

Eating, Drinking and Preaching

When our Lord chose to institute a sacrament by which His Church would remember Him, He gave her His body and blood to eat and to drink.

Jesus did some very remarkable things. He stilled the storm. He fed the five thousand. He cured the incurable. He raised Lazerus from the dead. But for these proofs of His divine sovereignty Christ instituted no sacrament. Instead, Christ wanted the faith and worship of His Church to be centered on His body given for us and His blood shed to forgive us our sins. "Do this in remembrance of me."

Were this command of our Lord to be forgotten, our faith would quickly lose its focus. Whenever and wherever churches have disparaged or distorted the sacraments of Christ's body and blood, they have also suffered corruption of their doctrine, preaching and faith. The doctrine of the free forgiveness of sins by the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for us is the central article of the Christian religion. Our Confessions call it the article "on which the Church stands or falls." Surely this is why our Lord said, "Do this in remembrance of me." By instituting this sacrament, Jesus Christ has placed the teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith in the very center of the Christian proclamation and at the very heart of the Christian faith.

When Christ's Church eats His body and drinks His blood, she proclaims this central and saving truth of the faith. St. Paul teaches this with his words, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." We preach a sermon! We preach the gospel of Christ's atoning death! We preach the gospel which is faithfully taught and confessed in the creeds and confessions of the Church. We say a clear "Amen" to the pure and saving proclamation of the gospel which Christ has entrusted to his Church. Do we not?

Not if we commune at an altar which promotes false doctrine contrary to the Scriptures and out of harmony with the true gospel of Jesus Christ. In such a case, we would be preaching the false doctrine of that altar. But what if we sincerely hold to the truth while communing at an altar of a church which teaches false doctrine? Would not our personal faith in the truth ensure that our confession or proclamation would also be true? Absolutely not! "Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?"

The church suffers today from the "Me and Jesus" syndrome. This is the notion that faith is so intensely personal and private that there simply is no such thing as a corporate faith. But the Lord's Supper was not given to

individuals as individuals. It was given to the Church! It is always and only as members of that body that we properly receive the body and blood of our Lord and proclaim the gospel of His death, the gospel which Christ has commissioned the Church to proclaim. By God's grace, this gospel has been preserved and faithfully confessed in the Book of Concord which contains the genuine and catholic creeds and confessions of Christ's Church. Where the preaching and teaching of the gospel is in conformity with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, there, and only there, can the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood be a faithful proclamation of the gospel. There the true unity of Christ's Church is displayed. There the communion of Christ's body and blood finds its expression in the communion for which St. Paul pleaded when he wrote: "Now I plead with you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

This is "close" communion. But that is a redundancy. *Of course*, communion is close! And it must therefore be closed. The practice of closed communion is the practice of the apostolic Church. The first description of the worship of the early Church, given in Acts 2, informs us that those who participated in the "breaking of bread" (the Lord's Supper) were those who also "continued steadfast in the apostles' doctrine." The two could not be separated because as each communicant ate Christ's body and drank Christ's blood, he also proclaimed the gospel of Christ's death, not just any gospel, but the apostolic gospel.

The apostolic practice of closed communion continued throughout the history of the Church. Werner Elert, in his book Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, has conclusively shown that agreement in *doctrine* was always necessary for admittance to the Lord's Supper. This is also the position of the Lutheran Confessions. It is also the historic position of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The tragedy of the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is, among other things, that it has totally abandoned this apostolic and Lutheran practice. ELCA shares altars and pulpits with Reformed churches which categorically reject the teaching of our Lord that the bread and wine of his Supper *are* the very body and blood of Christ.

When the LC-MS continues to hold to the apostolic practice of closed communion while the much larger ELCA has abandoned it, it does make us appear to be rather closed in our minds as well as our communion practice.

