



January 2017

Sacrament

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Author: Rev. William M. Cwirla

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, Calif.
wcwirla@gmail.com

General Editor: Rev. Mark W. Love

Senior Administrative Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church & School — Toledo, Ohio
markwlove@gmail.com



FOCUS

Among Lutherans, the phrase “Word and Sacrament” is almost cliché. By it, we mean the two parts of the Divine Service, namely the preached Word and the Lord’s Supper (Sacrament of the Altar) or the means by which God deals with us graciously in Christ — the preached and written Word, Baptism, Absolution and the Lord’s Supper. The focus of this study will be on the words “sacrament” (Latin: *sacramentum*) and the word that lies behind it — “mystery” (Greek: μυστήριον).

In the Latin West, from which comes our dogmatic language, *sacramentum* is the substitute word for μυστήριον. The apologist Tertullian was the first to use *sacramentum* in reference to Baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian faith. By the close of the second century, *sacramentum* became a functional synonym for μυστήριον in Latin Christianity. The West may have been reluctant to use the term μυστήριον because of its cultic use in the surrounding culture, being concerned that Christian worship would be viewed analogously with the “mystery cults,” and the Christian sacramental rites as a kind of ritual magic or secret knowledge.

Sacramentum is a word borrowed from the Roman civic life. It originally referred to the money deposited by parties to a law suit and later to the military oath of newly enlisted troops. The common thread in all its uses is the notion of “sacred obligation or engagement.”¹ This fit in nicely with the “militia Christi” metaphor employed by the Early Church writers for Christian initiation. In Baptism, one became a soldier of Christ the Crucified One, and received

upon the brow the mark of the cross in the same way that a soldier of Caesar bore Caesar’s mark on his forehead. (“All newborn soldiers of the Crucified bear on their brows the seal of Him who died,” *Lutheran Service Book* 837.) The military metaphor quickly breaks down, and the word “sacrament” can easily be misunderstood as something we do to become a Christian, rather than something God does to and for us. It would not be an understatement to suggest that the history of sacramental theology in the West has been a continual struggle to define *sacramentum* properly.

The word “mystery” (μυστήριον) originated in the ancient mystery cults of the seventh to fourth centuries BC. It means something that is secret or hidden. A μυστήριον is not so much a puzzle, like a “murder mystery,” as it is concealed knowledge that must be revealed. In the mystery cults, the “mysteries” were cultic rituals that portrayed or represented the actions of the gods on earth, and gave the participants a share in the gods’ life in heaven. The participant was initiated into these rituals, which were to be kept secret from the uninitiated.

In Christian usage, the idea of “mystery” lies very close to the Word Incarnate. Christ is the Mystery hidden from the ages and revealed to the world in His incarnation (Ephesians 1) and to us in the apostolic preaching of Christ. Not until the fourth century AD did the word “mystery” become a technical term for the rites of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For this reason, we should not read this later “sacramental” understanding of “mystery” back into the New Testament.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF μυστήριον / SACRAMENTUM²

μυστήριον in the Septuagint (LXX)

The word only appears in the later books of the Hellenistic period, and may well reflect the influence of the mystery cults (Wisdom 6:22; 8:4). The ordinary sense of mystery as “secret” occurs in Tobit 12:7 (the secret plans of a king) or Sirach 22:22 (the secrets of a friend). In the book of Daniel, μυστήριον takes on a prophetic sense of the concealing of

future events to be disclosed and interpreted only by God or the prophets whom He inspires (Dan. 2:28–29; 4:9).

μυστήριον in the New Testament

μυστήριον occurs a total of 28 times in the New Testament. It is found only once in each of the synoptic gospels in the same parallel saying of Jesus (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke

¹ Theodore B. Foster, “Mysterium’ and ‘Sacramentum’ in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions,” *The American Journal of Theology* 19: 3 (July 1915): 402–15.

² “μυστήριον” in Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 802ff.

8:10). Jesus' parables reveal the "secrets" (μυστήρια) of the Kingdom to the disciples while concealing the same from the overhearing crowds. The parables themselves show the nature of "mystery" in the sense that they conceal and reveal at one and the same time. Their heavenly meaning is hidden to the unbeliever and the casual onlooker while it is revealed by the Lord to the faith of the disciple. "He who has ears, let him hear."

Christ as Mystery

In Paul's letters, the term "mystery" is connected to the preaching of Christ. Christ is the Mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and therefore the object of apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 2:6–16). This is a wisdom from God, decreed before the ages (1 Cor. 2:7) and hidden from the ages (Eph. 3:9), but revealed to the prophets and apostles, and preached by Paul in his apostolic ministry (Eph. 3:1–6).

