to learn things by heart might answer in the words of the catechism: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself". They might even recall the Catechism answer about the real presence: "I believe in the real presence ... because the Bible states that the cup is the *communion* of the blood of Christ and the bread is the *communion* of the body of Christ", with 1 Corinthians 10:16 as the supporting text (*Small Catechism*, CPH, 1943, 195,96).

Informed by our present usage and understanding of the word "communion", we might then be somewhat surprised by the way Luther used the term in his first extended writing on the

---

1 Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Viittembergensi (WA 12:205). 
2 But it seems that in popular usage "holy communion" can be used for the whole rite too. See, for example, the website of the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, which speaks of "the Eucharist, or Communion" as if the words were interchangeable, but as one reads on a differentiation can be noticed (http://www.adelaide.catholic.org.au/our-faith/sacraments/eucharist-holy-communion).
sacrament, a sermon in late 1519: “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods” (LW 35:49–73; WA 2:742–58). In this sermon Luther says up-front that the sacrament derives its common name “communion” from the fact that “the significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints” (gemeinschafft aller heillgen; LW 35:50; WA 2:743). We will come back to this, and what Luther understands by it, but first we need to say something about background and context.

The Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 had provoked no little debate among theologians and concerned people about the church’s penitential system, and more generally about the entire sacramental system that had developed in the life of the medieval church. Prodded by friends, Luther produced three teaching sermons in quick succession on penance, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar (LW 35:5–73). These are essentially catechetical sermons for the instruction of all Christians; they are written in clear, simple German, they avoid difficult theological issues, and they are deeply pastoral. The pastoral intent and tone is reflected in the dedication, which was to Margaret, duchess of Brunswick, who was known to Luther not personally, but via her pious love of the scriptures (“Introduction”, LW 35:5). All three follow a similar pattern in which three things are stressed: the external sign, its spiritual significance, and faith that appropriates the grace that is offered.

Penance, which Luther still regarded as a sacrament in 1519, is treated first (LW 35:9–22). This is not surprising because the indulgences controversy was essentially about the true meaning of penance. In Luther’s evangelical understanding, penance is no longer about the doing of penance (poenitentiam agere) where the emphasis was on human activity, a work in three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction (LW 35:19); rather, it is a sacrament of grace that emphasises God’s work. First there is absolution, which is the word that proclaims, “you are free and … your sins are forgiven you by God” (LW 35:11). The second is grace, the actual “forgiveness of sins, the peace and comfort of the conscience, as the words declare” (ibid.). The third is faith, “which firmly believes that the absolution and words of the priest are true, by the power of Christ’s words, ‘Whatever you loose … shall be loosed’, etc.” (ibid.).

The sermon on baptism (LW 35:29–33), pastoral in tone and without polemic, continues the same pattern; but here of course the external sign is more tangible. The sign is that we are “thrust into the water” and “drawn out again” (30). Luther favoured immersion because it represents more clearly what is signified. The significance of baptism is “a blessed dying to sin and a resurrection in the grace of God” (ibid.). And the third thing in the sacrament is faith: “Faith means that one firmly believes all this: that this sacrament not only signifies death and the resurrection at the Last Day … but also that it assuredly begins and achieves this; [and] that it establishes a covenant between us and God to the effect that we will fight against sin and slay it, even to our dying breath, while he for his part will be merciful to us ….” (35).

The threefold pattern continues in the third sermon on the sacrament of the altar (LW 35:49-73). Here the external sign “consists in the form or appearance of bread
and wine ... that must be used in eating and drinking” (49). Luther comes out boldly for reception in both kinds, because the complete union and undivided fellowship of the saints is “poorly and unfitness indicated by [distributing] only one part of the sacrament” (50). For Lutherans conditioned by the catechism or Luther’s later writings, the significance or effect of the sacrament as described in this 1519 sermon may come as something of a surprise, as has already been indicated. It is not, in the first place or up-front, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation (cf. SC, part 6.6; Book of Concord, 352), but the “gemeynschafft aller heiligen”, the fellowship of saints, from which the sacrament “derives its common name synaxis [Greek] or communio [Latin] .... Hence it is that Christ and all saints are one spiritual body. .... All the saints, therefore, are members of Christ and of the church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God” (LW 35:50,51; WA 2:743). Beginning from this definition, Luther unfolds a wonderful and deeply pastoral description of what communio in holy communion is, and what grace, love and blessing are poured out, as those who partake of this sacrament in bread and wine receive thereby “incorporation [leybung] with Christ and all saints”.