That is surely understandable, inasmuch as many people judge the practices of a church by human rather than by biblical standards. As pastors, laypeople and elected leaders in our Synod seek to remain faithful to the pure proclamation of the gospel - which is *impossible* if we give up closed communion - there are a number of things which we should keep in mind.

First, ignorance on this matter is *vast*. This is so not only among members of ELCA, but also within the LC-MS. Pastors must take the time to teach the doctrines of the Church and of the Lord's Supper carefully to their catechumens, elders, and congregations. In so doing, they should present the positive blessing of true unity at the altar as a gracious gift from God, a gift which should be embraced and cherished. As long as closed communion is viewed merely as a "rule" which must be "obeyed" the evangelical purpose of this practice will escape the minds of many.

Second, ignorance on this matter is often *invincible*. Patience among pastors seeking to educate their congregations on this subject is a virtue which, unfortunately, can become a vice. It is important that the practice of closed communion be understood in an evangelical way, but our communion practices cannot be held hostage to the refusal or inability of some to support them after careful and patient instruction from God's word.

Third, we must, as a Synod, appeal to more than a "go along to get along" mentality among some pastors and congregations. The elected leadership of the Missouri Synod and its districts should appeal primarily to our *confessional* unity as they encourage pastors and congregations to uphold our apostolic communion practices. Mere synodical loyalty can quickly degenerate into legalism.

Fourth, we must recognize with great candor and humility that there are large numbers of congregations and pastors within the Missouri Synod who simply reject the biblical teaching concerning unionism. They either reject the possibility of the doctrinal unity which Scripture enjoins, or they do not have the courage of their convictions to refuse the Lord's Supper to those who regularly commune at altars which promote false teaching. District Presidents who are not committed to *changing* this should be disciplined by the president of the LC-MS. Every pastor and every layperson in the LC-MS has the responsibility to support the synodical president in this vital task --- and to take him to task should he be negligent in this, his duty.

Fifth, laypeople need to understand the powerful pressure placed upon their pastors to compromise. It is easy to say that pastors must be faithful to God's Word, not public opinion. But the support - vocal and consistent - the parish pastor receives from his members as he seeks to be a

faithful steward of the mysteries of God is a tremendous boost to his morale. Pastors are weak; they want to be liked. Many pastors who could have been strengthened in their commitment to a strong, evangelical communion practice have caved in to pressure to conform. Encouragement from laypeople to stand firm will bear fruit.

Finally, we must be aware of and able to respond to various objections sincerely raised against closed communion. Here are a few of them:

"You have no right to judge anyone coming up to the altar. Communion is between him and God." Answer: Wrong. "We, who are many, are one body." The pastor is not a spiritual vending machine but a steward of the mysteries of God and accountable to God for his stewardship. He may not distribute these mysteries indiscriminately.

"But you cannot look into anyone's heart to see if true faith is there. Isn't that what you are doing when you deny someone the Lord's Supper?" Answer: You are right. No human being can see the faith in another's heart. And this is precisely *why* we do not admit people to the Lord's Supper on the basis of the faith in their *heart*, but instead on the basis of their *public confession* of faith, that is, the public teaching of the church at which they regularly commune. This we are required to do.

"But you know that many people do not accept the doctrine of their church." Answer: True. But they "preach" that doctrine every time they commune there. Should we encourage them to continue to do so?

"Many people will misunderstand what you are doing. They will think you are judgmental and loveless." Answer: Unfortunately, that is true. That is why we must be careful to treat everyone with respect, love, and in demonstration of true Christian concern for their faithful confession of the gospel. Should we still suffer from derogatory labels, so be it. Our unity at the altar is a priceless gift that should not be traded for popular acceptance and approval.

Our unity as we together receive the body and blood of our Savior for the forgiveness of our sins is from God. The sins which separate us from our Lord and from one another are forgiven. The faithful proclamation of that gospel is made as we eat and drink Christ's body and blood. What a loss it would be if, under carnal pressure to conform to shallow social demands, we were to abandon the apostolic practice of closed communion!

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