

Breaking Down the Chancel Rails: Devastating Love or Loveless Devastation?

The Rev. Dr. Paul D. Lehninger
Professor of Theology, Wisconsin Lutheran College

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Consider the following two quotations, first from the website of the United Church of Christ:

We believe that each person is on a spiritual journey and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey. We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God, engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction. We believe that all people of faith are invited to join Christ at Christ's table for the sacrament of Communion. Just as many grains of wheat are gathered to make one loaf of bread and many grapes are gathered to make one cup of wine, we, the many people of God, are made one in the body of Christ, the church. The breaking of bread and the pouring of wine reminds us of the costliness of Christ's sacrifice and the discipleship to which we are all called. In the breaking of bread, we remember and celebrate Christ's presence among us along with a 'cloud of witnesses'—our ancestors, family and friends who have gone before us. It is a great mystery; we claim it by faith. We are a people of possibility. In the UCC, members, congregations and structures have the breathing room to explore and to hear . . . for after all, God is still speaking. . . ."[\[1\]](#)

Contrast this statement with one from the *Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, from about the fifth century:

Before the Eucharist the deacon calls, "Lift up your hearts to heaven. If anyone has enmity toward his neighbor, let him be reconciled. Is any conscious of unbelief, let him confess it. If any finds himself to be fallen, he may not keep it secret, for to conceal it is godless. If any is diseased in his soul, let him not come. The same is true of any unclean or wavering. Is any estranged from the commands of Jesus, let him depart. If any despises the prophets, let him step aside. Let him beware of the wrath of the Only-begotten—in order that we do not pour scorn on the cross."[\[2\]](#)

I have given this paper the title, "Breaking Down the Chancel Rails: Devastating Love or Loveless Devastation" to encourage consideration of the question as to whether a policy of so-called "open communion" is simply following biblical principles of practicing hospitality, and therefore an expression of Christian love, or ignoring biblical principles of confessing the truth, and therefore an unloving and spiritually harmful practice. This will be done by first examining the text of Scripture itself, then sources from the early church, and then material from the Lutheran Reformation. Finally, contemporary sources and practices will be considered.

SCRIPTURE

It seems to make sense to begin this consideration with the biblical accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper. However, not much can be concluded from these accounts as to who should or should not be included or excluded from participation at the Lord's Table. Whether or not Judas received the elements consecrated by our Lord is open to question. In St. Matthew's account, Jesus says, "He who dipped his hand with me in the dish will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! I would have been good for that man if he had not been born." Then Judas, who was betraying him, answered and said, 'Rabbi, is it I?' He said to him, "You have said it" (Matthew 26:23-25). In St. John's upper room account we read, "Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." Having received the piece of bread, he went out immediately" (John 13:27,30). And St. Paul writes that Jesus instituted Holy Communion *meta to deipnēsai* (1 Cor. 11:25). If Judas received the bread as part of the Passover meal, then left, and then Jesus instituted the Eucharist, one could argue that this was the first instance of so-called "closed" or "close" communion.

Or is it? Surely the first Eucharist, instituted by our Lord, was in some ways unique. It was the only case in which the presider could read hearts and know that Peter would deny him, and that all the disciples would argue about who was the greatest, a clear-cut expression of sinful pride (Luke 22:24-34). For that matter, all Christians who have ever communed and have earnestly purposed to go and sin no more have, as far as we know, sinned again. At any rate, Augustine, among others, believed that Judas did receive the Eucharist. He uses Judas' reception to support his argument that those who receive the sacrament unworthily still receive the body and blood of Christ. [\[3\]](#)

The "meal motif" in St. Luke's Gospel does not deal directly with the Eucharist. Nevertheless, these meal accounts reflect principles that are clearly established by St. Paul and practiced by the early church, namely, that the Word creates faith, which then recognizes Christ in the Eucharist. In the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, the rich man, although he calls Abraham "Father," like his brothers did not believe Moses and the prophets and therefore was separated from Abraham by a great chasm. Luke places this parable shortly before his account of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Then, in his account of Jesus meeting two disciples on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), Jesus opens the Scriptures (Moses and the prophets) to two disciples who are foolish and slow to believe "in the heart." But his opening of the Scriptures causes their hearts to burn within them so that their eyes are opened and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. These disciples rush back to Jerusalem and report to the others how Jesus was made known to them "in the breaking of the bread." Then Jesus appears to all of them—again, in the context of a meal—in the upper room, and opens their minds to understand what was written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:36-49). The meaning of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection is proclaimed, faith trusts that Word of salvation, and that same faith then recognizes the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