To get to the heart of Luther’s theology of communio in this 1519 sermon it is helpful to go to a summary that Luther himself provides:

In conclusion, the blessing of this sacrament is fellowship and love, by which we are strengthened against death and all evil. This fellowship is twofold: on the one hand we partake of Christ and all saints; on the other hand we permit all Christians to be partakers of us, in whatever way they and we are able. (LW 35:67; WA 2:754)

“Partaking of Christ and all saints” does not sound like the solus Christus of Luther’s later theology, and indeed it could be misunderstood in terms of the merits of the saints. But no, this is Luther in the wake of his final evangelical breakthrough, which means that salvation is ever and always through Christ alone. This comes through clearly at various places in the sermon, and we cite two in particular:

When Christ instituted the sacrament, he said, “This is my body which is given for you, this is my blood which is poured out for you. As often as you do this, remember me”. It is as if he were saying, “I am the Head, I will be the first to give himself for you. I will make your suffering and misfortune my own and will bear it for you, so that you in your turn may do the same for me and for one another, allowing all things to be common property in me, and with me”. (LW 35:54,55; WA 2:745,46)

---

3 This was to cause quite a furor, and Luther had to defend himself against the accusation of being a Hussite. See the “Postscript” to the sermon that appears in two of the Wittenberg printings, LW 35:73; a much longer defense is the “Verklärung D. Martin Luthers etlicher Artikel in seinem Sermon von dem heiligen Sakrament. 1520” (WA 6:75–83).

4 Luther gives a moving account of this in the preface to his Latin writings (LW 34:336–38), and although the date is disputed by scholars, Luther himself says that it was “during that year [when he] returned to interpret the Psalter anew”, which places it in autumn 1518 or winter 1518/1519.

---

LTJ 49/3 December 2015
Thus in the sacrament we too become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts on our behalf. ... Thus our sins assail him, while his righteousness protects us. For the union makes all things common, until at last Christ completely destroys sin in us and makes us like himself, at the Last Day. (LW 35:58; WA 2: 748,49)

*Communion* comes into being because Christ makes us his body by giving us himself. In this connection Luther can still unselfconsciously use the language of change: "For just as the bread is changed [vonwandelt wird] into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, in the fellowship of Christ and all saints" (LW 35:59; WA 2:749).

Luther employs a wonderful illustration for the eucharistic communion of saints, a figure that goes back to the second century.\(^5\) It is the figure of many grains becoming one loaf, and many drops of wine becoming one drink:

For just as the bread is made out of many grains ground and mixed together, and out of the bodies of many grains there comes the body of one bread, in which each grain loses its form and body and takes upon itself the common body of the bread; and just as the drops of wine, in losing their own form, become the body of one common wine and drink—so it should be so with us, if we use this sacrament properly. Christ with all his saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form [Phil. 2:7], fights with us against sin, death, and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely on his righteousness, life, and blessedness. And through the interchange\(^6\) of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. (LW 35:58; WA 2:748)

The self-giving of Christ is the deepest expression of God's love for us, and we, in union with Christ as his body, are bound to respond in kind: "Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones" (LW 35:54; WA 2:745). The self-giving love of Christ creates a community of love and care. Thus going to the sacrament is not just a private matter between Christ and the individual. We all go there to lay down our burden of woe. Grace and mercy come to us from God through Christ, who gives us his body and blood. But in laying down our sin and misery and in receiving Christ and his righteousness, we respond by mutually receiving and giving love, help and consolation in the communion of saints. Having received the self-giving love of Christ in his true body and blood, we are to render love and support to one another. Christ not only pours out his love through giving us his "true and natural" body, but also through the spiritual body of his saints we receive mutual love and support and consolation:

Whoever is in despair, distressed by a sin-stricken conscience or terrified by death or carrying some other burden upon his heart, if he would be rid of them

