The Lord’s supper, the service in which it was encased, the mass, was the center of medieval piety. For those believers of the medieval ages whose conception of religion was still formed to a great extent, by the pagan rhythms of their pre-Christian ancestors. The Mass was the moment of highest magic in their entire lives. The Mass occurred regularly, it was the heart of medieval religion, it fit into the weekly temple of village life. The peasant, the townsperson, experienced God’s presence in the Mass regularly or could experience it regularly, the Mass was always there whether the people attend or not. And because the Mass was so important in the rhythm of religious life in the medieval ages. There was a great deal of concentration on it by the theologians and by the parish priest as well as the common people in the medieval ages. Because it was so important in so many ways for the practice of medieval religion. It was also a point that drew strong opposition from the reformers who were sensitive to its importance, but also sensitive to the many abuses that surrounded it.

This is certainly true for Luther, and in his AD 1520 treatise on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, he spent more time on the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, on its practice in the medieval Mass, than he did on any of the other sacraments. He criticized three aspects of the medieval usage of this sacrament; he labeled them “three captivities” of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The first of these was the distribution of the Lord’s Supper in only one kind. That is, with only the element of the bread which conveys the body of the Lord. The practice of communing in both kinds had gradually been abandoned in the Middle Ages; this practice of communing in only one kind probably began out of reverence, out of fear of magical abuse. The story is told, for instance, that Luther once ripped off part of a piece of clothing from a communicant who had happened to spill wine on the piece of clothing. That reflects a fear that the people of his time would abuse the sacrament by seeing it as a kind of magical material.
thing. Stories are told of peasants slipping the host out of the mouth as soon as the priest had placed it there to take it home to use for magical purposes, it could serve as a talisman on the door of the barn to keep evil spirits away, or it could serve as a means of special healing for someone in the family who was sick. So the practice of communing in only one kind may well have developed in many places out of a reverence and a fear of this magical abuse.

But as a matter of fact, by the time of the Reformation it was used, above all, as an instrument of reinforcing the status of the priest, it was used as an instrument of priestly power. It was an instrument which these protest movements that we discussed in the last lecture saw as an instrument of tyranny.

Luther found that the exegesis which was used to support communion in one kind was fraudulent beyond belief. For he believed that Christ had commanded both the eating and the drinking, and He had commanded the eating and the drinking for the whole people of God. For he always saw the apostles not as the forerunners of the priests of the church, he always recognized in the apostles the church itself. So he believed it was impious and oppressive of both the people of God and of God Himself to limit the communing of the people to only the bread body.

Luther had different reactions at different times as to whether the sacrament could be celebrated in only one kind. Earlier in his career he tended more to think that for the sake of weak consciences the medieval argument that the whole body and blood of Christ was contained in simply the body, since human bodies always contain the blood, and therefore communion in one kind was permissible. But as the Reformation movement grew, he came to believe that it was an unnecessary concession, as a matter of fact it was a sacrifice of Christian liberty to accept communion in only one kind, and insisted that both the bread body and the wine blood be given to the people of God.

The second captivity of the sacrament was a captivity of a different kind. Luther rejected and criticized the explanation of the real presence in the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation. He did not reject the doctrine behind the expression transubstantiation, for it affirmed the real presence, but he believed that it was a false attempt at explanation of something that could not be explained, to use Aristotelian physics to assert that the bread and the wine become transubstantiated.
It is necessary to understand a little bit about Aristotelian physics to understand this particular point of view. Aristotle believed that objects are made up of a substance unseen which determines what they are, and then of what he called “accidents,” the external superficial qualities that make the substance horse into this individual horse, as substance and accidents come together.

So in an attempt to explain how Christ’s body and blood could be present in what looked like and tasted like bread and wine, medieval theologians (as they discovered Aristotle) set forth this explanation: The substance of bread is displaced by the substance of Christ’s body, but the accidents of the bread and taste and sight and so forth remain. The accidents of the wine are still there, no longer the substance of the wine that remains.

