

THE CHURCH FELLOWSHIP in THE LORD'S SUPPER

Any discussion on the fellowship in the Lord's Supper will have to consider a multitude of factors. I cannot address them all in the time allotted today, and those that I speak on might also not be satisfactorily answered since this topic has been influenced by the experiences of our time: pluralism, individualism and subjectivism, non-traditionalism, anti-authoritarianism, emotionalism and indifferentialism. A lot of –isms I know, but they show how connected the Lord's Supper is to our human existence and spirituality, and so being, references to “this is how the Lord instituted it” may often not satisfy those concerned.

Let me begin by pointing out that the Lord's Supper cannot be treated as an isolated topic. It relates to the church, that is ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. In other words you cannot talk of communion fellowship without speaking of church fellowship and *vice versa*. This is because the Lord's Supper is one of the marks of the church as defined in AC VII. “*The Church is the congregation of saints where the Gospel is preached purely and where the sacraments are administered rightly.*” (AC VII). In order to have fellowship with Christ and one another the believers (the church) gather around the Lord's Table to receive the gift of forgiveness. In most cases we are used to having the preaching of the Gospel precede the administration of the sacraments. In this way, the believers who heard law and Gospel from the pulpit, who were made aware of their sins, may attend the table and receive comfort for their repentant hearts. For this reason both the sequence of preaching of the Gospel and the Lord's Supper plays an important role in the spiritual formation of a congregation. But the preaching of the Gospel and the Lord's Supper are also interrelated in another way and that is in terms of doctrine. For confessional Lutherans the Lord's Supper is a proclamation and confession of Christ's bodily presence, and as believers gather they mutually agree on that understanding of Christ's presence. The Lord's Supper is the visible word or Gospel, giving the believer and strengthening him in a very tangible way in what he receives through the Gospel. But it is important that the Lord's Supper also draws in all other doctrines preached and taught. Thus, those who attend the fellowship of the Table will mutually agree on what they previously heard and what they, as a body of Christ, believe. One cannot go to the Lord's Supper and be in disagreement with something that the Gospel teaches.

This sets the stage also for us today, for the question we explore on fellowship in the Lord's Supper is this: *who* may attend it and *what* is required of him to permit him to attend? The **first** point to be raised is thus the question about the believer's faith. This question is I believe the least problematic and challenging. For every communicant, to be sure, draws on his confirmation knowledge and takes the bodily presence of the Lord for real. Thus, while it may be easier to argue that the communicant should know that he is receiving Christ's body and blood orally through the mouth for the forgiveness of sin, it is more difficult to argue that point that he or she should also know more than that the body and blood are present in the Lord's Supper. In other words, does admission to the Lord's Supper and fellowship demand that we draw in other articles of faith? For Confessional Lutherans this is so. **Second**, therefore, fellowship and admission to the Lord's Supper is embedded in the *consensus doctrinae*, not just that Christ is present but also who he is, what the church teaches for example on Scripture, the Holy Spirit and Christ's second coming. After all, we recall the definition the church above which states that the church strives to teach the Gospel purely and administer the sacraments rightly. These adverbs are not cosmetic verbiage but they actually mold the churches mind to actually do so as a fellowship of believers. Who then would want someone in their midst who believes differently and then like yeast sours the entire dough. However, in case the *pure* and *recte* in AC VII does not quite embrace that thought of doctrinal consensus as a prerequisite for fellowship,¹ Confessional Lutherans have always pulled in FC X,31: “*churches will not*

¹ In his *Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, Leif Grane holds a minimalist approach and dismisses any confessional reading of the “*doctrina evangelii*”. For him it would violate Melancthon's original intent that the *consentire de doctrina evangelii* (to agree concerning the teachings of the Gospel) refers to proclamation alone and not to ‘correct doctrine’ or something similar. To Grane, the AC could be characterized as pre-confessionalistic and pre-schism, and thus he cannot envision the Augsburg Confession already drawing a line of demarcation of one denomination from another. It is for this reason that FC X, 31 serves as a valuable commentary

condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments.” (Tappert 616). Accordingly and by logical implication, a body of believers cannot tolerate in its midst beliefs other than that what they jointly hold as true for themselves, as Paul reminds us in 2 Cor.6:14. And since the Lord’s Supper is the most intimate expression of joint belief, fellowship to the Lord’s Supper demands clear oversight. Thus, Confessional Lutheran churches, which follow the tradition of the Formula of Concord hold this: Purely teaching the Gospel and rightly administering the Lord’s Supper both embrace the teaching that there must be an agreement in the doctrines of the church, and that upon that agreement established as a *fait accompli* is one allowed to partake at the meal. In other words, the Lord’s Supper does not work towards an agreement, it rather seals it. It underscores that that doctrinal agreement has already been established between the parties and communicants. This area, I believe, is an extreme test to prevalent subjectivism and individualism in our church, who do not wish their faith to be examined or questioned. A **third** point flowing from this second point suggests that we need to go one step further and pull in ecclesiology. This implies that fellowship in the Lord’s Supper does not only inquire what the individual knows and believes, it also wants to know to which church he or she belongs. Thus all those who attend the Lord’s Supper might agree on Christ’s bodily presence and on most of the *consensus doctrinae* put forward, but are admitted to the Lord’s Table once their affiliation to the denomination has been clarified. For us that means the Lord’s Table is a fellowship for Missouri Synod members, which means in turn that only those who belong to the same denomination are allowed to come together to the Lord’s table. Moreover, only those in other denominations who have doctrinal agreement with the Missouri Synod are allowed to partake in the Lord’s Supper.

However, who establishes these requirements one, two and three? Who is responsible to find out whether the believer knows and confesses Christ’s true bodily presence and his agreement with the body of believers and denomination? We may point out to the high officials of the church or to the Conventional proceedings. Ultimately, however, points one to three call for pastoral oversight at the congregational level. Thus as a **fourth** point on the discussion of the fellowship policy in Holy communion (I don’t like the word “policy” which sounds like a human devised rule, whereas we are trying to point to Scripture) states that fellowship is maintained and determined through pastoral oversight and consent. Thereby the pastor acts as steward of the mysteries of God and as soul carer (*Seelsorger*) over those who attend. Yes, there is a pastor’s supervision over the Lord’s Supper that requires him to establish who and who not may attend the Lord’s Supper. Thus, Lord’s Supper not only calls for clarification on who may attend, what they need to know and which denomination they belong, it also calls for proper oversight. Moreover, as a final **fifth** point, and which I’ll mention more in passing, is the question which individual qualifies for that spiritual oversight of fellowship at the Lord’s Table. Already in the early days of the Missouri Synod and for confessional Lutherans in North America, there had been the Galesburg Rule of 1875 which established a simple rule pertaining to the Lord’s Supper and the Pulpit: Lutheran altars for Lutherans only. However, the lines of this *communio in sacris* are now more narrowly drawn for us, namely that pulpit and altar can be administrated only by pastors of the LCMS or with permission also by those pastors from churches which have declared fellowship with one another. Obviously, that will not satisfy everyone and often understandably so as is the case in Australia, a church we work with closely. There through an agreement between the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Anglican Church of Australia was signed in April 1, 2001. This document entitled “*Common Ground: Covenanting for Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation*” makes proposals for closer relations and asks the two churches to mutually address pastoral care at remote local congregations. “Common Ground” aims not at church union but at fellowship in the gospel.

It seems that we have laid down a number of principles pertaining to fellowship in the Lord’s Supper: faith in the real presence of the Lord, doctrinal agreement known as the *consensus doctrinae*, denominational membership, pastoral oversight and exact qualification of which pastors may do that. These principles laid out have actually been defended in the history of the LCMS in many of its documents. At the same time they are also chal-

of AC VII. *The Augsburg Confession. A Commentary*. Translated by John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 97.

lenged and misunderstood in a number of ways. Allow me for the remainder of this presentation offer you a few windows a discussion of this or that principle mentioned above.

The bodily presence of the Lord's Supper doctrinally understood and confessed.