---

5 Didache 9:4; although Luther could not have known that source.
6 German: *Gemeynschaft*; perhaps better translated "communion" or "fellowship", as elsewhere.
all, let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar and lay down his woe in the midst of the community [gemeyn] and seek help from the entire company of the spiritual body. . . . The immeasurable grace and mercy of God are given us in this sacrament to the end that we might put from us all misery and tribulation [antechtung] and lay it upon the community, and especially on Christ. Then we may with joy find strength and comfort, and say, “Though I am a sinner and have fallen, though this or that misfortune has befallen me, nevertheless I will go to the sacrament to receive a sign from God that I have on my side Christ’s righteousness, life, and sufferings, with all holy angels and the blessed in heaven and all pious [people] on earth”. (LW 35:53, 54; WA 2:745)

Notice here how Luther becomes explicit about his understanding of the communion of saints. It is both the angels and blessed in heaven and faithful believers on earth. Paul Althaus has shown how Luther actually renewed the concept of communio sanctorum in that he "brought down the community of the saints ... out of heaven and down to earth" and, on the basis of Paul's letters, taught that "all who believe in Christ are saints" (Althaus 1966, 298).

Nor is this participation in Christ and the mutual consolation of the saints purely a spiritual matter. Luther was perturbed by the fact that while many Masses were held "yet the Christian fellowship [Christliche gemeynschaft] which should be preached, practiced, and kept before us by Christ's example has virtually perished" (LW 35:56; WA 2:747). Here Luther calls to mind the early church and its practical ways of showing love in the community: "But in times past this sacrament was so properly used, and the people were taught to understand this fellowship so well, that they even gathered food and material goods in the church, and there—as St. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:23—distributed among those who were in need".

Alongside the true fellowship that partakes of Christ and responds in fervent love toward one another is a different kind of fellowship. This is the false fellowship of "the brotherhoods" and their self-seeking love that Luther attacks so vehemently in the last part of the treatise ("... and the Brotherhoods" in the last part of the title). These fraternities, of which there were many, were associations for devotional purposes that included recitation of certain prayers and attendances at specified Masses. It was believed that by pooling the good works of their devotional practices, the collective merit that had accrued would benefit each brother in this life and, even more importantly, after death. Luther rails against their selfishness, gluttony and drunkenness: "If a sow were made the patron saint of such a brotherhood she would not consent" (LW 35:68). Instead of serving themselves, counsels Luther, "they should gather provisions and feed and serve a tableful or two of poor people, for the sake of God" (ibid.).

---

7 See also Althaus's earlier seminal work, Communio sanctorum: die Gemeinde im lutherischen Kirchengedanken (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1929), especially 37–84.
9 For further information about the brotherhoods see "Introduction" LW 35:48, and LW 35:67, footnote 41.
As in the sermons on penance and baptism, the response of faith is strongly urged in this treatise. Whereas in later writings faith is focussed on the word of Christ “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins”, here the emphasis is on Christ and the communion of saints:

See to it that here you exercise and strengthen your faith, so that when you are sorrowful or when your sins press you and you go to the sacrament or hear Mass, you do so with a hearty desire for this sacrament and what it signifies. ... Be certain that Christ and all his saints are coming to you with all their virtues, sufferings, and mercies, to live, work, and die with you, and that they desire to be wholly yours, having all things in common with you. If you will exercise and strengthen this faith, then you will experience what a rich, joyous, and bountiful wedding feast your God has prepared for you upon the altar. (LW 35:61; WA 2:750)

This is indeed a wonderful explanation, a vision even, of what it means to believe in the communion of saints, as we say that in the creed. And yet something is missing. What is lacking, from the perspective of Luther’s later theology, is a clear and necessary distinction between the salvific work of Christ and the work of Christ through his saints for our support and encouragement.

This truly rich theology of the communion of saints in Holy Communion was, unfortunately, soon displaced by other emphases. As early as the next year Luther went on the attack against the prevailing Roman theology and practice of the Mass as a sacrifice and good work. First, *A treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass*, was published little over half a year after the sermon of December 1519 (LW 35:75-111; WA 6:353-78). Here Luther boldly substitutes the medieval church’s emphasis on the Mass as a sacrifice and good work with the scriptural teaching of the Lord’s Supper as a testament. The focus is on the work of Christ for us, and there is no explicit mention of communion as fellowship with Christ and the saints. On the heels of this treatise came Luther’s hard-hitting treatise on *The Babylonian captivity of the Church* (LW 36:3–125; WA 6:497–573), in which the whole sacramental system of the medieval church is boldly attacked. In his treatment of the Roman Mass, Luther discerns three “captivities”. The first captivity is the withholding of the cup from the laity; the second is found in the doctrine of transubstantiation; and the third is the sacrifice of the Mass. Luther’s intent is polemical rather than pastoral, and this may explain why also in this treatise there is no mention of the communion of saints. It would almost seem that Luther went quiet on his theology of *communio*, lest strong words about the response of love and caring for others in the communion of saints be misconstrued as a sacrificial duty and a good work that earns merit.