The "mystery of God" is the history of the crucified, risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ, which was prepared before the world was created (1 Cor. 2:7), concealed from the ages (1 Cor. 2:8, Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:26, Rom. 16:25) and hidden in God (Eph. 3:9). Its purpose is to unite all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head (ἀνακεφαλαιῶ, literally "recapitulate") in the Christ. This is not simply an abstract piece of esoteric knowledge, but the actual breaking in of God into chronological history as the Lord of glory who dies and rises. The content of this "mystery" is "Christ among you" (Col. 1:27) and the ultimate unity of Jew and Gentile in the mystical body of Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).

The Mystery of Christ is revealed to the world in the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel (Eph. 3:9; 6:19; Col. 4:3) and is summarized in creedal form as the confession of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension (1 Tim. 3:16). As proclaimers of the Gospel, the apostles are to be recognized both as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1).

Mystery as Hidden Knowledge

"Mystery" can also refer to hidden knowledge that could not be known apart from revelation. It is the gift of the prophet to penetrate the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 13:2), which are then also the prophetic content of speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:2). In Rom. 11:25, the eschatological of Israel in the hardening of a portion of Israel and in the inclusion of the Gentiles is a mystery to which Paul claims special insight. In 1 Corinthians, the instantaneous change that will take place in those who are yet alive at the coming of the Lord is also a "mystery" that has been revealed to the apostle (1 Cor. 15:51).

Of special importance is the "mystery" of Eph. 5:32. Here the "mystery" is the allegorical interpretation of Gen. 2:24 as a prophesy of Christ, who leaves Father and mother to be joined to His Bride, the Church, in His death. The Latin Vulgate translated 5:32 *Sacramentum hoc magnum est*, "this is a great sacrament," lending credence to the notion of marriage as a "sacrament." However, the referent is the Christological interpretation of Gen. 2:24, not the institution of marriage.

Mystery as Eschatological Reality

"Mystery" also is used in an apocalyptic sense to express the "now/not yet" tension of the eschaton. The "mystery of lawlessness" is already present and at work, though it has not yet been revealed (2 Thess. 2:7), just as the mystery of Babylon as the devil's base of operations in this world has not yet fully been revealed (Rev. 17:5, 7). The Mystery of God, who is Christ, is opposed in the last days by the "anti-mystery" of the anti-Christ, just as God's city (heavenly Jerusalem) is opposed by man's city (earthly Babylon). The Revelation prophetically reveals these heavenly, eschatological mysteries ahead of their manifestation in chronological history.

CONFSSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF μυστήριον/ SACRAMENTUM

"Sacrament" in the Lutheran Confessions

Following the received Western dogmatic tradition, the Lutheran Confessions employ the term sacrament

(*sacramentum*) in place of mystery. The Apology defines "sacrament" as a "rite or sign which has the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added"

(Ap. XIII.3).³ This definition comes directly from Melancthon's 1521 Loci. Under this definition, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Absolution are numbered "sacraments" proper over the remaining four "sacraments" of the medieval church.

The Large Catechism, borrowing the language of Augustine, describes a "sacrament" as the Word added to an external element (*accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*) (LC IV.18).⁴ Strictly speaking, the Catechism applies this Augustinian formula only to Baptism in order to underscore that Baptism is not simply water but water combined with the Word of God. This is not intended as a doctrinal definition of "sacrament," nor does it necessarily exclude Absolution from the Lutheran definition. Apology XIII makes that abundantly clear. The emphasis in the Catechism is the Word attached to the element, which brings the spiritual gifts of Christ to faith.

Apology XXIV, defending the right understanding and use of the Mass, argues against a "ritualistic magic" understanding of the operation of the Sacrament (*ex opera operato*) as well as a propitiatory understanding of its sacrificial character. The Apology distinguishes "sacrament" (*sacramentum*) from "sacrifice" (*sacrificium*). A sacrament is "a ceremony or act in which God offers us the content of the promise joined to the ceremony. ... By way of contrast, a sacrifice is a ceremony or act which we render to God to honor Him." (Ap. 24.17–18).⁵ The Apology further distinguishes propitiatory and eucharistic (i.e. thanksgiving) sacrifices. There is but one propitiatory sacrifice, namely, the death of Christ on the cross for the sin of the world. Any other sacrifice is an act of εὐχαριστία, thanksgiving for forgiveness and other blessings (Ap. 24.19).