Some medieval theologians did advance a view called consubstantiation. That the two substances were there at the same time, that the substance of Christ’s body joined the substance of the bread and the substance of Christ’s blood joined the substance of the wine, under the accidents of bread and wine. Sometimes that view of consubstantiation is attributed to Luther, but that was not really his view at all. For what he objected to in both transubstantiation and consubstantiation was the use of Aristotelian physics to explain the mystery of God.

Luther said that transubstantiation as an explanation is not so serious a matter, but it becomes a serious matter because the papacy regarded it as a great heresy to challenge transubstantiation, as certain medieval reformed figures had done (John Wycliffe came to Luther’s mind). Luther believed that a method of explanation, a method of analysis should never oppress consciences, the Christian conscience was more important than Aristotelian explanations, he believed. For twelve hundred years, Luther argued, transubstantiation had not been used to explain the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament. Furthermore, it was not particularly effective, the laity did not understand the doctrine of transubstantiation, they didn’t get what it meant to translate the concept of the real presence into Aristotelian language because they didn’t know Aristotle. So Luther insisted it was better to leave it a mystery.

He cited the Ockhamist theologian from Paris, Pierre D’Ailly (who died about 1420, but whose works Luther frequently read), he had suggested that the elements all exist together, a kind of application, I suppose, of Ockham’s razor, and Luther agreed. Body
and bread are there together, wine and blood are there together in a way that simply can't be explained. What was important for Luther was to affirm that Christ's body and blood and the bread and wine are present. He couldn't explain it, but reason must be captive to the word and obedient to Christ. Faith must govern our understanding of the sacrament.

The third of the captivities of the Lord's Supper in the medieval church was the worst, the sacrifice of the Mass. The view of the Mass as a representation of the sacrifice of Christ made by the priest in behalf of and in connection with the worshiping congregation for the forgiveness of sins directed the sacrament in the wrong direction. Luther believed that the sacrament was God's word coming to the people of God, not the action of God's people through their priest back in God's direction. He distinguished sacramental action, the action of gift, the bestowing of the last will and testament of Christ, from the action of the people. The action of the people in the Mass had the function of Eucharist, had the function of thanksgiving, had the function of the response of prayer and praise to the good and giving heart of God, as it's experienced in this form of the word.

So Luther argued, what is important in the Mass, in the whole service which includes human thanksgiving, what is important is the word of Christ. For here, Luther emphasized, God gives us His testament, the last will and testament of Jesus of Nazareth, the irrevocable promise of God which comes to us in this particular genre, in this particular form, the form of the last will and testament.

A will always involves the death of the testator that clearly is there. The will always involves the promise of an inheritance for the designated heirs, and in distributing the Lord’s Supper Christ has his heirs designated. And the inheritance, the gift that comes through the Lord’s Supper is the inheritance of the forgiveness of sins, of life and salvation.

Throughout all the Old Testament acts of worship, Luther saw the giving hand of God as the most important element, as that which elicited the human acts of response in worship. So he saw in the sacrifices of the Old Testament gifts of God which foreshadowed the gift of the sacrifice on the cross and which foreshadowed then the bestowal of its benefits through the word in all its forms, but above all, in the Lord’s Supper. So Luther argued it is simply not possible that the Mass can be a sacrifice from us to God.
And some would argue that medieval theologians did not really teach that, but Luther argued already with theologians of his own day that he was addressing what was happening at the popular level. He knew what the people believed, and the people believed (according to Martin Luther and other reformers) that the priests were sacrificing Christ once again, and that they participated in this sacrifice by being present (not necessarily by receiving the body and blood of Christ, but simply by being there). And this had disturbed Luther, this had placed his relationship with God in his hand and in his performance of the Mass, and he insisted once again on reemphasizing that the Lord’s Supper too is only a gift where the Spirit conveys benefits and we do nothing but respond in faith.

So Luther addressed a widespread pastoral problem in his day, the problem of worthy reception of Christ’s body and blood. Worthiness for coming to the Mass, worthiness for receiving the Lord’s body and blood consists only in recognizing sinfulness, in recognizing unworthiness. That is the worth that the sacrament demands.