The requirement for proper understanding of Christ's bodily presence at the Lord's Supper is based on 1 Cor 11: 28 "*Let a man examine himself.*" And that a communicant who does not "recognize the body and blood eats and drinks judgment on himself". (v.29) Fellowship at the Lord's Supper understands that the communicant is aware of what he or she receives namely Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The serious nature of correct understanding is based on the fact that if we cannot discern the true body and blood of Christ and mistaken it for something else, (like the Corinthians mistook it for just any other food), is that they drink it to their damage. As Lutherans we cannot belittle the issue of unworthy reception (*ἀνάξιως*) in 1 Cor. 11:27 for it will according to Paul make the communicant guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord and bring judgment upon himself (v.29). This concern also validates pastoral oversight since it is the pastor's desire that the communicant does receive it to his benefit (about which I will speak later). Of all five factors I pointed to, this point seems the most important. Faith at the Lord's Supper is strengthened and nourished and awakened (AC XIII), but it is the faith that believes what it receives. As Luther states it: Faith does not make the sacrament a sacrament but it receives the benefits of that sacrament: the forgiveness of sins (LC IV,53 Tappert 443; LC V,33 Tappert 450). There is thus a reception always, both positive or negative. The Lord's Supper does not accept a neutral reception. It can either be taken to your benefit or to your damnation. A *manducatio oralis* implies the *manducatio impiorum* as well. A false understanding impairs the fellowship with Christ himself (vertical) and with all believers around him (horizontal) which is the body of Christ. Proper discernment of the "body" (soma) in verse 29 is more than discerning the "body" (*σῶμα*), that is the church; it is proper discernment of the actual body of Christ present at the Lord's Supper. I will return back to this issue when it comes to pointing to pastoral oversight and admission, for now let us underscore that discerning properly the body and blood would in essence be a correct understanding of Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper.²

The Marburg Colloquy (1529) and Formula of Concord (1577)

The precedent case highlighting the seriousness of this matter on the bodily presence of the Lord's Supper is arguably found in the Marburg Colloquy 1529 and subsequently in the Formula of Concord. One can see that Martin Luther did not gloss it over as a negotiable item. For him it was not just with an intellectual enterprise but a matter of laying the foundation of making the Lord's Supper a means of comfort and strength for the sinner. The words he uttered to Zwingli: "You are of a different spirit" reveal how important the issue of the correct interpretation of "is" is.

The subsequent discussion on the Lord's Supper after the Marburg Colloquy, 1529 affirmed what Luther and the Reformers had confessed all the years: the *unio sacramentalis*, the *manducatio oralis* and *manducatio impiorum*. This came to a conclusion in Formula of Concord article VII and VIII. As Sasse points out: The Lutherans were clearly adamant not on the mode of presence but on the presence of Christ. After all, the mode of presence whether his exalted human nature is there according to whether he wills it as Chemnitz and Andreae held or whether he is present everywhere according to the ubiquity of Luther and others, is not the issue. Rather the point is from Luther at Marburg, the Augsburg Confessions, and now the Formula of Concord whether or not the entire Christ is present: "*Not the mode of presence was at stake, but the question whether or not the body of Christ is present.*" (Sasse, p. 343) And those who think Christ's presence other than the full bodily presence of Christ are then part of the "*impropare*" and "*damnare*," that is, rejected and condemned. (FC VII,112 Tappert 589). They belong to the *manducatio impiorum* of 1 Cor. 11:29, the impious partakers. Chemnitz for example writes in *Ministry, Word and Sacraments—An Enchiridion* (p.130): "*But the following are they that eat unworthily, as one can very clearly gather from Paul, 1 Cor. 11: They do not discern the body and blood, that is*

² The CTCR statement makes the point that soma is the synecdoche meaning a part of the whole: the body and blood of Christ. (CTCR, 1999,16).

they do not hold that the very sacred food of this supper is the body and blood of Christ, but handle and use it with no greater reverence and devotion than other common foods.”

Efforts at Unity: Unionism (1817) and Leuenberg Concord (1973)

There are, however, examples where the proper discernment of Christ’s body and blood mattered much less. In fact, there are stations in the history of the church where the correct doctrinal understanding of Christ’s bodily presence were a matter of less importance. We know that efforts for unity continued over the decades and the centuries after the Reformation though one could have assumed the Formula of Concord settled the matter. The first attempts produced few promising results, only to be thwarted again by disappointing setbacks. The untiring mediation of Martin Bucer, for example, or Calvin’s attempts to find agreement in the understanding of the Lord’s Supper, was unable to prevent the two traditions from gradually hardening into mutually exclusive confessions. Calvin’s later years were overshadowed by an acrimonious dispute with Joachim Westphal (1510-1574), a Lutheran theologian who saw Calvin’s teaching as a further deviation from biblical truth.

