

A Lutheran Understanding of the Meal

In **1523**, early in the reform movement started by Martin Luther, the German parish of **Leisnig** (eleven villages) decided to start celebrating the evangelical Mass, and its town council took responsibility for establishing and funding schools and for setting up a fund, a **“common chest,”** to provide for the poor and needy. When Luther wrote a preface to the town ordinance setting up the common chest, he referred to **Acts 2:37-47**. Next to the sharing of bread was set the sharing of possessions. The move to the evangelical Mass was naturally linked with a concern for the poor.

The medieval Mass had become in many people’s experience a sacred performance by special holy people, a performance meant to please God. The money the church collected was also broadly understood to buy God’s favor or forgiveness for the giver; the church was more often seen as fleecing the poor than helping them. Luther thought that this is what human beings naturally tend to think “religious activity” is about: something that special holy people do to win God’s favor for us.

The Lutheran reform found in the New Testament an entirely different understanding of the Christian meal. It is God’s gift to us, not our gift to God. God’s favor is a gift of sheer grace. Christ gives us his own self, his own risen life, and joins himself to us and us to himself so that we become Christ’s body, so that we are Christ to our neighbor. Each of us through our baptism is joined with Christ, so **there are no special holy people**. All of what we are called to be and do in the world is holy, so there is no “especially holy” calling associated with the church. We each have the holiest of callings: the calling to serve the neighbor, to be Christ to the neighbor, especially the neighbor most in need.

So instead of a Mass that was perceived as a performance by a special, holy man (a priest), an action that pleased God, a Mass where usually no one communed except the priest himself, the reformers wanted a Mass that was understood as an event in which Christ gave himself to all of us, a meal everyone would share. How did this lead to a common chest to provide for the needy?

It’s not that God has been good to us, so now we have to be good to others, to pay God back. It’s not a duty we have to perform so that God will smile on us. We already have God smiling on us, without our having done anything to earn it.

Instead, **it’s a matter of who we have become and what we are freed to be and do**. We have become Christ, each of us and all of us together. Parts of the same body cannot help but be concerned for each other’s wellbeing, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Beyond that, **we are Christ in and for the whole world, for our neighbor** wherever that neighbor might be, especially the least powerful and most needy. Or, to use another biblical metaphor from the parable of the final judgment in Matthew 25:31-45 (as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me): it is the neediest person who is Christ, and we are Christ’s people only when we care for Christ in the person of the prisoner, the sick, the alien, the hungry.

We are not required to help those in need; we are freed to do so. We no longer need to make ourselves look good in God’s eyes or in other people’s eyes; I no longer need to convince myself I am a worthwhile person. **We are justified by grace:** God has made it clear how dear we are and has given us in baptism the greatest dignity anyone could ever have. **So we are free to stop trying to prove ourselves, or to make ourselves more successful or more loved than our neighbor, and free to use our energy to honor our neighbor and heal our broken world.**