So the proper response is not a certain kind of preparation as a good work. Luther says in his catechism that one may fast; one may do other kinds of human activities to prepare for coming, if that focuses the heart and the mind in faith on the good and loving word of God. But the proper response or the proper preparation for the Lord’s Supper is simply trust, and all good works will flow from that. So the Mass is not celebrated for any other purpose than to bestow upon the believers who receive it, once again strengthening for their faith and the forgiveness of sins, the promise of life.

The implications of this for medieval practice of religion on a daily basis were devastating. For so much of the pious activity of the people and so much of the performance of the priests was wrapped up on the Mass because the Mass comes to the individual to elicit faith and to strengthen faith. The Mass cannot be celebrated for the sake of other people, so Masses for the dead and all the payments that went with Masses for the dead and Masses for oneself or one’s relatives simply had no purpose anymore. So much of the medieval piety was undercut by Luther’s critique of the Mass.

III. Luther’s Struggle Against Other Protestants Over the Real Presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper
A. Luther’s definition of the Real Presence

1. Sacramental presence
2. Manducatio oralis
3. Manducatio impiorum

B. Luther’s presuppositions

1. Literal interpretation of Words of Institution
2. God can use selected elements of His created order to convey His recreating Word and its gift of life

C. Dispute over Real Presence began with Karlstadt, who had appropriated medieval model of protest

1. Luther argued on the basis of I Corinthians 10:16 and Words of Institution
2. He refused to attempt an explanation which would unravel the mystery

D. Luther continued the argument with Zwingli and Oecolampadius

1. Luther argued that God, as Lord of Creation, uses all as He wills
2. Bodily presence is not unworthy of the God who condescends into human flesh
3. Exegetical argumentation
4. Christological argumentation

Luther, however, was not only confronted with the superstitions and the works righteousness that involved the use of the Mass in the Middle Ages, Luther was also challenged quite quickly by those who came from the anti-sacramental tradition of protest and reform, of which we spoke in the last lecture.

Luther admitted that he understood this tradition in 1524, as he wrote to the people of Strassburg on the subject of the Lord’s Supper. He said that he had been tempted too from time to
time to consider this complete rejection of the Mass because its abuses had been so bad. We have, as a matter of fact, in his own writings, no indication that Luther ever played seriously with that temptation, for he was always insisting on the promise of the word, as he treated the abuses of the medieval Mass. But at least he was admitting that he understood why people could be so angry about the works righteousness connected with the Mass that they would turn away from it completely. Nonetheless, Luther consistently insisted that God places the body and blood of the God-Man Jesus Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of sins, for the restoration of life, for his people. Other reformers disagreed. And so the battle over the real presence became one of the most important lines of demarcation among those who objected to the medieval church and to the papacy’s control of it.

Luther’s definition of the real presence revolves around three points. First of all, he insisted that the body and the blood (not merely Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ in His body and blood) are really present in the Lord’s Supper. But he defined that real presence as a sacramental presence, a mysterious presence beyond reason. As we have just noticed, he abandoned the medieval attempt to explain it in terms of Aristotelian physics, there was no other physics which Luther could use to elaborate an explanation. Luther had no need to elaborate an explanation, he believed that what God is about in every use of His word (and perhaps we could say particularly in this particular sacramental form of the word) was a mystery. So he insisted against all attempts to explain it, either in Aristotelian physics or in Platonic spiritualism, he simply affirmed that Jesus Christ in His body and blood are there to be received. And the second point of his explanation, they are there to be received through the mouth. The Latin term which Luther used is manducatio oralis (eating through the mouth). He rejected the so-called capernaitic explanation which said physically blood is there in the mouth, he saw that God had executed this mystery by placing the blood somehow under that wine so that the taste of blood is not there in capernaitic fashion. But nonetheless, he believed in importance for the consolation of the sinner, that God was coming in this particular way in the Lord’s Supper with His word, a word which rests on the bread that conveys Christ’s body and the wine that conveys His blood.