The ramifications of the *damnare* or *improbant* in the Confessions against those who deny Christ’s bodily presence has ecclesial consequences. While the authors to the preface of the Formula of Concord still call themselves “Reformed”, it was a title already appropriated and given to the Geneva crowd, so that the name Lutheran was used for those who follow Luther’s position and theology. A historian would have to show how the “*improbare*” (rejection and condemnation) played itself ecclesiology in terms fellowship practices after the Reformation. It is our assumption that the decades after the Reformation, and after Formula of Concord in 1580, that churches practiced their fellowship much around who interprets the word “is” the Lutheran way or the Reformed. In other words the “*diakrino*” (discernment) over the word “is” continued to be the distinguishing mark between Reformed and Lutherans. This explains why the Prussian King wanted the fixed divisions overturned so that he and his wife could enjoy the Lord’s Supper together. However, by enforcing a Prussian Union of 1817, opposition arose against blurring the ecclesial lines. Though various forms of unions between Reformed and Lutheran Churches were practiced from agenda to administrative unions, the bottom line of the unionized concept is that there is no longer an interest in the doctrinal clarification of the presence of the Lord’s body in the Lord’s Supper. Thus when King Frederick William of Prussia issued a manifesto on the anniversary of the Reformation in 1817, calling on the Protestant communities to unite the call was not only greeted with enthusiasm but also resisted by those who wished to maintain the position of the Lutheran Confession.

The unionism’s hermeneutic of ignorance or condoning differences of Christ’s body and blood caused grave concern for **Johann Gottfried Scheibel** and his Breslau Lutherans, the first resistance to the union. Scheibel and the Breslau Lutherans influenced also the Lutheran communities in Dresden of which C.F.W. Walther was a member and which led to his and others emigration to North America. Scheibel opposed the union with the following words: “*True contradicting and opposing teachings, as this can be determined from the doctrines of both Confessions (i.e. Lutheran and Reformed), cannot according to healthy logic ever be united. This has become evident especially in the 1817 attempts at union and with the imposed formulas. In none is the Lutheran doctrine, only the Reformed expressed. Nowhere did a union take place and nor could it happen, except that it is a shift to the Reformed confession.*”³ What Scheibel expressed is not only his concern that two irreconcilable positions cannot coexist, but also wherever unions do take place, or where the interpretation of the presence of Christ is left open, the Reformed understanding will win the day and the Lutheran position suffers. This is an important point because any fellowship negotiations that leave it open will not be truly a union but a Reformed Confession.

Hermann Sasse offers a similar perspective on the hermeneutic of unionism: “*If a doctrinal agreement cannot be reached, there can at least be a mutual recognition and a common celebration of the sacrament. The history of unions, however, shows that this apparently practical solution is no solution at all. For apart from the fact that a common celebration presupposes a common liturgy in which, if it is a real liturgy, the doctrinal differ-*

³ Peter Hauptmann, *Johann Gottfried Scheibel. Vom innersten Wesen des Christentums*, (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 411

ences are bound to appear in a different form, such practical intercommunion leads to a destruction of the sacrament. For a sacrament which is a mere rite performed without the necessity of believing a divine interpretation, may be a more or less impressive, mysterious action, but it is not the sacrament of Christ, which is always constituted by the Word, as even the Roman Church has not quite forgotten. Here lies the deeper reason why in all union churches—we must include also many Lutheran churches that for practical purposes have accepted the union—the disintegration of the sacrament is inevitable.” (Sasse, *This is my Body*, 295-296).

In the course of the history after 1817 we have seen many further declarations of unionism between church bodies. The recent statement which truly precipitated a *fusionitis* between church bodies world-wide is the Leuenberg Concord or Fellowship declaration between major Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe in March 16, 1973. It has set the hermeneutic precedent for all fellowship declarations in the ecumenical era of today.⁴ For it says this: “*In this Agreement the participating churches acknowledge that their relationship to one another has changed since the time of the Reformation.*” Since then it has become a standard approach by church bodies who wish to come together to dismiss the historic distinctions and the *damnare* or *improbare* for the sake of fellowship and unity. Thus in terms of the Lord’s Supper the document says upon a loosely defined presence of Christ: “*Where such a consensus exists between the churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.*” Thus, for the goal of unity, which by the way the Lord has never promised his church this side of heaven, Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe and in North America have come together to commune with one another, according to the popular ecumenical motto of “**reconciled diversity**”.⁵