In any case, it was not a sudden shift in emphasis, because one can point to sermons of 1523 and 1524 where the earlier theology of communion stills endures. First, in a Maundy Thursday sermon of 1523 we find again that wonderful figure for *communio*, one loaf from many grains: the sacrament “makes us one loaf [eyn kucken] with Christ, who sets before us his body and life, blood and flesh, and all his goods and takes away from...
us all our evil” (WA 12:490, trans. author). A year later Luther is still boldly proclaiming a theology of communio based on our participation in Christ:

Now this is the fruit, that even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words. As if to say, Here am I myself, given for you, and this treasure do I give to you; what I have you shall have; when you are in want, then will I also be in want; here, take my righteousness, life, and salvation, that neither sin, nor death, nor hell, nor any sorrow may overcome you; as long as I am righteous and alive, so long shall you also be righteous and alive.

These are the words he [Christ] speaks to us; these we must take, and repeat them to our neighbor, not by the mouth alone, but by our actions, saying, Behold, my dear brother, I have received my Lord; he is mine, and I have more than enough and great abundance. Now you take what I have, it shall be yours, and I place it at your disposal. Is it necessary for me to die for you, I will even do that. The goal placed before us in the Lord’s Supper is that the attainment of such conduct toward our neighbor may appear in us. (Sermons 2:208,209; WA 15:498)

These examples stand firmly in the tradition of the 1519 sermon, but with a difference: the response of faith—love toward one’s neighbour—is linked to Christ alone, and because of that the expression “Christ and the saints”, so prevalent in the 1519 sermon, is heard no more.

After 1524 the trail peters out and little is to be found, as far as we know. Althaus rightly connects this definite shift from 1524 onwards with a sudden change of focus. In 1524 a new front opens up and Luther becomes preoccupied with defending the doctrine of the real presence against those who would deny it, first Karlstadt and then Zwingli and his followers.

These thoughts [expressed the 1519 sermon], as well as the entire evaluation of the Lord’s Supper as the sacrament of the community of saints (communio sanctorum), later recede into the background of Luther’s thought and he is primarily interested in the real presence and the reception of the heavenly body and blood of Christ. These thoughts of 1519 are to be found—as far as I can see—only up to the year 1524. It is significant that they cease at the very point at which the battle about the real presence begins. (Althaus 1963, 321,22).

The result of all this is that from 1524 onwards the focus is very much on the real presence and personal faith, so that by worthy reception one may receive the forgiveness of sins and other spiritual benefits that go with it: life, salvation, peace with God, a good conscience, etc. But with this change in emphasis very little, and sometimes nothing at all, is said about the "horizontal" dimension; no more does one hear that "the significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of the saints" (LW 35:50). For a brief
moment Luther had recovered something of the richness of the early church’s theology and practice of holy communion as the communion of saints, participating in Christ and becoming his body in which all members truly love and care for one another. But now a process of impoverishment sets in. Let us look at a couple of examples of this loss.

The catechisms (1529) are certainly pastoral in their clear teaching about the sacrament. The teaching on the “benefit of such eating and drinking” focuses on the words “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sins”. “By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation” (SC part 6; Book of Concord, 352). This is a wonderful and salutary teaching, but the horizontal dimension is entirely absent, with the result that while there is clear teaching about the “communion of holy things” (the real presence of the body and blood of Christ) there is not a word about Luther’s earlier teaching on the “communion of holy ones” (gemeinschaft aller heiligen).