The third element in Luther’s definition, the third way of testing the idea of the real presence is captured in the Latin phrase manducatio impiorum (that is, the eating by the impious, those
who are not believers). The manducatio impiorum means that the
presence of Christ rests upon the promise in the word, not upon
our faith. The benefits of Christ’s body and blood are conveyed
to those who receive it in faith. Luther had no doubt about that,
he insisted that there is nothing magical about the reception
of the Lord’s Supper that conveys some kind of benefits simply
through eating and drinking to those who do not believe. But he
did believe that the presence of Christ is established simply by
His word, the reality of that presence is established because God
says so and not because we permit God through our faith to do
what He does.

His presuppositions, which lie behind this definition of the real
presence, are, I suppose, two in number. First of all, he believed that
the Scriptures should be interpreted literally, in his understanding
of that term, even when the literal interpretation demands the
sacrifice of our reason. Luther believed that reason serves the
human creature even in theology, but reason must serve, it must
always be subject to the word of God. And he believed that even
though it seems unreasonable to identify this consecrated bread
and wine as bearing the body and blood of Christ, nonetheless,
because Christ says so, reason must be held captive to that word
in the text.

Luther also presupposed that God uses selected elements of His
created order to effect His saving will. As we have said before, he
was not burdened by a kind of Platonic spiritualism which was part
of the intellectual inheritance of some reformers who had been
educated by the biblical humanists of their day; Luther believed
that the God who created all things uses all things as He wills.
And in His absolute power, He could have designated anything as
anything that He might have wanted. And if He decided to work
in this way, if He decided to place His body and blood in bread
and wine, there is no reason why He could not. As an Ockhamist,
Luther recognized that God works in individual creatures of His in
unique ways in many instances, and in the material, in the created
order, whether it is unseen (as in human language) or whether it
is seen (as in this bread that bears the body, in this wine that bears
the blood).

So on the basis of those presuppositions; he was able to accept
the medieval understanding of the real presence, even though he
shucked its mode of explanation. And that meant that he found in
the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper a strong comfort, an important
consolation in the face of sin and Satan. And, therefore, he did
not want to give that up, and he connected Christ’s presence in his body and blood with the assurance that His presence in every form of the word brings. And Luther was ready then to do battle with those whom he believed without justification challenged the doctrine of the real presence.

That challenge first came home to him in an important way when his friend, his older mentor, his colleague, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, challenged the doctrine of the real presence. As I have noted before, Karlstadt got the spirit from Luther (the spirit of reform), but as an older colleague he perhaps was a little reluctant to go along with his younger colleague in every regard, and instead of capturing Luther’s dynamic new doctrinal approach to the Scriptural message, Karlstadt fell back into the medieval pattern of protest and reform which brought him, among other things, to an anti-sacramental position. So he didn’t understand Luther’s argument that God could place the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine.

In arguing with Karlstadt, Luther not only turned to the words of institution, which he demanded be literally interpreted, he also found the doctrine of the real presence taught clearly in I Corinthians 10:16. The bread which we break is the communion, the koinonia, the participation in the body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we bless that is actually a koinonia, a communion, a participation in the blood of Jesus Christ. How again, as he treated this passage, Luther was not prepared to explain. The reason of a Platonic spiritualism was a false presupposition, and he simply rejected it against all of Karlstadt’s arguments.

The battle went on, Luther fell into conversations inevitably with leaders of reform in south Germany and in Switzerland, and their leaders included Ulrich Zwingli at Zurich and Johannes Oecolampadius at Basel. Each of them had been educated in the camp of the biblical humanists, and each of them brought a set of spiritualistic presuppositions to the question of the real presence. Each of them developed an argumentation that was a little bit different from that of the other, and also different from that of Karlstadt’s. And Luther did note that his opponents could agree on what they wanted to teach, but they couldn’t agree on why (an argument that seemed to impress Luther with the validity of his own conclusions). They argued, for instance, that the Lord himself had said that the flesh was of no avail (in John 6:63). Even before Zwingli and Oecolampadius had come on the scene, in 1520 in the Babylonian Captivity, Luther had dismissed this
word as not applying to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The flesh that’s of no avail in John 6:63 is not the flesh of Christ’s body in the sacrament, but is that fleshly yearning for some kind of security in the self apart from God.

