The Orientation of the Presiding Minister to the Altar During the Words of Institution

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The publication of *Christian Worship Altar Book* (reviewed elsewhere in this volume of the *Quarterly* – vol. 97 *–ed.)* offers an opportunity to think about where and how the presiding minister stands as he speaks the Words of Institution in the liturgy of Holy Communion. What encourages this study specifically is an unfortunately worded rubric on page 13 of the *Altar Book:*

> The minister faces the altar for sacrificial portions of the service (e.g., the Trinitarian invocation, all prayers, canticles, psalms, Proper Preface, Sanctus, and Words of Institution) and faces the congregation for sacramental portions of the service (e.g., the Apostolic Greeting, Absolution, Lessons, Preface, Pax, Benediction). A detailed rationale for these rubrics may be found in CW: *Manual*, pp. 76-80. In the same section, *CW: Manual* also includes a rationale for the presiding minister's orientation to the altar if he presides in a chancel with a free-standing altar and/or with no lectern.

The wording of the rubric is unfortunate for two reasons. First, a few may come away with the impression that the rubric is allowing the Sacrament to be thought of as a sacrifice, and Lutheran blood runs cold at the mere hint of a connection between Holy Communion and sacrifice. The reality is that the rubric relies on a liturgical shorthand (as old as Luther) in which some parts of the liturgy are considered sacramental (actions of God to his people, e.g., the absolution, the sermon, the blessing, etc.) while others are considered sacrificial (actions by God's people to God, e.g., the prayers, the hymns, etc.). The shorthand helps with theological distinctions, of course, and is a helpful pedagogical tool in teaching the liturgy to adults and children. It also helps in the training of seminarians; professors have taught generations of pastoral students to face the altar during the sacrificial sections of the liturgy and to face the people during the sacramental sections. That the shorthand has its weaknesses becomes obvious in this rubric. The rubric simply means to say that the presiding minister faces the altar as he speaks the Words of Institution.[1]

The second difficulty in the rubric raises no theological questions; it simply causes a little embarrassment to the editors. The *Altar Book* rubric instructs the minister to face the altar during the Words and then, for a detailed rationale of said rubric, suggests pages from the 1993 publication, *Christian Worship Manual.* The difficulty arises because the *Manual* says something different:

> Whether serving at a wall altar or at a freestanding one, the pastor more properly speaks the Words facing the people than facing the altar (p. 79).

So what shall it be? Does the minister face the altar or the congregation as he speaks the Words of Institution? The question arises only when the minister presides at an against-the-wall altar, of course. When the minister presides behind a freestanding altar, he is facing the altar and the people at the same time. But more on that later.

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[1]The same rubric includes among the sacrificial parts of the communion liturgy the Proper Preface and instructs the minister to face the altar while speaking. This is correct instruction for the Proper Preface in the Common Service. The opening words, "It is truly good and right..." are the opening words of the traditional eucharistic prayer. The language of the Proper Preface indicates it to be prayer-like and rightly spoken facing the altar. The Proper Preface in the Service of Word and Sacrament ("Praise be to the God and Father...") has a different character, however, both in concept and language. These words are properly spoken facing the people.

That an apparent disagreement over a matter of ceremony can be found in two volumes both connected to *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* and both produced by the same Commission on Worship probably will cause a smile in some quarters. WELS pastors tend not to become overwrought about matters of liturgical posture and ceremony. Sensing that even the "worship gurus" cannot find agreement over one or another ceremony, some likely will echo the observation, "Finally, when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again in glory, he will not care very much about these things."

The point is well taken. On the other hand, while not as important as words, actions in worship mean something, because actions often speak as loudly as words. We stand, we remove our caps, and we place our hand over our heart because we want to express how we feel about our nation when the flag is presented. The ceremony enables us to say with our actions what is on our minds and in our mouths. And so the minister raises his hands in blessing or makes the sign of the cross as he speaks the name of Jesus. While he does not become obsessed with ceremony, the pastor is wise to consider carefully whether the actions he takes as he presides at worship are consistent with his words and the theology his words contain. People who take the Fourth Commandment seriously wouldn't think of chatting and laughing during the singing of the national anthem. Such activity would be inappropriate. Those who preside at worship want their actions to be equally appropriate to what they are saying.

What did Jesus do?