The same format of Word, faith, Eucharist is followed in John 6. Jesus says that whoever believes in him feeds on him. But he will also give his flesh (*sarks*) for the life of the world. Whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life. Some of his disciples were "scandalized" by this and stopped following him. Peter said he and the rest of the twelve would not leave because Jesus had the words of eternal life, and through these words they had believed and had come to know that Jesus was the holy one from God. And so they were the ones who would ultimately be with him in the upper room to eat his flesh and drink his blood at the first Eucharist.

In Acts 2:41-42 we hear that those who were baptized devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of the bread and to prayer. Here "the breaking of the bread" is a technical term for Holy Communion. Who are the ones who had all things, spiritually and materially, in common, especially Eucharist and worship (prayer in the wider sense)? Those who were baptized and who devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. Being baptized into one body, they continued in one apostolic faith, and grew in that faith by means of Word, Eucharist, and worship. The fruits of this are fleshed out, as it were, in vv 43-47. Especially significant here is *koinonia* (*koina* in v 44). The fruit of sharing the one faith and of sharing the Eucharist is the sacrificial sharing of all we possess with fellow believers. Baptism, Word, and Eucharist effect this *koinonia*; *koinonia* does not effect Eucharist. We will return to this point later.

In 1 Cor. 10:16, St. Paul uses this same word, *koinonia*, to describe the "sharing" in Holy Communion of the cup with Christ's blood and bread with Christ's body. The context here (1 Cor. 10:14-22) is a discussion of continuing to partake of pagan sacrifices to demons while at the same time partaking of the Lord's Supper. Such unionistic practices could not be permitted to continue. Just as there is *koinonia* between the cup and Christ's blood and the bread and Christ's body, we who are many are one body and have *koinonia* with one another and not with unbelievers, so we must keep ourselves separate from them.^[4]

Of course, the Corinthians had other issues St. Paul had to deal with as to their use of the Sacrament. In chapter 11, after referring to their disorderly and inconsiderate practices when they "came together" to eat the Lord's Supper, he establishes what Holy Communion is by repeating Christ's words of institution, and then tells them how to properly prepare for receiving Christ's body and blood. Worthy reception consists in examining oneself. Whatever this may include, it is clear that it must include "discerning the Lord's body," because unworthy communicants do not discern the Lord's body. Already at the time of Martin Chemnitz, those who denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion interpreted "the Lord's body" as the body of believers, the church. Indeed, a number of passages of Scripture refer to believers as "the body of Christ." Chemnitz, however, says that "not discerning the Lord's body" can only mean not believing that the bread is Christ's body. Lack of faith in Christ's Word, especially his Word of promise that he gives us his true body and blood to eat and to drink, makes a communicant unworthy, and if such a communicant does commune, the communicant falls under Christ's judgment.^[5] In connection with this point, he provides a plethora of citations from the fathers of the church.^[6]

From the beginning, the church had to deal with the problem of "false brothers" (Gal. 2:4, 2 Cor. 11:26). What to do? St. Paul tells the Thessalonians to withdraw from those who walk disorderly and not according to the teaching received from the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6). This withdrawal would certainly include not communing with them. In 2 Cor. 11:12-14, speaking of false apostles, deceitful workmen, those who masquerade as apostles of Christ just as Satan masquerades as an angel of light, St. Paul says he wants to "cut off" (*ekkoptein*) their opportunity to be regarded as having the same authority as the apostles. It is significant that *ekkoptein* was later used as a technical term for excommunication.