Luther respected Zwingli and Oecolampadius, they were, he wrote, men to whom God had given more gifts than He had given to most people. He acknowledged their contributions to the church, but he also feared that they were diverting the people of God from God’s word, and that was particularly serious in this case because they were blunting the great consolation and comfort that Luther himself found in the sacrament and that he wanted the people of God to enjoy in the sacrament as well. So Luther argued against them as he had argued against Karlstadt, that the Lord of creation may use everything that He has made as He wishes. The Ockhamist concentration on the material, the Ockhamist affirmation of the absolute power of God to arrange His ordained power in whatever form He wanted to, these Ockhamist themes are certainly there once again.

The argument had been made, again I would think, on the basis of a kind of Platonic spiritualism, that a bodily presence of this sort is simply unworthy of the Lord. But Luther argued that the incarnation itself was the ultimate emptying of all godly pretensions, as God wanted to come in human flesh. So Luther said it is the glory of God that He hides Himself in human flesh and that He hides Himself also in the modest elements of the Lord’s Supper. We see here, I think, a reflection of Luther’s theology of the cross, the God who hides Himself in crib and cross and crypt is also the God who hides Himself under the forms of bread and wine.

Luther also took on the exegetical arguments of his opponents against ideas that “This is My body” simply means that somehow the body of Christ is symbolized or made spiritually present here. His opponents had discussed the verb to be and showed that Christ spoke metaphorically when he spoke of Himself as the vine or the good shepherd. And Luther argued against that, that “This is My body” is grammatically a different kind of sentence, it functions differently grammatically than do those other passages. He also relished, I think, pointing out the differences in the exegesis of his opponents. As Zwingli tried to explain “This is My body” in the words of institution, he argued that the “this” referred to the bread. Karlstadt referred the “this” to the body of Christ as He sat there at the table, saying that Jesus was saying, this physical
body is My body, whereas Zwingli conceded that the bread was the object. Or in the translation of the verb to be, Oecolampadius argued that what is meant by “This is My body” is, this is indeed the sign of My body, and put the emphasis on the representational nature of the word body. Zwingli, on the other hand, placed the representation in the verb itself and translated “This is My body,” this represents My body. And Luther suggested that the safest and best way to operate with the word of God is simply to return to its simplest, its literal meaning and sacrifice reason, and affirm that in His mysterious power, God places body and blood in the bread and wine.

His opponents had also argued on the basis of Christology, and Luther replied with an Christological argument. Zwingli particularly had emphasized that the ascension proves that the body of Christ cannot be on the altar, cannot be in the bread and wine as the sacrament is celebrated across Christendom because Christ ascended and He is now sitting at the right hand of God in Heaven, and therefore cannot be present. Luther was not particularly polite in scoffing at this kind of exegesis. He said that the right hand of God is not a location, the right hand of God is an Old Testament term for the power of God, for sharing fully in the power of God. When Christ in the ascension returned to Heaven, he returned to the right hand of God (that is, the full exercise of His powers as the second person of the holy Trinity). Luther extended then his Christological argument with reference to the ancient doctrine of the communication of attributes. We have discussed Luther’s view of the communication of the divine and human attributes within the person of Christ in our lecture on the person of Christ. The argument meant this for Luther, in connection with the Lord’s Supper: Within the person of Jesus Christ, His divine nature and His human nature are bound together so tightly that even though the two natures remain distinct, they are inseparable. And within the person of Christ then, the attributes of one nature (though they don’t belong to the other nature) are shared by that other nature because the person cannot be divine without being human, cannot be human without being divine. Strictly distinct, Luther kept the two natures, the characteristics of the divine nature were shared with the human nature inevitably, and the characteristics of the human nature were shared with the divine nature. For the sacramental argumentation then, that meant that because the divine nature has the ability to be present wherever God wills, in whatever God wills, so the human nature with its body and blood can be present in whatever form God wills, wherever God wills.
Luther supported this argumentation by explaining that there are a number of ways in which we can use the word presence. There is a local presence, a circumscribed presence, something that occupies exact circumscribed space. When Jesus sat at table with His disciples, He was there in a circumscribed presence, He was simply there in His body. There is a second kind of presence that Luther called a definitive presence, it is uncircumscribed. An angel or a devil, he argues, can be present in a corner or in a whole city and that presence of this spiritual being is there, but it cannot be circumscribed. So Christ, as He came through the door on Easter night, was practicing, was present in His definitive kind of presence. Then there is the repletive presence of God which fills all and everything. God is omnipresent, we say. God may have other modes of presence, Luther didn’t think he had necessarily put together a complete list, but by using these three examples, he proved that God can be present where, when, how He wills. And so in the second person of the holy Trinity, now united inseparably in the person of Christ, the human remains human and the divine remains divine but the characteristics are shared, there is a communication of attributes between the two natures.