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, a sign of God's will toward us, and only secondarily a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Promise and sign run together as one. "There are two parts to a sacrament, the sign and the Word. In the new Testament, the Word is the added promise of grace... Therefore the Word offers forgiveness of sins, while the ceremony is a sort of picture or "seal," as Paul calls it (Rom. 4:11), showing forth the promise" (Ap. 24.69–70).⁶ "The minister who consecrates shows forth the body and blood of the Lord to the people, just as a minister who preaches shows forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says (1 Cor. 4:1), "This is how one should regard us, as ministers of Christ and dispensers of the sacraments of God" (following the Vulgate) (Ap. 24.80).⁷

In summary, the Lutheran Confessions define "sacrament" as a sign of God's grace in Christ, an outward ceremony to which the promise of the Gospel has been added. The phrase "Word and Sacrament" on Lutheran lips can be rightly understood as "sacramental Word," the various material forms by which the Gospel of forgiveness comes to us, namely, the spoken Word, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Keys (Absolution) and the conversation of Christians (SA 3.4.45).⁸

"Mystery" in the Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions do not use the word "mystery" with reference to Baptism, Absolution, or the Lord's Supper, but they do use it to refer to the revelation of the Word. The "mysteries of faith" include Christ Himself (SD 9.96), the Incarnation and personal union of the two natures of Christ along with the communication of attributes (SD 8.22), the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper (SD 7.101), Christ's descent to hell (SD 9.3) and the eternal election of the believer in Christ (SD 11.26, etc.).

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

"Mystery" and "sacrament" are Gospel words. If the Gospel is hidden to unbelief, it is so that the faithful might walk by faith and not by sight. Faith comes from hearing not seeing. It requires no faith to see a pastor, water, bread and wine.

These are apparent to the senses. It requires faith to believe that "in, with, and under" these things, God reveals His undeserved kindness (grace) in Christ, and to receive the gifts of Christ that come with these gifts.

³ Theodore G. Tappert ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* 13th ed. (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1959), 211.

⁴ Tappert, 438.

⁵ Tappert, 252.

⁶ Tappert, 262.

⁷ Tappert, 264.

⁸ Tappert, 310.

In the history of the Church, mystery and sacrament have suffered two basic misunderstandings. The first is the notion that these are rituals by which man is able to influence God or is able to tap into divine power. At the time of the Reformation, the Lord's Supper was said to be effective simply by its having been done (*ex opere operato*). Rightly understood, *ex opere operato* confessed the power of the Word of God alone in the Sacrament. Wrongly understood, however, it excluded faith as the means by which the blessings and benefits of the Sacrament were received, so that Masses could be said for those who were absent or even dead.

The second mistaken notion is that a sacrament or mystery falls under the control of man rather than God, with man running the sacramental verbs. In medieval Roman theology, this resulted in the Mass being regarded as a kind of atoning sacrifice for sin, a "re-presentation" of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to the Father by the hand of the priest. In contemporary Protestantism, the Lord's Supper is typically misunderstood as an act of Christian obedience to the ordinance of Christ as a type of "memorial meal" by which the Christian remembers what Christ has done.

Both views make the sacrament man's work rather than God's. This affects not only the understanding of Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper, but the very nature of justification itself. Justification and salvation are seen as man's striving to ascend to God rather than God coming down to meet sinful man. It also feeds the false notion that the sacraments are something we can do in order to justify ourselves before God, a notion to which the old Adam clings tenaciously. The Lutheran Reformers rightly saw this as robbery of Christ's glory as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by His sacrificial death. The very Gospel of Christ is at stake.

Rightly understood, mystery and sacrament point to Jesus Christ in His Incarnation. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Just as our Lord's divinity was hidden under His humanity, so His sacrificial Body and Blood, given for the life of the world, are hidden under bread and wine. So also, our rebirth and renewal in the Spirit are hidden under baptismal water, the forgiveness of our sins is hidden under the humility of human words emanating from the mouth of a fellow sinner. Yet the Mystery proclaimed is the Mystery actually present among us (Col. 1:27), even where as few as two or three are gathered (Matt. 18:20).

DISCUSSION

1. Lutherans often refer to the sacraments as "means of grace," though this phrase is never explicitly used in the Confessions. How might this way of describing the sacraments be mistakenly understood? How is it rightly understood? Why might "signs of grace" (Ap. 24) be preferred? Which is closer to the sense of "mystery"?
2. In 1 Cor. 4:1, the apostle Paul states that people should regard apostolic ministers as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." In what sense does this correspond to our Lutheran understanding of "Word and Sacrament ministry"? How is it not quite the same? What are some of the "occupational hazards" of handling the holy things of God as stewards of God's mysteries?
3. We live in a skeptical age in which people demand scientific evidence for any truth claim. How do we teach the concept "mystery" as something hidden from sight and revealed by the Word to people who are accustomed to measurable scientific data? What are some of the challenges to preaching and teaching the "mysteries of the faith" in our age?
4. Jesus Christ is the Mystery/Sacrament *par excellence*. How does this impact our preaching, teaching and practice?
5. How would you teach the terms "mystery" and "sacrament" to a Bible class or a catechism class? What examples from ordinary life might serve as suitable analogies?

SUMMARY

The words “mystery” and “sacrament” point to the Word Incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as Christ is true God hidden under true man, yet fully God and man, so the sacramental Word comes to us as the Mystery proclaimed and revealed in human words, water, bread and wine. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).