This reminds us that the issue of communion fellowship cannot be separated from church discipline and confession and absolution, especially in the context of 1 and 2 Cor. In 1 Cor. 5

St. Paul tells the Corinthians to hand the impenitent man over to Satan, and not even to eat—which above all would include the Eucharist—with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. And that is in the context of encouraging them to heal divisions in the church! Divisions are caused by those who need to be disciplined; practicing church discipline is intended to heal existing divisions and prevent further division. Later, the individual spoken of in 1 Cor. had repented, and St. Paul tells the Corinthian congregation to forgive him, comfort him, and reaffirm their love for him, which surely ultimately included restoring him to communion fellowship (2 Cor. 2:7-8). Again, these divisions are caused not only by impenitence in the area of morality, but also in the area of false doctrine. St. John writes to the elect lady and her children, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him" (2 John 10).

INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

The *Didache*, now generally considered to be written around the end of the first century, demonstrates concern for unity at the Lord's Supper. It urges its readers to beware of those who would "cause you to err from this way of the Teaching;"^[7] namely, what the apostles taught about the Lord. Especially the readers were to be on guard against what was sacrificed to idols, clearly echoing St. Paul's words in 1 Cor., which were written in the context of admonitions concerning the Lord's Supper. Doctrinal error and immorality were to be avoided, and since they were to confess their sins before worship, this would certainly also include confessing their sins before receiving Holy Communion:

You shall hate all hypocrisy and everything which is not pleasing to the Lord. Forsake in no way the commandments of the Lord; but you shall keep what you have received, neither adding thereto nor taking away therefrom (Deuteronomy 12:32). In the church you shall acknowledge your transgressions, and you shall not come near for your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.^[8]

The *Didache* affirms that Christians are united in one body by the Eucharist, "Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom," but then adds, "But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving (Eucharist), but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, Give not that which is holy to the dogs"

(Matthew 7:6).^[9] This is also emphasized by the requirement that communicants be reconciled with one another before approaching the Lord's altar, "On the Lord's own day, assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks; but first confess your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure.

However, no one quarreling with his brother may join your meeting until they are reconciled. . . ."

^[10] Similar concern for the unity of the church, while at the same time excluding unworthy communicants—this time specifically those who are impenitent—is expressed in the Prayer After Communion:

Remember, Lord, Your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Your love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Your kingdom which You have prepared for it; for Yours is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the Son of David! If any one is holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen."^[11]

This last phrase entered the Eastern liturgies as *ta hagia tois hagiois* and is still used today.

Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, clearly states that there are specific expectations for those who desire to receive the Eucharist:

And this food is called among us Εὐχαριστία [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, This do in remembrance of Me, Luke 22:19 this is My body; and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, This is My blood; and gave it to them alone.[\[12\]](#)

This quotation is significant because Justin uses the fact that when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he gave the bread and cup, his body and blood, to the apostles *alone* to support the "closed" communion of the early church.

In summary, according to the *Didache* and Justin Martyr, those people are worthy to commune who have been baptized, continue in the teaching of the apostles, confess their sins, and are reconciled with one another. When this is not the case, they are excluded from the communing assembly. The question of who does continue in the teaching of the apostles and how that is ascertained remains, however.

Writing about 80 A.D. Clement of Rome first makes the point that just as there was order in the Old Testament church, there is also order in the New Testament church. He draws an analogy between the offering of the sacrifices in the temple by the high priest, the priests, and Levites, and those who were appointed by the apostles to be bishops and deacons. Again, his point of reference is "those who offered sacrifices" in the temple, and the association with leaders in the church offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist is inescapable. The problem he appears to be dealing with is the Corinthians capriciously removing from office elders who had served faithfully. But those who continued in the teaching of the apostles and had peaceably and honorably fulfilled the duties of their office were to be recognized as having a valid ministry.[\[13\]](#)

About thirty years later, Ignatius of Antioch expands on this principle of the relationship between episcopacy and Eucharist in his letter to the Smyrnaeans. He writes:

