

Gerrish points out that, in his *Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Mass* (1522), Luther "identified the sign [*sc.* the sacramental sign in the Eucharist] not with the elements, but with the actual presence of Christ's body and blood *under* the bread and wine to confirm the promise of forgiveness" (*Thinking with the Church*: 118). Although Gerrish gives no specific reference, I assume that the passage he has in mind is the following:

In all his promises, . . . in addition to the word, God has usually given a sign, for the greater assurance and strengthening of our faith. Thus he gave Noah the sign of the rainbow [Gen 9:12-17]. To Abraham he gave circumcision as a sign [Gen 17:11]. . . . So we constantly find in the Scriptures many of these signs, given along with the promises. For in this way also worldly testaments are made; not only are the words written down, but seals and the marks of notaries are affixed, so that [they] may always be binding and authentic.

This is what Christ has done in this testament. He has affixed to the words a powerful and most precious seal and sign: his own true flesh and blood under the bread and wine. For we poor men, living as we do in our five senses, must always have along with the words at least one outward sign to which we may cling and around which we may gather—in such a way, however, that this sign may be a sacrament, that is, that it may be external and yet contain and signify something spiritual; in order that through the external we may be drawn into the spiritual, comprehending the external with the eyes of the body and the spiritual or inward with the eyes of the heart.

Now we see how many parts there are in this testament, or mass. There is, first, the testator who makes the testament, Christ. Second, the heirs to whom the testament is bequeathed, we Christians. Third, the testament itself, the words of Christ—when he says, 'This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which is poured out for you, a new eternal testament,' etc.

Fourth, the seal or token is the sacrament, the bread and wine, under which are his true body and blood. . . .

Fifth, there is the bequeathed blessing which the words signify, namely, remission of sins and eternal life. Sixth, the duty, remembrance, or requiem, which we are to do for Christ, that is, that we should preach his love and grace, hear and meditate upon it, and by it be incited and preserved unto love and hope in him. As St. Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 11[:26], 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of Christ.' And this is what an earthly testator does, who bequeaths something to his heirs, that he may leave behind him a good name, the good will of men, and a blessed memory, that he should not be forgotten (*LW*, 35: 86 f.).

Gerrish speaks of the sense in which Luther uses the notion of sacramental sign here as "peculiar," presumably because Luther uses it to refer, not [just] to the elements, but to Christ's "own true flesh and blood *under* the bread and wine"

(Gerrish's italics). But this usage is hardly "peculiar," given Luther's own allowance elsewhere that "if [he] were to speak according to the usage of the Scriptures, [he] should have only one single sacrament, but with three sacramental signs [i.e., baptism, penance, and the bread]" (*LW*, 36:18; cf. 93, where he says expressly that "Christ himself is called a 'sacrament' in 1 Tim 3[:16]"). Of course, there are signs and there are signs, and Luther's distinction here between "sacrament" and "sacramental signs" anticipates the distinction I and others make between "primal sacrament" and "secondary sacraments," allowing "primary sacrament" to refer to the church itself and as such, since it is evidently included somehow in the Vulgate's "*magnum sacramentum*" as the agency whereby Christ is proclaimed among gentiles and believed in throughout the world. But Luther recognizes, rightly, that and how Jesus Christ himself is in his own way re-presentative.

In other passages, however, it's not quite as clear that he is thinking and speaking of Christ himself as a sacrament. Consider, for instance:

So in the mass also, the foremost promise of all, [Christ] adds as a memorial sign of such a great promise his own body and his own blood in the bread and wine, when he says: 'Do this in remembrance of me' [Lk 22:19; Cor 11:24-25]. And so in baptism, to the words of promise he adds the sign of immersion in water. We may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus, in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament. And as there is greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament. 'Believe,' says Augustine, 'and you have eaten.' But what does one believe, other than the word of the one who promises (*LW*, 36:44; cf. 35:91).

Aside from what may be only the verbal difference of speaking here of the body and blood of Christ "*in*" the bread and wine instead of "*under*" them, Luther goes on to say, simply, that "the bread and wine are the sacrament," instead of speaking of Christ's own body and blood "*in*" the bread and wine as the sacrament in the mass.

Even so, we have Tillich's profound analysis of symbols generally, including "the religious symbol", to remind us that "*das Symbolisierte selbst [kann] wieder Symbol sein für ein Symbolisiertes höheren Ranges*"—to the point, indeed, that even talk about "*den erlösenden Handeln Gottes [ist] selbst symbolischer Ausdruck für eine Erfahrung des Unbedingt-Transzendenten*" (GW, 5:196). My thought is that just as the explicit primal source of authority is constitutive relative to the primary (formal) authority and all secondary (merely substantial) authorities, so the primal sacrament is constitutive relative to the primary sacrament of the church and all secondary means of salvation, including all "sacramental signs." But insofar as the secondary means are administered and received as re-presentative of the church and, through it, of the explicit primal source through which the church itself is authorized/constituted, that primal source and the church are both really present "under" them, or, alternatively, "in" them, as is the *implicit* primal source—the *transcendental* source—that is strictly ultimate reality itself.

7 January 2010