Jesus spent several hours with his disciples in the upper room on the night he was betrayed. He washed their feet, he taught them, he presided at the Passover meal, he instituted Holy Communion, he sang a hymn. Our interest is only in what he did when he instituted the holy meal. St. Paul passed on to the Corinthian congregation what was important for them:

> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The Savior's words "Do this" authorize the Church of all ages to continue to offer his body in the bread and his blood in the wine to forgive the sins of believers of all ages. Jesus did not, however, suggest a rite or a manner in which the sacrament should be used. We know some of the things Jesus did, and we can suggest other things he probably did. As the father figure at the Passover meal, Jesus sat at a table with the disciples reclining around him. He faced the disciples as he spoke and carried out the actions of the meal. He spoke his words of promise in the middle of the Passover's thanksgiving blessing. He used unleavened bread and probably mixed water with the wine according to the customs of the Passover in place during his time. He broke the bread and perhaps placed a portion of the loaf (or loaves) into the hands of the disciples. The pieces of bread may have been placed in a pottery dish or a basket for distribution. He distributed wine from a cup.

With their understanding that Holy Communion is nothing more than a memorial of the Savior's Maundy Thursday meal, the Reformed theologians made an effort to re-enact precisely everything Jesus did in the upper room. Ulrich Zwingli even prescribed the use of *wooden* bowls and cups for the congregation in Zurich. Luther, of course, had a vastly different understanding of the Sacrament. He understood that the evangelists, while describing the Savior's procedures on Maundy Thursday, were not prescribing them for the

Church's future celebrations of the sacrament. We take our position with Luther and other orthodox theologians throughout the centuries and confess that only three actions are essential in the repetition of the sacrament: the giving of bread, the giving of wine, and the setting aside of the bread and wine with Jesus' words of promise. Whatever other actions took place or whatever other words were spoken at the institution—even the breaking of bread and the speaking of thanksgiving—are not part of the essence of the Sacrament.

The practice of the early Church

Although the second and third century fathers do not disagree about what constitutes the essence of the sacrament, the early church tended to follow carefully the Savior's upper room procedures. Justin Martyr (Rome, ca. 150) indicates, for example, that in the service which he knew water was mixed with the wine and the Savior's words were included in a prayer of blessing. Literally every liturgical source from the patristic age includes a eucharistic prayer of some sort. Archeological studies indicate that the early Christians met in homes and gathered in a room that had a table, usually the dining room. When congregations became larger and worshipers began to gather in public buildings, the presiding minister sat in a chair at the back of the raised platform at the front of the room from which he presided at the liturgy and preached the sermon. When it came time for the meal he moved forward, faced the people across the table that had been placed at the front of the platform, and began the dialogue and blessing of the communion liturgy. By the time of Hippolytus (Rome, ca. 200), the presiding minister prefaced the consecratory blessing by saying, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." The people responded, "It is good and right so to do." Then began the prayer and blessing.

The sacrament moves away from the people

Several events that took place in the centuries immediately after the apostles eventually led to the practice whereby the minister turned away from the people during the blessing prayer and the Words. Christian churches often were built on sites of the tombs of martyrs. The table used for the sacrament was replaced by a tombstone of sorts positioned directly over the martyr's grave. One can imagine a simple tombstone functioning rather well as a communion table, but as the Church became wealthier and the emphasis on the saints stronger, these tombstones became very elaborate.

At about the same time, the church began to be troubled by the problems that came with rapid growth. When Christianity became the state religion of the empire, thousands flocked to the churches, and many came with suspect motives. The early church's deliberate and thorough catechumenal process couldn't handle the throng. Ministers began to complain about the ragtag groups of worshipers that assembled on Sunday morning. Preachers who said unpopular things were sometimes shouted down. More than one minister complained that there was so much chatting during the service that the words of the liturgy couldn't be heard. Church leaders began to set up barriers between the clergy and the people to keep out the noise. Over the span of several hundred years the entire concept of Christian worship changed. No longer was the liturgy thought to be the "work of the people" but instead the work of the clergy, who knew the liturgy's content and meaning. When the people were divorced from worship, there was no need to speak the Words to them. As the tomb altars became more elaborate, they were built against the east wall of the church, and the minister faced the altar when he spoke the Words. Because the assisting clergy stood near the altar, they could see the vessels and hear the Words well enough.[2]

What solidified the orientation of the minister toward the altar was the development of the doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass and the related doctrine of transubstantiation. An orientation toward the altar during Rome's eucharistic prayers was absolutely consistent with this theology, for the communion was declared to be

[2]Much of the historical information summarized in these paragraphs comes from a treatise on the practice of the early Church by Basil Minchin, entitled "The Celebration of the Eucharist Facing the People" (Bristol, England: Warden Press, 1954).

the unbloody sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ. The priest effected the change from earthly element to body and blood and then offered the body and blood of Christ to God as he faced the altar with his back to the people.