For our discussion today, may this brief historical survey help us to understand where we are located as a denomination among all the others in our fellowship understanding of the Lord’s Supper. There are two hermeneutic positions over the Lord’s Supper at odds with one another. The one coming from Marburg and leading through to the Formula of Concord put the doctrinal definition of the Lord’s Supper in the forefront and demand theological clarity of it prior to any practice of fellowship. That would be our tradition. Then there is also the other stream that emerges with Martin Bucer perhaps and culminates in the union of 1817 and goes on throughout Church movements today, stating that the clarity of the Lord’s Supper is not a prerequisite for fellowship. In fact, to achieve maximum unity final doctrinal clarity is detrimental, *ala* doctrine divides. This hermeneutic is so pervasive and continues to this day and it has, I am sure, also an influence on many of our members who see doctrinal distinctions as divisive and most unloving.

Intellectualizing Confessionalism and Denominationalism

One could argue that the understanding of Christ’s bodily presence if kept only to that is least problematic for anyone to understand and follow. In fact it seems so simple that within our Lutheran circles infant communion or admission to the Lord’s Supper prior to confirmation has been suggested if not practiced already. This discussion shows that there is no attempt to rationalize the presence of the Lord’s Supper too much or to embrace the thought that the communicant should be well versed in other doctrines of the church. I do not intend to address here communion of infants or young children but that discussion raises the question: how much should the

⁴ The churches involved were originally joined in the "Leuenberg Church Fellowship". In 2003 this was renamed the "Community of Protestant Churches in Europe".

⁵ The following documents stand in the tradition of Leuenberg Concord and espouse its hermeneutic. *The Reuilly Common Statement*, (1999), between the British and Irish Anglican churches and French Lutheran and Reformed churches; *The Porvoo Common Statement*, 1993, between Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches and British and Irish Anglican churches; *Called to Common Mission*, 2000, between the Episcopal Church, USA, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; *The Waterloo Agreement*, 2000, between the Anglican Church of Canada and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada; *The Formula of Agreement*, 1998, establishing full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, on the one hand, and the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, on the other.

communicant know beyond the presence of Christ's body and blood? I have already pointed to the ecclesiological dimension of the Lord's Supper. At the table the visible body of Christ congregates and shares horizontally with one another and with Christ a fellowship. Confessions Lutheranism has always ensured that there must be a theological agreement amongst the believers. There may be no participant who believes on key issues falsely lest his false belief infests the entire body. Thus a communicant is a confessor of what the church believes, namely the body of believers to whom he or she belongs. It may be the case that within the body of believers not all members are equally able to comprehend all that is taught and probably never will. So one may thus be cautious in over-intellectualizing the faith of a communicant. (CTCR, 1999,47). However, such exceptional cases aside, fellowship at the Lord's Table is a sacrament of unity in the confession, that is an acceptance of the *concensus doctrinae* of all parties involved. This applies to all members of the congregation, but it also raises the question to which denomination does both the communicant and the congregation belong. Congregations in the LCMS have voluntarily affiliated with the Synod. Though it is one of choice, it is an important one. For this reason we may assume and should that all members of the Missouri Synod, if members of a congregation belonging to the Synod have access to the table of other congregations in the Synod. Members transferring expect that rule to exist and snow birds who temporarily travel to other regions of the country expect this rule to take effect as well.

However, a problem that has emerged from all this is that denominational lines cannot be maintained as perhaps they should be. Any pastor will be able to share his experience with this issue. Pastors themselves and members have good friends in non-fellowship congregations such as the ELCA, and to them it seems incomprehensible that they should be barred from the table. In some ways the latest developments in the ELCA on the blessing of same gender unions and ordination of gay pastors have sharpened the distinctions again. However, the issue of admission of non-LCMS members still remains. While the fellowship practices can to a large degree be logically explained at parachurch and denomination level, i.e. e.g. Kenya's ELCA and Missouri must be affirmed by CTCR and then voted on by the Convention, it is less clear at a congregational setting where this issue becomes personal and emotional, the distinctions may be challenged.

Thus the fellowship practices in the Lord's Supper of LCMS congregations are often not followed too the degree of what is considered "official". However, to avoid misunderstandings the Synod's congregations point to their mission statements which clarify that communion policy. I leave it to the pastors and the congregations to evaluate for themselves whether these mission statements do the trick and provide the pastoral oversight satisfactorily.