[But] shun divisions as the beginning of evils. All of you, follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father; follow the presbytery as the apostles, and pay respect to the deacons, as to God's commandment. Let no one do anything pertaining to the Church apart from the bishop. Let that Eucharist be regarded as valid which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the

people be; just as where Jesus is, there is the catholic Church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love feast [Holy Communion]; but whatever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God, that everything you do may be sure and valid.^[14]

Unity was preserved in the church by adhering to the teaching of the apostles, under the leadership of orthodox bishops, priests, and deacons. Right teaching and orthodox leaders complemented one another. Heterodox teachers also used the Scriptures, but they had broken continuity with church leaders whose ministry had been approved by the apostles. Others claimed a connection with the apostles, but they no longer taught the truth as the apostles had taught it. The scriptural principle was not merely conceptual, but was embodied in persons who had apostolic authority. The Scriptures must be interpreted, and at this point in the history of the church the hermeneutical principle depended on faithful successors of the apostles. Later it would depend, in addition, on subscription to the Rule of Faith, which developed from the baptismal confession required of catechumens.^[15] But for now, the Eucharist of those who had apostolic authority was valid; heretics who denied *i.a.* that Jesus had come in the flesh were to be avoided at all cost.^[16]

It was mentioned earlier, in connection with Acts 2:41-42, that the Eucharist effects *koinonia*; *koinonia* does not effect the Eucharist. St. John Chrysostom emphasizes this very point to impress his hearers with the importance of enjoying the *koinonia* of the early church. The unity of the gathered community does not establish the validity of the Sacrament; rather, the objective validity of the Sacrament unites each individual who receives Christ's body and blood with Christ, and in this way unites the individuals with one another:

The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? Why did he not say, the participation? Because he intended to express something more and to point out how close was the union: in that we communicate not only by participating and partaking, but also by being united. For as that body is united to Christ, so also we are united to him by this bread. For we, who are many, are one bread, one body. For why do I speak of communion? He says, we are that self-same body. For what is the bread? The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body. For as the bread consisting of many grains is made one, so that the grains nowhere appear; they exist indeed, but their difference is not seen by reason of their conjunction; so are we conjoined both with each other and with Christ: there not being one body for you, and another for your neighbor to be nourished by, but the very same for all.^[17]

In connection with this, Werner Elert's comments are worth considering:

Who could improve on this interpretation of the connection between 1 Cor. 10:16 and 17? The *koinonia* as partaking, which is first individual, remains clear, but by its very nature the many become one whole. Those who participate in eating the same bread are together the body of Christ. They do not produce this body. The body of Christ is there before they are and before what they do. They are rather drawn into it so they become its members. The fellowship-nature of the Sacrament is in this, that Christ incorporates into himself those who partake of it.^[18]

St. John of Damascus later used this same point to explain why unity in the faith is so important as a precondition of communion fellowship. Since we are united both with Christ and with one another

in the Eucharist, it would be inappropriate to be united with those with whom we do not share a common confession of faith:

Participation is spoken of; for through it we partake of the divinity of Jesus. Communion, too, is spoken of, and it is an actual communion, because through it we have communion with Christ and share in His flesh and His divinity: yea, we have communion and are united with one another through it. For since we partake of one bread, we all become one body of Christ and one blood, and members one of another, being of one body with Christ. With all our strength, therefore, let us beware lest we receive communion from or grant it to heretics; *Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, says the Lord, neither cast ye your pearls before swine* Matthew 7:6, lest we become partakers in their dishonor and condemnation. For if union is in truth with Christ and with one another, we are assuredly voluntarily united also with all those who partake with us. For this union is effected voluntarily and not against our inclination. *For we are all one body because we partake of the one bread*, as the divine Apostle says (1 Corinthians 10:17).^[19]

In summary, how was Eucharistic fellowship practiced in the early church? Perhaps the catechetical instruction of St. Cyril of Jerusalem can provide a guide. Catechumens were instructed in the teaching of the apostles, under the guidance of an orthodox bishop. This prepared them to make a confession of faith, at which time they were baptized. They expressed their repentance as part of the Lord's Prayer and their reconciliation with one another in the kiss of peace^[20] and, at last, they joined their fellow believers at the Lord's Table for the first time.