The reforms of Martin Luther

It was the eucharistic prayer, the Canon of the Mass, with its sacrificial theology, that Luther called "that abominable concoction drawn from everyone's sewer and cesspool" (AE 53:21). Luther did not suggest that the concept of a eucharistic prayer was, in and of itself, wrong.[3] What he loathed was the Roman Catholic eucharistic prayer and its heretical content. But he did not compose a replacement for the canon, though others did. Luther seems to have been of a mind that there would always be confusion as long as the Words of Christ were included with human words in a prayer addressed to God.

> They have come to ascribe to the sacrament what belongs to the prayers, and to offer to God what should be received as a benefit *[beneficium* not *officium]*. We must therefore sharply distinguish the testament and sacrament itself from the prayers which we offer at the same time (AE 36:50).

For Luther, the Words were everything. They were the promise of the Lord Jesus, and it was his power alone that designated the bread and wine as Sacrament and that proclaimed the gospel of forgiveness.

> We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone, and set nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted the sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the Mass. All the rest is the work of man added to the word of Christ (AE 36:36; AE 35:97).

Benedictio and *testamentum*—blessing and promise. This was the sense that Luther had about the Words of Institution. In that same double sense—as consecration and as proclamation—the writers of the Lutheran Confessions understood the Words of Institution and proposed actions appropriate to that concept. The *Formula of Concord* considers the Words consecratory:

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[3]In fact, the Words are placed within a prayer in the *Formula Missae.* Note the Latin text:

> Vere dignum et iustum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere: Domine, sancte Pater, omnigotens, aeterne Deus: per Christum Dominum nostrum. *Qui* [emphasis ours] pridie quam pateretur accepit panem gratias agens fregit deditque discipulis suis dicens: Accipite, comidite, Hoc est corpus meum, quod pro nobis datur (an English translation is found in AE 53:27).

Nor do the Lutheran Confessions reject a eucharistic prayer per se. The Formula of Concord quotes Justin approvingly who wrote, "So we believe that the food blessed by him through Word *and prayer* [emphasis ours] is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Triglotta, p. 985).

It must be said that some confessional Lutheran theologians have questioned Luther's reluctance to produce a pure eucharistic prayer. A number of Lutheran church bodies have returned to this ancient practice in forms that are theologically sound. This article does not intend to address the issue but admits that the issue needs to be addressed. During the production of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* several respected pastors in our synod requested the Joint Hymnal Committee to include a eucharistic prayer. The author, a member of the committee, recalls that the committee was of a mind to encourage the next generation to take up the issue. Whatever the outcome of that discussion, the fact remains that Lutheran theology for four hundred years has considered the Words to be consecration and proclamation and not consecration and prayer.

> For where [Christ's] institution is observed and *his words are spoken over the bread and cup* [emphasis ours], and the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious by virtue of the first institution, through his word, which he wishes to be there repeated *(Triglotta,* page 999).

And the *Formula* considers the Words proclamatory:

> Now in the administration of the Holy Supper *the words of institution are to be publicly spoken or sung before the congregation distinctly and clearly* [emphasis ours], and should in no way be omitted (*Triglotta,* page 1001).

What shall the orientation of the minister be when he speaks the Words of Institution? Does he face the altar or the people? According to the Confessions he ought to speak *over* the bread and wine (because the Words have a consecratory purpose) and he ought to speak *before* the congregation (because the Words have a proclamatory purpose). Considering that the elements are on one side of him and the people on the other, is the minister to face both the altar and the people at the same time?

Luther answered this question by suggesting the use of a freestanding altar. In the introduction to his German service he wrote:

> Here we retain the vestments, altar, candles until they are used up or we are pleased to make a change. But we do not oppose anyone who would do otherwise. In the true mass, however, of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is, and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtlessly did in the Last Supper. But let that await its own time (AE 53:69).

By returning to the chancel design of the early church Luther could speak the Words facing the elements and the people at the same time and could display with his posture as well as with his words what the Bible taught about the Sacrament and the Lord's Words of Institution. In *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice,* Wayne Schmidt wrote, "It is precisely at this point in the liturgy that the freestanding altar performs its noblest service" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993, p. 202).

One can't help wondering if Luther anticipated how long it would take for the freestanding altar to "await its own time" in Lutheran churches. For some reason, the idea never caught on among the churches of the Reformation. This author knows of only one church, the church in Torgau, that installed such an altar; Luther was directly involved with the design of that building. Why was Luther's suggestion not followed? We can imagine the change in orientation would have been quite radical in some places, and Lutheran pastors were sensitive about scandalizing people who had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church. Other suggestions of Luther for Holy Communion were not followed, e.g., his suggestion that there be separate distributions for the bread and the wine.