So the Christological argument for Luther was not the only argument, but it was an important argument alongside his wanting to simply accept the words of institution as they were.

IV. Luther’s Sacramental Piety

A. Emphasis on community into which Lord’s Supper brings believers

B. Transformation and incorporation into the body of Christ’s death and resurrection, through reception of the promise in special form

C. Believers receive forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith through the Lord’s Supper

Luther also criticized his opponents on pastoral grounds. Karlstadt and the others failed to see the gift, failed to see the goodness of the gift, failed to see how rich in meaning the sacrament was for those who came humbly to accept God’s gift, not only of the forgiveness of sins but of the forgiveness of sins in His body and in His blood. For Luther’s polemic was simply not an exercise in doctrinal philosophy, it was an exercise in pious teaching. And
there are a number of elements in Luther’s understanding of the piety which accompanies this form of the word.

In 1519, already as he commented on the sacrament’s significance for the church and for the people of God, he emphasized the horizontal communion of the Lord’s Supper. When we receive the Lord’s Supper, we are taken into that relationship with Christ which binds us into His family. And so we receive assurance as we come to communion that Christ and all the saints will intercede for me (and by saints, he didn’t mean saints in heaven, he meant saints on earth). And when I receive the Lord’s Supper, I am also bound and obligated to intercede for all others in the community of faith. I am taken into the family and have membership in the family horizontally (with other Christians, in other words), as well as with the Father in heaven.

Luther did not completely dismiss also the memorial function of the Lord’s Supper. He saw it as the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He viewed the words of institution as that good word from God that announces and pronounces the forgiveness of sins. But then also he saw along with that, that God is working here, that what believers experience in receiving the Lord’s Supper is incorporation into the body of Christ’s death and resurrection, another form of the joyous exchange. The transformation of the sinner once again into the child of God who cannot be separated from God’s family, from God the Father. That happens through the hearing of the promise, as it happens in every other form of the word. But for Luther, in the Lord’s Supper, in this special way of receiving the word, the real presence was integral to this bestowal of forgiveness. For the presence of Christ is that that affects the joyous exchange.

So Luther thought it was terribly important that the people of God commune frequently, that they often come to the Lord’s table to receive there the forgiveness of sins and strengthening for their faith. God acts to put away their sins, to impute righteousness to them once again as He continues to complete His baptismal promise also through the Lord’s Supper. At the same time, He not only forgives sins but psychologically He strengthens that faith for those who long and hunger for the presence of God and for the forgiveness.

So he emphasized that all should come. They should come in humble faith, in humble trust, in a recognition of their own sinfulness and with joy in their hearts, as they grasp that word
that grasps them, as they receive the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper then, as in every other form of the word, Luther focused on the word, on its power, on its special form, in this case, in the real presence of Christ, and then on the goal, the end of that word and its power. The forgiveness of sins, which as he explains, is nothing more than life and salvation. For from life and salvation as the gift of God, eternally come the practice of life and the announcement of salvation in the daily life of the believer. As also through this form of the word, God empowers the believer to live out the full life of the Christian, the full life of the human creature of God, a life of love and service to God through love and service to the neighbor.