THE REFORMATION

We now jump to Luther and the confessions of the sixteenth century. In short, as an evangelical and catholic reform movement in the Christian church, Luther and the reformers attempted to return to the doctrine and practice—the discipline—of the early church. This is evidenced by both Luther and the Lutheran confessions making copious quotations from the fathers of the church. In connection with fellowship at the Lord's Table, therefore, communicants (it is assumed that they have already been baptized) should have received instruction from orthodox teachers, confessed the true Christian faith (which in this case usually means assenting to the truths of Scripture as summarized in the Small Catechism), and confessed their sins. As they then join their brothers and sisters in the faith at the altar, they give tangible evidence of being united with them in one body.

One of Luther's major concerns was the appalling lack of instruction of both priests and laity at the time of the Reformation. He realized that a renewed emphasis of catechesis was crucial for the spiritual wellbeing of Christians throughout Saxony and beyond. As a result of the dire situation revealed by the Saxon visitation, he wrote a series of sermons which later formed the basis of the Large Catechism. Luther was convinced that instruction in the main teachings of the Christian faith was a precondition of admittance to the Lord's Table:

This sermon has been designed and undertaken for the instruction of children and the uneducated. Hence from ancient times it has been called, in Greek, a "catechism"—that is, instruction for children. It contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament. . . .^[21]

Moreover, after this instruction communicants were examined to see if they had truly understood what they had been taught.

Many among us celebrate the Lord's Supper every Lord's day after they are instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn them; the people also sing in order either to learn or to pray. Among our opponents there is no catechesis of children whatever, even though the canons prescribe it. Among us, pastors and ministers of the church are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly, a custom that produces very good results.[\[22\]](#)

Luther's words regarding those who rejected instruction are extremely harsh, and suggest penalties over and above being barred from the Eucharist. Nevertheless, they reflect his conviction that receiving the Lord's body and blood is not a matter to be taken lightly:

Those who do not want to learn these things—who must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians—should also not be admitted to the sacrament, should not be sponsors for children at baptism, and should not exercise any aspect of Christian freedom, but instead should simply be sent back home to the pope and his officials and, along with them, to the devil himself. Moreover, their parents and employers ought to deny them food and drink and advise them that the prince is disposed to drive such coarse people out of the country.[\[23\]](#)

We have already looked at references to communicants not only being instructed and examined, but also absolved. An examination of the references to private confession and absolution in Luther and the confessions is beyond the scope of this paper. It is clear, however, that Luther and the reformers considered the regular practice of private confession indispensable for reception of the Sacrament. This did not mean every communicant confessed privately before every reception of communion. Nevertheless, at least a private examination of conscience and sincere repentance were assumed. In making the point that worthy reception of the Sacrament was not a matter of being free from sin but of recognizing one's sin, Luther writes:

For if you wait until you are rid of your burden in order to come to the sacrament purely and worthily, you will have to stay away from it forever. In such a case he pronounces the verdict, "If you are pure and upright, you have no need of me and I also have no need of you." Therefore the only ones who are unworthy are those who do not feel their burdens nor admit to being sinners.[\[24\]](#)

It is significant that the *Brief Exhortation to Confession* immediately follows this part of the Large Catechism. When the pastor is aware that individuals who publicly reject the truths of the Christian faith or are openly impenitent are approaching the Lord's altar, he may refuse to commune them, "For Chrysostom tells how the priest stands every day and invites some to receive the sacrament, but forbids others to approach."[\[25\]](#)

So far, so good—as long as there is unity in the church. But increasing division more accurately characterizes the situation at the time of the Reformation and, of course, the church of the West had already been separated from that of the East for half a millennium. That the reformers sincerely and

earnestly sought unity in the church is clear from their confessional writings. Nevertheless, such unity must be more than a matter of good intentions or agreeing to disagree, but unity in fact, based on a common confession of the truth, "We take no pleasure in discord, nor are we unaware of our danger, the extent of which is evident from the bitter hatred inflaming the opponents. But we cannot surrender truth that is so clear and necessary for the church."^[26] While working toward a common confession of the faith would require deep commitment and hard labor, ultimately it was Christ who prayed that his church would be one, and all depended on his blessing: "And so we shall commend our cause to Christ, who will one day judge these controversies. We pray that he will help his afflicted and scattered churches and restore them to a godly and lasting concord."^[27]

What, then, was necessary for the true unity of the church, so that Christians could once again join in fellowship at the altar? According to Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.^[28]

It is not sufficient that the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered. The gospel must be preached *harmoniously according to a pure understanding* and the sacraments administered *in conformity with the divine Word*. The reformers clarify how they understand these terms in the rest of their confessional writings.