The practice among the Reformed

Perhaps as plausible as any reason for the reluctance to change the practice is the fact that the Reformed were insisting that the minister speak the Words facing the people with his back to the elements on the altar. Without a doctrine of the Real Presence, the Reformed had no need for the Words in a consecratory sense. Holy Communion for the Reformed was nothing more than a memorial meal. The Words proclaimed the original history of the meal. The Lutheran dogmaticians took a stand against this understanding of the Words. Consider Johann Gerhard's explanation:

> This consecration of the Eucharist is 1) not a magical incantation which, by the power of certain words transmutes the bread in its essence into the body and the wine into the blood of Christ . . . . 2) It is also not merely a historical repetition of the institution, as the Calvinists make little of the words of institution and assert that it is to be directed at the people and does not at all have the purpose of consecrating the external symbols (*Calvin Inst.* VI, 17, 39). But 3) it is an efficacious hallowing by which according to the command, ordination, and institution of Christ the consecration (or blessing) in the first Supper, so to say, descends into our Supper and the external elements are destined for this holy use, that with them Christ's body and blood be distributed….We certainly believe and confess that the presence of Christ's body and blood depends solely and entirely on the will and promise of Christ and on the perpetual effectiveness of the first institution; however, we nevertheless add that the repetition of that original institution, done by the servant of the Church in the administration of the Eucharist, is not merely historical and doctrinal, but also consecratory, by which, in agreement with Christ's ordination, the external symbols are truly and effectively designated for the holy use, so that in the distribution itself they are the communion of the body and blood of Christ, as the Apostle expressly says in 1 Cor 10:16….The Son of God himself repeats the words, uttered once upon a time, through the mouth of the minister and through them hallows, consecrates, and blesses the bread and wine to be the medium of distributing his body and blood (Gerhard, *De coena,* #151, quoted by Pieper in *Christian Dogmatics,* Vol. III, p. 368).

Note that Gerhard twice used the phrase "not merely" when he wrote about the historical and doctrinal status of the Words. He understood the Words to be an announcement of the gospel but not only that. He understood the Words as Luther and the Confessions did, to be both consecratory and proclamatory at the same time.

The battles between Lutheranism and Calvinism were pitched in the 16th and 17th centuries, and in some cases the minister's facing the altar during the Words may have been a statement about his Lutheran confessionalism. It was at this time, for instance, that making the sign of the cross over the bread and wine become customary. One supposes that over time Lutherans stopped thinking about this issue and, while believing truly that the Words were both consecratory and proclamatory, simply carried on a custom with which they were familiar. Our forefathers inherited this practice and handed it down to their sons. This writer cannot recall from his youth ever seeing a WELS pastor speak the Words with any other posture than with his back to the congregation and facing the altar.

Contemporary Lutheran thought and practice

What made Lutherans begin to think about this issue once again was the liturgical earthquake that came out of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). Rome's liturgical reforms reestablished the early Christian practice of gathering around the table for the Sacrament with the priest at the center of the community presiding at the meal. (The new position has not in the least affected Rome's doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass.) Since this had been Luther's suggestion some 430 years before, 20th century Lutherans began to think about the freestanding altar as well as the minister's orientation to the altar as he spoke the Words of Institution. When *Lutheran Book of Worship* (ELCA, 1978) and then *Lutheran Worship* (LCMS, 1982) arrived on the scene, the accompanying manuals were agreed that the minister should face the people when speaking the Words.

> The preferred position of the minister is to face the congregation across a free-standing altar….Luther himself notes the appropriateness of a free-standing altar, although Lutherans, following the prevailing medieval Christian practice, have tended toward positioning the altar against the "east wall." Either position is permissible, but the position facing the people is more

> desirable (Philip Pfatteicher in *Manual on the Liturgy;* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1979, p. 233).
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> When the altar is against the wall, the presiding minister may turn and face the people for the Words of Institution (*Manual on the Liturgy*, p. 239).
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> The Supper itself, however, is God's gift to us, and although the Words of Institution relate to the bread and wine upon the altar, the Words are a Gospel proclamation to the congregation and should be spoken by the pastor in a position facing the people. The historic wall-altar, which usually left the pastor with his back toward the people when the Words of institution were spoken, has always been most unfortunate because the sacramental and declaratory nature of the Words is easily lost when the presiding minister has his back toward the people. It is precisely at this point in the liturgy that the freestanding altar performs its noblest service (Wayne Schmidt in *Lutheran Worship History and Practice;* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993, p. 202).