What then can be done to deepen the denominational loyalty among the Synod's congregation so that the pluralistic of our postmodern culture are stemmed? In a book entitled *The Conviction of Things not Seen*, the author suggest perhaps the only alternative we have: "*Catechize, catechize, catechize! In the postmodern world the enemy is not so much ignorance as it is misunderstanding. There is widespread misunderstanding of traditions and religion, even while many have some knowledge, interest, and respect for religious traditions. There is a need for deeper study and formation...work consciously against the postmodern tide of huge amounts of surface information on many things, and go for deep information and formation in historic traditions.*"⁶

The Alternative: The New Testament or Early Church Model?

What would however be the alternative to the above where we bring in denominational loyalty into the discussion of Communion Fellowship? Is it possible to abandon the denominational distinctions altogether and leave communion fellowship to become solely a concern of the local congregation. That would suggest that congregations choose selectively their fellowship with congregations whom they consider in good standing. After all, it may seem that this would find its example in the New Testament context and for a time thereafter. Indeed, de-

⁶ Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig, "Denominations in the New Century," in *The Convictions of Things not Seen. Worship and Ministry in the 21st Century*. Edited by Todd E. Johnson (Brazos Press, 2002), 163.

nominalism is of fairly recent origin. By contrast we find in the early church congregations of Ephesus, Corinth, Antioch and Jerusalem which seem to exist as autonomous churches regulating their fellowship policies for themselves. It was Werner Elert, however, who observed in his study *“Eucharistic fellowship in the first three centuries,”* that all these churches though existing separate had a common agreement with one another that regulated transfers or communicants coming to one of the other churches. Creedal statements were formulated, confessed and compared which ensured that fellowship at the Lord’s Table was properly administered.

Pastoral Oversight and Fellowship in the Congregation

It seems that we have spoken on fellowship around the Lord’s Table in rather abstract ways which play themselves out along denominational terms. The question we might have to ask is to what extent does it impact the congregational level. To use the proverbial statement, I believe that it is at the level of the congregation where the rubber hits the road. Let me introduce this subject with a quote from the *Augsburg Confession* Article 28:20: *“According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop (as that of any pastor) to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest.”* (Tappert 84). This quote calls for pastoral oversight in the congregation and it draws into the oversight the office of the keys and its application over sinner and saints. Martin Luther in his Preface to the Small Catechism wrote these words to the pastor: *“If any refuse to receive your instruction, tell them that they deny Christ and are no Christians. They should not be admitted to the sacrament, be accepted as sponsors in Baptism, or be allowed to participate in any Christian privileges.”* (LC I,11; Tappert 339). In that preface Luther lays out the relevance of every commandment in the German people’s lives and then concludes: *“We should so preach that, of their own accord and without any law, the people will desire the sacrament and, as it were, compel us pastors to administer it to them...All you need to do is clearly set forth the advantage and disadvantage, the benefit and loss, the blessing and danger connected with this sacrament. Then the people will come of their own accord and without compulsion on your part.”* (SC I,22 Tappert 341). What Luther describes here is that a pastor should instruct his members on the benefits of the Lord’s Supper and its dangers, and then without compulsion they would desire the Lord’s Supper. The question is what exactly would drive them to the Lord’s table? It is because of the recognition of their sins after having heard the preaching of God’s will in the 10 Commandments. Thus proper pastoral care brings people to recognize their sins and have them repent. Fellowship at the Lord’s Table is not merely based on a sharing of knowledge or an examination whether the communicant knows them, but fellowship flows from true pastoral care on the basis of proper preaching of law and Gospel and the examination of the people so that they may desire forgiveness because of a repentant heart. This is why the Augsburg Confession XXV,1-4 points to proper examination as a prerequisite for fellowship: *“The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved.”*

Communion fellowship invites pastoral oversight, repentance and church discipline. Here we may assume that pastoral oversight and the pastoral authority is frequently questioned and dismissed.. Examples where this has become a problem in the parish abound in our Synod. We often forget that pastoral oversight is a loving concern for the communicant and that it wishes to guard him or her from an eating to their judgment (1 Cor 11:27ff). The holy elements are not to be thrown to the dogs and the pearls to the swine (Mt 7:6; Hebrews 10:29-31). Where pastors seek out the communicants and wish to apply pastoral care, their concern or care might be understood as “domineering” and an attempt at usurping control over a believer.

