Reformation ABCs

# R is for Real Presence

Just how does Jesus show up in the meal of Holy Communion? This question has perplexed Christians through the ages, and is sometimes a source of division among Christ’s church. Holy Communion and Holy Baptism together are the two sacraments (or holy things) in Lutheranism. Here, in meal and bath, we trust that Jesus is truly present and in these places we are certain that his grace is made known to us in these things.

But how? Is this a meal of remembrance only? Or do the bread and wine actually take on the form of flesh and blood? The answer for Lutherans is somewhere in the middle. The ELCA’s Use of the Means of Grace states, “In this sacrament the crucified and risen Christ is present, giving his true body and blood as food and drink. This real presence is a mystery” (p. 37). Lutherans speak of the real presence of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine. Article Ten of The Augsburg Confession states: "It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received." This meal is more than a symbol. However, the elements do not experience some kind of mystical change and cease to be bread and wine. Rather, we trust that Jesus, somehow through the power of God, is really and truly present with us as we share the meal of Holy Communion. It is a mystery, but one we can all count on.

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# R is for Reformation

When all efforts at mediation failed at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, both Catholics and Evangelicals had lost. The dream of a unified Western church, the grand hope of both Luther and Charles V (representing Rome), had died. Henceforth, Roman Catholicism would become just another confession. The Protestant world, already divided among Lutherans, Reformed, and Anabaptists, would be fractured further as a bewildering array of sects and cults would arise, especially in the New World. When Lutherans puff out their chests on Reformation Sunday, it’s best to remember that Luther did not share such triumphalism.

If in recent days you find yourself reading how the Reformation enshrined free-floating conscience and ushered in modernity, democracy, and tolerance, be skeptical. It did nothing of the kind. Luther, his followers, and his opponents were not modern and not democrats; nor were they tolerant. They lived in a hierarchical late-medieval world populated by angels and devils where religious dissent merited the stake. How the West grew democratic, modern, and tolerant is another story.

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