During the first part of the reformation movement, the Lutheran reformers primarily identified themselves and their teachings in contrast to what was being taught in the church of Rome. Both the Augsburg Confession and its Apology deal at length with false teaching regarding the Word and, especially, the sacrifice of the mass. Their previously noted sincere desire for unity is contrasted with—or perhaps complemented by—sharp denunciation of false teachers:

They approved the entire eighth article. In it, we confess that hypocrites and evil people are mixed together in the church and that the sacraments are efficacious even though they may be dispensed by evil ministers, because the ministers act in the place of Christ and so do not represent their own person. This accords with that passage [Luke 10:16], "Whoever listens to you listens to me." The ungodly teachers must be avoided because they no longer act in the person of Christ but are Antichrists. Christ says [Matt. 7:15], "Beware of false prophets," and Paul says [Gal. 1:9], "If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"^[29]

However, partly as a result of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, the Lutherans experienced growing doctrinal disagreement among themselves. They faced pressure to make compromises not only with Rome, but now also with Calvinists and other Reformed groups. Crypto-Calvinists—secret Calvinists—existed among the Lutheran ranks, and their teachings especially affected the doctrine of Holy Communion. Could one commune at the same altar with someone who held an erroneous view as to the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament?

The Formula of Concord answers this question unambiguously. The "sacramentarians"—those who did not clearly confess that Christ's body and blood were truly present, distributed, and received in the Eucharist—were regarded as deceptive, and their teachings were considered dangerous to the faith of other Christians:

Because in this document, however, we have principally undertaken only to offer our confession and explanation of the true presence of Christ's body and blood against the sacramentarians, some of whom have impudently infiltrated our churches under the cover of the Augsburg Confession, we also wish to present and recite, above all, the errors of the sacramentarians here, in order to warn our hearers so that they can guard and protect themselves against these errors.^[30]

One could guard and protect oneself against these errors in a number of ways. But surely, since their errors especially concerned the doctrine of Holy Communion, one would not join them at the altar. That certainly was Luther's conclusion:

For they do not want to believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body which the godless person or Judas receives orally just as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever (I say) does not want to believe that should not trouble me . . . and should not expect to have fellowship with me. That is final.^[31]

The errors of the sacramentarians were subtle, and therefore could easily mislead unsuspecting Christians. Like the doctrine of transubstantiation, they appeared to answer in a logical way the "how" of Holy Communion: how can bread and wine be conveyors of the presence of Christ? According to the sacramentarians, bread and wine were merely "distinguishing marks through which Christians recognize each other."^[32] In other words, the gathered community is the body of Christ, and bread and wine simply remind us that Christ, who instituted this supper, is the one who gathers us into this community. Others taught that the bread and wine, by reminding us of Christ's sacrifice, caused believers by faith to ascend into heaven, and there participate in the body and blood of Christ.^[33] Still others affirmed that the body and blood of Christ were truly present, yet not because the powerful and creative words of Christ's first institution came to the elements to make a sacrament, but because the faith of the individual communicant effected and created the presence of the body and blood of Christ, a view often called "receptionism."^[34] What do the authors of the Formula of Concord conclude regarding these and other errors? "Accordingly, we reject and condemn with heart and mouth as false, erroneous, and deceptive all the errors that are not consistent with the teaching set forth above and based upon God's Word but that instead oppose and contradict it."^[35] As a result, Lutherans communed neither with Roman Catholics nor with members of the various Reformed churches. However, the temptation to admit to communion those who denied the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and to join them at their altars, repeatedly afflicted Lutherans. It still does today.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Charles Porterfield Krauth, writing one hundred years ago, sounds prophetic today. In his "Theses on the Galesburg Declaration on Pulpit and Altar Fellowship," he is commenting on the so-called "Galesburg Declaration," namely, "Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers; Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants." I quote Krauth at length, since as a member of the General Council he

had great influence in one of the bodies that eventually became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and yet today he is possibly most highly regarded, and most often quoted, by members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). According to Krauth:

It is one of the greatest sins and calamities of the Church of our day that there is widespread and utter carelessness in regard to doctrine, or a fixed aversion to it; in some a contempt for it, in many ignorance or an ignoring of it. Men sometimes array the Gospel against itself by urging that they "want the Gospel," they "don't want doctrine"; as if there could be any real Gospel which is not doctrine, or any Gospel in its totality, which does not embrace all the doctrine of the Gospel. It is as if they said: "We want nourishment; we don't want food"; "We want warmth; but none of your fuel and clothes for us."

Whether the laxity of the time helps men toward the extreme [of] pseudo-ecclesiasticism or the extreme of unionistic sectarianism, the beginning of the healing must be a Bible estimate of the indispensable nature of Bible doctrine. Our Church, once chosen of God to lead His people back to the pure faith, must realize that none can take her vocation from her. The front of the host is still her place, if she is faithful to the Captain of her salvation, and she can do now no work more characteristic of her, and more worthy of her great name and responsibility, than to help in awakening the mind of Christendom to a consciousness of the disastrous tendency of the time.^[36]

As to the specific "sins and calamities of the church" to which Krauth refers, I would argue that the malaise and indifference already present in 1908 are even more of a threat in 2008. The question of whether or not to allow non-Lutherans—or, for that matter, heterodox or impenitent Lutherans—to commune at Lutheran altars must seem absurd to those who are apathetic about uniformity of confession and practice.

When Krauth specifically addresses the question of communion fellowship, it is interesting to note that he is not writing about "open" communion, but about making occasional exceptions to the principle "Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants." The predecessor to the Galesburg Declaration, the Akron Declaration, included two additional points: "The exceptions to this rule belong to the sphere of privilege, not of right," and "The determination of the exceptions is to be made in consonance with these principles by the conscientious judgment of the pastors as the cases arise."^[37] Krauth comments:

The principle on which rests constant admission to Lutheran altars, demands that those who are there received shall have been taught and examined as to their knowledge of the fundamental truths of the Gospel system, which is the confessed system of our Church; shall have solemnly bound themselves, by God's help, to persevere in the Lutheran faith, and in fidelity to the Lutheran Church, to conform and be subject, as communicant members, to its divine government and discipline. There can be no principle of occasional admission to the altar distinct from and in conflict with this. In a word, the principle of a constant admission precludes the existence of any separate principle of occasional admission.^[38]

Here Krauth is even more restrictive than the WELS or LCMS, both of which recognize the

principle that exceptions can be made to the practice of "close" communion according to pastoral judgment.^[39]

How, then, should Lutherans in 2008 determine when and with whom they will commune? It should be obvious that Lutherans—or any Christians—will want to respect the discipline of other denominations. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches restrict participation in Holy Communion to members of their own church bodies under ordinary circumstances. Among Lutherans, the LCMS, WELS, ELS, *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*, and others follow a similar practice. Sharing of the Lord's Supper is encouraged by the ELCA with those churches with which it has declared full communion. However, the confessional statements of those church bodies fall far short of the clear confession of the real presence found in the Lutheran confessions, and in some cases explicitly deny it. Take, for example, this question from a catechism in the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church—USA:

Question 78. What does it mean to share in the Lord's Supper?

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the Lord Jesus Christ is truly present, pouring out his Spirit upon us. By his Spirit, the bread that we break and the cup that we bless share in our Lord's own body and blood. Through them he once offered our life to God; through them he now offers his life to us. As I receive the bread and the cup, remembering that Christ died even for me, I feed on him in my heart by faith with thanksgiving, and enter his risen life, so that his life becomes mine, and my life becomes his, to all eternity.