Similarly, in the Large Catechism, when the benefit of the sacrament is being considered, the emphasis is on the forgiveness of sins for each believing individual: “… for you for the forgiveness of sins”. And a little further on: “Christ bids me eat and drink in order that the sacrament may be mine and may be a source of blessing to me as a sure pledge and sign—indeed, as the very gift he has provided me against my sins, death, and all evils” (LC 5.21-22; Book of Concord, 449). Based on sermons that Luther prepared, the Large Catechism is wonderfully pastoral, not least in its teaching on the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but here again there is a strange silence—is it a deliberate avoidance?—in regard to the communio sanctorum in the sacrament. The only time it occurs—slightly at that—is towards the end, where there are two peripheral references. (1) When you do not feel the need to go to the sacrament, you should “just examine yourself, look around a little … lament to God and to your brother … take others’ advice and seek their prayers” (LC 5.83, Book of Concord, 456). (2) In an exhortation to teach children about the sacrament Luther says that “since they are baptised into the church, they should also enjoy this fellowship of the sacrament so that they may serve us and be useful. For they must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight the devil” (LC 5.87; Book of Concord, 456,57).

The more Luther becomes preoccupied with polemical defence of the sacrament, the more impoverished his pastoral teaching of it seems to become. Consider, for example, the article on the sacrament of the altar in the Smalcald Articles of 1537 (SA 3.6.1-5; The Book of Concord, 311).10 There is a clear confession of the real presence—including the teaching that “wicked Christians” also receive the body and blood of Christ, a defence of reception in both kinds, and a rejection of transubstantiation—but not a word of any kind about the benefits and blessings of the sacrament.

---

10 By this time Luther is using the word “Mass” in reference to the Roman Mass; thus the article on the Mass is entirely polemical (SA 2.2; Book of Concord, 293–96).
The impoverishment that took place in Luther's teaching of communio in holy communion has without doubt affected Lutheran sacramental practice and piety, and it is a loss that surely needs to be redressed. This was recognised by Paul Althaus half a century ago:

There can be no question that this development [the fading out of Luther's earlier communio teaching] restricted and impoverished the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and the celebration of this meal in the Lutheran Church compared with its fullness among primitive Christians. Luther did not restore the Lord's Supper to the dominant position in the life of the church as a community that it had among the first Christians. As celebrated in our church, it is certainly the high point of the individual Christian life; but it is not equally the center of the community's life of sharing as the body of Christ. (Althaus 1966, 322).

Admittedly, it is understandable that there is some diffidence about the 1519 sermon because it is a work of the younger Luther and antedates the controversies that sharpened his later teaching. While there is clear teaching about the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, it is not as pervasive as in his later writings. Sasse defends Luther against those who, taking up his language of "sign", question whether he actually taught the real presence at all in the 1519 sermon:

It is not permissible to understand this and similar sayings, as sometimes has been done, as a denial of the Real Presence or of the necessity to receive the true body and blood which cannot be separated from the elements: "For just as the bread is changed into His true natural body and the wine into His true natural blood, so we are also truly drawn and changed into the spiritual body...." [WA 2:749]. (Sasse 1959, 112)

Furthermore, the relationship between communion with Christ in the reception of his body and blood and spiritual communion with Christ and his saints is not fully explained. This Sasse concedes: At this early stage Luther "is not quite able to show why the corpus mysticum depends on the corpus sacramentale" (Sasse 1959, 112). And in the same vein, there is not yet a clear distinction between the chief benefit of receiving Christ—forgiveness of sins, life and salvation—and the benefit that comes through mutual love, support and consolation in his spiritual body, the communion of saints.

But these "deficiencies"—for lack of a better term—do not mean we should continue to allow this treasure of our Lutheran heritage to be ignored and forgotten. In its rich and pastoral teaching on the meaning of communio in holy communion Luther's earliest writing on the sacrament of the altar, this sermon of 1519, stands far above all those that followed. Here we have much to learn and much to put into practice, as Luther himself says (LW 35:62; WA 2:751):

Christ has given his holy body for this purpose, that the thing signified by the sacrament—the fellowship, the change wrought by love—may be put into practice.

11 For example, what Sasse writes about the 1519 sermon is fine as far as it goes, but it is less than four pages in a 400-page book.
References


Luther, Martin. 1883-1993. *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Weimar: Böhlau. [Cited as WA]


Sasse, Hermann. 1959. *This is my body: Luther's contention for the real presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.