Often fellowship issues suffer under the goal of winning over new members and getting numbers. Here statistics rather than the pastoral and spiritual oversight of people’s souls seem to matter. It is not so much the concern over salvation from judgment, from eternal and temporal punishment but rather it is about numbers. An extreme outcome of this individualization of communion fellowship without pastoral oversight is now commonly called “eucharistic hospitality” in many Lutheran circles outside the LCMS. Here not even baptism serves as the requirement and qualification; just anyone may attend the table. The sacrament is seen like an *ex opera operato* event creating faith in those who attend but do not believe. Hear what leading ELCA representatives have

commented in the book *The Evangelizing Church* under the heading, Release the Evangelizing Power of the Eucharist. “*The evangelistic power of the Eucharist has been largely untapped and is waiting to be discovered more broadly by the whole church. Instead of requiring baptism before communing at the altar (the present ELCA and LCMS policy), more congregations should practice eucharistic evangelism, in which the liturgy is focused on gospel proclamation to all sinners—baptized and non-baptized—announcing that Jesus really comes to them with all his gifts in bread and wine...The Eucharist needs to become more of a banquet feast where invitees come from the highways and byways to receive God’s grace in Christ, rather than being an insider feast for family members only (Matthew 22).*”⁷ Here the early church practice of communion fellowship has taught us “*to draw distinctions between the missa catechumenorum and the missa fidelium. This was done precisely with the purpose in mind that while the church pursued its missionary obligation to the world outside, it was also responsible to its own people. As the preaching of the word and baptism establishes a fellowship in the Triune God, the Communion fellowship is confessed as special to the unbelieving world.*”⁸

Let us therefore remind ourselves of the true purpose of the Lord’s Supper. It calls for a faith in Christ’s bodily presence and a repentant mind of being sinful. It is that sin which bears on the individual’s conscience. It is the understanding that we are struggling with our daily flesh and sin against the Spirit of God. It has to do with the “*koinonia*”, the fellowship with one another and with the body and blood of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 10:14ff). Joining that *koinonia* implies a knowledge of what one receives, who is present in that fellowship: both Christ and the body of believers. Spiritual oversight, the office of the keys, is thus interested in diagnosing that kind of unworthiness—that bars a communicant from that fellowship: the lack of faith and an unrepentant heart. This presupposes that fellowship is a closed fellowship with certain boundaries. Thus not everyone can attend or just enter that fellowship at his own behest. Whenever I attend large congregations, I wonder how such pastoral oversight can be maintained according to 1 Cor 11:28-34.

The above point does warn us from over-intellectualizing the belief of the community and the communicant. Attendance is not an intellectual feat apart and without the involvement of the conscience and the repentant heart. I guess those who propose infant communion and admission of children prior to confirmation remind us of having a tendency to over-intellectualize things. We have to be aware of that problem and yet we are in a church that underscores the “*consensus doctrinae*” as the key to why we as a Synod and congregation exist, and on which we practice church and communion fellowship. There is a reason why the LCMS has no fellowship with the ELCA, hence the congregation is obliged to follow the rule that forbids open communion fellowship with communicants or congregations that church body.

The tendency to over individualize participation at the Lord’s table is a common phenomenon where the believer sees himself/herself only in the relationship with Christ. After all our culture’s insists on choice, rights, autonomy and independence. But ultimately individualization is a rejection of “*koinonia*” itself and of public teaching and agreement in it: the believer exists as part of the whole. It is a fellowship between all believers and with the pastor. Together they form the body of Christ. And lest they forget, it is the Lord who actually instituted the keys (John 20:19ff), and for this reason pastoral oversight over the fellowship at the Lord’s Table is an integral part of exercising those keys.⁹

⁷ Richard Bliese and Craig van Gelder (edss.), *The Evangelizing Church. A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 47

⁸ “*The proclamation of the Gospel extends to all people, over the unbaptized and baptized. In the proclamation of the word the worship service is open for all people. Holy Communion is only for the baptized. When the church celebrates Holy Communion, the doors to the world are closed...Holy Communion is the specific means of grace for the already constituted community of disciples. The most essential (Eigentümlichste) of the worship service is recognizable only in Holy Communion,*” Peter Brunner, “Das Wesen des kirchlichen Gottesdienstes,” *PRO ECCLESIA* (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1962), I: 133.