It needs to be understood that both Pfatteicher and Schmidt understand that when the presiding minister is facing the congregation at a wall altar, he has the vessels in his hand as he speaks the Words. They assume the minister is not standing with his back to the elements.

Christian Worship Manual contains similar directives. After reviewing Luther's suggestion for the freestanding altar, the author continued:

> The concept concisely matches Lutheran theology, which considers the Words of Institution to be the gospel proclamation of the Sacrament. Whether serving at a wall altar or at a freestanding altar, the pastor more properly speaks the Words facing the people than facing the altar. Luther purposefully removed the Words from the ancient Thanksgiving Prayer so that they would be proclaimed and not prayed (p. 79).

At a distance of some seven years, the author of that paragraph (who happens to be the author of this article) sees that the *Manual's* words about presiding at a wall altar are unclear. He wrote the words to summarize what he had been teaching (and still teaches) in his Seminary worship classes where he was able to show students as well as tell them about the suggested procedure. In class the instructor stands at an angle near the corner of the altar in a position that allows him to refer to the elements and to speak to the people. He suggests the pastor speaks the Words in the following manner:

> [*Looking at the people*] Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread [*gesturing to and looking at the paten*]; and when he had given thanks [*looking at the people*], he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, [*looking at the paten*] "Take and eat; this is my body [*making the sign of the cross*], which is given for you [*facing the people*]. Do this is remembrance of me."

He instructs students to speak the words over the chalice in a similar way. Thus the presiding minister uses the Words of Institution *facing the people in connection with the elements.* He speaks the Words *over* the elements and *before* the congregation and is able by means of his orientation at the altar to accentuate the teaching that the Words have both a consecratory and a proclamatory sense.

What the author/instructor did not anticipate was that some of his students might face the congregation with their backs to the elements on the altar, speaking the Words as though they were speaking the Absolution or the Blessing. Such a posture does not testify carefully or concisely to the consecratory function of the Words;

it does not allow the minister to speak the Words *over* the elements. Besides this, such a posture duplicates what Calvinists did precisely because they did not believe in the Real Presence. Of all positions the pastor may take when speaking the Words, an orientation at the altar in which he faces the people with his back to the elements has the least to commend it and the most to discourage it.[4]

What ought to be the orientation of the minister to the altar as he speaks the Words of Institution? When he presides at a freestanding altar, the answer is obvious: he stands behind the altar and is thus able to preside *over* the elements and *before* the people at the same time. What about the minister who presides at an altar positioned against the wall? In many cases, the members of our congregations have experienced no other practice than that their pastors speak the Words facing the altar. The pastor is wise to think twice before he changes long-standing and time-honored customs. If he continues the traditional practice, however, he must carefully explain the purpose of the Words, lest the people hold to a notion that the Words have some sort of mystical power that changes bread to body and wine to blood in some sacramental moment. If, with the understanding and consent of his members, he begins to face the people as he speaks the Words, he ought to carefully explain the new position and then avoid any practices or mannerisms that make it seem as though he is ignoring the elements on the altar, lest the people come to devalue the importance of the Words in the consecration of the bread and wine.

Some may contend that all this is a minor point. What is important are the essential aspects of the Sacrament. True enough. Discussions about liturgical ceremonies that descend into debates have little value in the church and waste precious time. The church's liturgical ceremonies and actions deserve some attention, however, especially when a particular ceremony may no longer communicate what it once did or what we want it to communicate. Note this advice from the Apology:

> [The holy fathers] observed these human rites because they were profitable for good order, because they gave the people a set time to assemble, because they provided an example of how all things could be done decently and in order in the churches, and finally because they helped instruct the common folk. For these reasons the fathers kept ceremonies, and for the same reasons we also believe in keeping traditions (Triglotta, p. 325).

Let the words written here about the minister's orientation at the altar during the Words of Institution serve the purpose of leading brothers to some thought about appropriate actions during one of the most important parts of Christian worship.

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[4]Though forgotten by most people, it remains true that some actions and some phrases have an historical significance that Lutheran pastors are wise to keep in mind. It surprises us when we hear occasionally that a WELS pastor speaks this formula during the distribution: "Jesus said, `Take and eat, this is my body . . .'" The insertion of "Jesus said" to the Savior's words was the weasel word used by the authors of the Prussian Union Agenda to bring together Lutherans and Calvinists who disagreed on the doctrine of the Real Presence. The weasel word satisfied both parties and clearly was meant to deny of the Real Presence. While it cannot be absolutely said that the use of the phrase is wrong, one can't help but question the appropriateness of using it.