Feeding on Christ "in my heart by faith" is precisely one of the errors rejected by the Formula of Concord.

Given this state of affairs, what is a Lutheran to do? I hope we can agree that neither a flaccid capitulation to the Zeitgeist, nor an alleged repristination of the strident polemics of the past is acceptable. We reject both correction without love, and love without correction. We let no debt remain outstanding except the debt to love one another (Rom. 13:7-9). That loving the truth and loving our brothers and sisters in the faith go hand in hand is emphasized throughout the first epistle of St. John. Scripture never assures us that this will be easy. But, as Peter J. Leithart writes, "What kind of villainy do we tolerate when we smile and smile and refuse to disagree?"^[40] Similarly, what kind of villainy do we tolerate when we obstinately refuse even to try to reach agreement based on God's Word? This is an area where once again we must recognize that over-arching mark of the church, living under the cross.

And it is precisely under that cross that we find the strength to bear the disappointment that unity—even around the Lord's own table—does not exist among Christians, as well as the encouragement to continue to speak the truth in love, so that "we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:15-16). We pray with Luther in the Preface of the Smalcald Articles, "O dear Lord Jesus Christ, hold a council of your own and redeem your people through your glorious return! . . . Help us who are poor and miserable, who sigh to you and earnestly seek you, according to the grace you have given us through your Holy Spirit, who with you and the Father lives and reigns, forever praised. Amen."

FOOTNOTES

[1] www.ucc.org

[2] J. Quasten, *Monumenta Eucharistica V*, quoted in Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), 99-100.

[3] *Contra Donatistas* 5, 8.

[4] See Martin Chemnitz, *De coena Domini*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 142-43.

[5] Chemnitz, 146-47.

[6] Chemnitz, 176-81.

[7] *Didache* 6, 1.

[8] *Didache* 4, 13-14.

[9] *Didache* 9, 4-5.

[10] *Didache* 14, 1.

[11] *Didache* 10, 5-6.

[12] *Apol.* 1, 66-67.

[13] *Ep.* 1, 44.

[14] *Smyr.* 8; see also *Ep. Phil.* 4, 1.

[15] For an interesting discussion of the relationship between *koinonia* and the later addition of *koinonia tōn hagiōn* to the Apostles Creed, see Elert, 5-11.

[16] *Smyr.* 6-7.

[17] *Hom. 1 Cor.* 24, 4.

[18] Elert, 28.

[19] *De fide orth.* 4, 13.

[\[20\]](#) *Cat. Lec.* 23, 3; 16.

[\[21\]](#) *LC Pref.* 1-2.

[\[22\]](#) *Ap* 15, 40; see also *Ap* 24, 1.

[\[23\]](#) *SC Pref.* 11.

[\[24\]](#) *LC* 5, 74.

[\[25\]](#) *AC* 24, 36.

[\[26\]](#) *Ap Pref.* 16.

[\[27\]](#) *Ap Pref.* 19.

[\[28\]](#) *AC* 7, 1-2.

[\[29\]](#) *Ap* 7&8, 48.

[\[30\]](#) *FC SD* 7, 111.

[\[31\]](#) *FC SD* 7, 33.

[\[32\]](#) *FC Ep* 7, 27.

[\[33\]](#) *FC Ep* 7, 29.

[\[34\]](#) *FC Ep* 7, 35.

[\[35\]](#) *FC SD* 7, 107.

[\[36\]](#) Charles Porterfield Krauth, "Theses on the Galesburg Declaration on Pulpit and Altar Fellowship," Part II, in *Lutheran Church Review* 27, 2 (April 1908), 747-48.

[\[37\]](#) Juergen Ludwig Neve, *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Burlington, IA: The German Literary Board, 1916), 222.

[\[38\]](#) Krauth, *Review*, 325-26.

[\[39\]](#) See, for example, "Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching," A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, November 1999, 40.

[\[40\]](#) Peter J. Leithart, "Consensual Silence," *Touchstone* 21, 6 (July-August 2008), 8.

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contact: webmaster@societyholytrinity.org

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