⁹ As the CTCR of 1983 points out: “[T]he office of the keys is less than faithfully exercised when admission to the sacrament is granted to all who come to the altar regardless of their faith and congregational and/or denominational affiliation. The practice of ‘open’ Communion renders it difficult, if not impossible, for church discipline to be exercised in a way that honors the ministrations being carried out by those to whom the responsibility of spiritual care for a member of God’s flock has been entrusted.” (CTCR 1983, p. 8). See reference to cases of discretion, CTCR (1991), 30-31; CTCR *Report on Fellowship*, (2001), 11.

Pastoral discretion and Exceptions

If then we have accepted the proposition of maintaining proper spiritual oversight and limiting the fellowship to those belonging to our denomination or a partner church, then the question may be asked whether exceptions may be granted. This question is a test case to whether the closed communion policy truly holds. Here one often calls attention to *close* communion. What does “close” mean really? It means that one refuses “*the Lord’s Supper to those whose belief is not known to us...It also means if they are members of a Christian body which departs from the full truth of Scripture in some of its doctrines, that we must not minimize the evil of this false teaching by opening our fellowship to any and all Christians who err in faith.*” (CTCR 1983, p.8). Here we have the idea that it is not solely the faith in the presence of Christ that qualifies for fellowship but that an errant faith in any other doctrine and a membership in an erring church disqualifies one from fellowship. However, is close communion saying that there may be someone close by from another church body we are not in fellowship with, who may attend the Lord’s Supper? Then “close” would imply proximity. To be sure there is a lot of proximity going on among our members with members of other denominations: family members, friends and colleagues may all belong to a different church body, and if they were admitted to the Lord’s table in an LCMS congregation would that be because of exceptional circumstance and pastoral discretion where sensitive pastoral care needs to be exercised? The LCMS frequently speaks of such cases.. “*The Synod has established an official practice requiring ‘that pastors and congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us.’*” (CTCR 1983,8). However there is little further clarification as to what sensitive pastoral care means and we probably will never know because the assumption is that pastoral discretion means that the pastor himself decides.¹⁰

If that is the case, which it is, emergency situations and cases where sensitive pastoral care apply have left the back door open to practice a form of “open” communion. Apart from campus and wartime situations, the Missouri Synod allows also for rare and difficult situations of personal need and of being in a state of confession. Hermann Sasse will have none of these apply not even in the case of “*periculo mortis*” (in the peril of death). He considers participation always a confession. Even in exceptions these would send the message that the important distinctions are irrelevant.¹¹

Conclusion

I looked at a few stations and discussed how they explain the issue of church fellowship and then moved on to parish issues such as the pastor’s involvement, the dangers of intellectualizing the faith and the erosion of denominational loyalty due to pluralism and individualism penetrating the mind of our members. Of those factors that seem least acceptable and most contentious is that the fellowship requires a broader consensus and denominational affiliation. In other words, it seems acceptable that a communicant understands who Christ is at the Lord’s Table. However, it is less clear that fellowship is set along denominational lines and that “outsiders” are not admitted.

We need to return to an understanding of the Lord’s Supper that sees the church for what it really is this side of heaven. The church is a struggling church, one that is threatened, challenged and persecuted by the antichrist himself. The church wrestles with truth and error, caught between God’s Spirit and sin. In a lecture on Psalm 45 Luther commented on the church: “The image of the church is that of a sinner, who is tortured, abandoned , dying and in mourning. Everything Satan is and has, that is what the church endures.” (Slenzka, p. 89) Thus the church is not to be understood in worldly terms, as a political or sociological entity , it is precisely her sinfulness that comes to the fore through the work of God’s word and the sacrament. The church is not completely cleansed yet, but it is on the road of being cleansed and renewed through repentance and forgiveness, a constant reformation through the removal of her deformation. And in that process the Lord says: “I will be with you in my body and blood.” The Lord’s Supper becomes part of that cleaning process; it cannot be treated lightly or

¹⁰ CTCR (1991): 31-32. 43; CTCR, Lord’s Supper (1999), 47.

¹¹ In Statu Confessionis. I: 118.

carelessly, but administered in the context repentance and forgiveness. A proper fellowship approach to the Lord's Supper will take this all into account.

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