

## Closed Communion

"The custom has been retained among us of **not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved**." (AC XXV, Tappert, p. 61) [emphasis added]

This article from the Augsburg Confession is part of our basic confession from the start as Evangelical Lutherans. To abide by it is to be an Evangelical Lutheran. To dismiss it is to turn from Evangelical Lutheranism.

Granted we may not "examine" and "absolve" the communicants as often as the Reformers did, however, it is important to note that in our administration of the sacrament historically and properly we commune only those who have been "examined and absolved" at least once!

But what does it mean to have been examined or not? absolved or not? Could we agree that being "examined" involved instruction? By 1530 Luther's Small Catechism was widely known. If not already, soon the five/six chief parts would be part of every Lutheran's training and examination. Being "absolved" meant sins forgiven, not retained because of an unwillingness to admit or recognize sin or an unwillingness to reject error.

The key to understanding AC XXV with regard to Closed Communion is simply to ask, **examined by whom and absolved by whom?** Would Lutheran pastors be administering the sacrament to those examined by Roman priests or later by Reformed ministers? Hardly. What would be the meaning of the Augsburg Confession if that were the case? It would render the document virtually meaningless, erasing differences with one swift act of open communion. Augsburg Confession XXV establishes for Lutheran orthodoxy until the end of time a standard for admission at the sacrament that goes beyond "being baptized," beyond "recognizing one's sin and need for forgiveness," and beyond "affirming the presence of Jesus' body and blood with the bread and wine in the sacrament." And yet this was no innovation. Rather it continued the biblical practice of continuance in the Apostles' doctrine, a biblical practice that is evidenced already by Justin Martyr in First Apology LXVI (c. 150),

"And this food is called among us *Eucharistia* [the Thanksgiving], 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."

“. . . the man who believes that the things which we teach are true” is welcome at the altar. But to leave that determination up to the false understanding of a Calvinist himself or a Roman Catholic or an ELCA Lutheran is irresponsible at best.

To push onto the visitor the decision about whether to commune is to abdicate his pastoral responsibility.

To refine a point in this argument, I am saying that reliance on an announcement in the bulletin that the Sacrament is for those who are baptized, repentant, and "believe in the real presence" is completely inadequate. Such a practice clearly amounts to nothing but functionally open communion. The practice of relying on bulletin announcements places the decision entirely in the hands of the individual. This practice makes it obvious to the church visitor that it is his choice whether to commune - which of course, is precisely the way that just about everybody wants it to be. In a society that celebrates the individual, dismisses the role of community, and operates with an entitlement mentality, giving the decision to the individual is reasonable and easy. It is a common thought: "Let

each person decide. It is between the visitor and God, I'm just delivering the gospel, just passing out hosts." Wrong. The pastor is the steward. It is his responsibility to invite people to the rail, to exclude those who should not commune, and yes, even to refuse to commune those who may present themselves at the altar inappropriately. This is neither easy nor fun. Practicing oversight and administering the Sacrament can be altogether uncomfortable and demanding. The pastor would do well, then, to recall those prophets of old who frequently found themselves carrying out distasteful and unpopular tasks not by their choosing or according to their preferences, but at the behest of the Lord whose call they had been compelled to answer. So it is with the Lord's servants in the twenty-first century, or so it should be.

To accomplish such a shift in the practice of the Lord's Supper will require a corresponding shift in the way that pastors and people view the office. Yes, pastors are there to proclaim the gospel, to dispense the forgiveness of sins, and to comfort souls. But, it is patently obvious in Scripture and Confessions that they are also "there" to use the keys: to convict sinners, exclude the unrepentant, and oversee the right practice of the sacraments. Functionally open communion amounts to pastoral neglect. The corrective is not pastors as dictators, but pastors as responsible stewards diligently administering God's means of grace so that the broken are healed and the unrepentant are admonished. As stewards, they will also see that the Lord's Supper, the meal that feeds and binds the church to Christ and to one another in the unity of their confession, is celebrated by those for whom it is intended: the members of the church in that place. Those who are not part of that particular community of faith, but who are present at the celebration of the Sacrament should learn to see their participation as privilege and not as right or entitlement. They should assume that this celebration does not include them unless they are specifically invited to join—hence the time-honored, but now typically disregarded, practice of conversing with the pastor before the celebration. To make the point sharper yet, assuming such a conversation occurs, it is imperative that the pastor does not perpetuate the erroneous notion that if the visitor "believes in Jesus and the real presence," then she is welcome. There is much more to it than that, and the pastor needs to communicate this fact by his conversation and his decision . . . and it is *his* decision. He has been entrusted with this responsibility by his Lord and the priesthood in that place. He is accountable for his practice in administering the Sacrament. [Joel D. Biermann, "Step Up to the Altar: Thinking about the Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper," CTQ 72 (2008): 151-162 <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/biermannstepuptothealtar.pdf> ]

Do not think the position of Lutherans changed when Chemnitz came around. Chemnitz made sure every pastor under his superintendency knew what to teach and how to examine. For some pastors this meant further instruction, for others retirement and others were no longer to serve as pastors. As The Book of Concord was assembled and set forth, read how the matter of dealing with other Christians was addressed in the Preface,

With reference to the condemnations, censures, and rejections of false and adulterated doctrine, especially in the article concerning the Lord's Supper, . . . it is not our purpose and intention to mean thereby those persons who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine Word, and far less do we mean entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation. On the contrary, we mean specifically to condemn only false and seductive doctrines and their stiff-necked proponents and blasphemers. . . . But we have no doubt at all that one can find many pious, innocent people even in those churches which have up to now admittedly not come to agreement with us. These people go their way in the simplicity of their hearts, do not understand the issues, and take no pleasure in blasphemies against the Holy Supper as it is celebrated in our churches according to Christ's institution and as we concordantly teach about it on the basis of the words of his testament. \* It is furthermore to be hoped that when they are rightly instructed in this doctrine, they will, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, turn to the infallible truth of the divine Word and unite with us and our churches and schools. Consequently the responsibility devolves upon the theologians and ministers duly to remind even those who err ingenuously and ignorantly of the danger to their souls and to warn them against it, lest one blind person let himself be misled by another. (Tappert, pp. 11-12; emphases including \* added)

It is just this sort of warning that the Missouri Synod's official practice of Closed Communion—passed on to us down through the centuries—involves, out of love for our erring fellow saints. We owe them no less. Indeed, love demands it.

Today pastors in the Missouri Synod are expected to maintain the confessional standard of communing only those who have been examined and absolved by orthodox Evangelical Lutheran pastors. Some Missouri pastors cave-in to today's cry for ecumenicity. On the one hand, those LCMS pastors who accept the examining and absolving by unorthodox Lutherans (ELCA) and Romans and Protestants are not being faithful to the Augsburg Confession. On the other hand, those who examine simply by asking those three questions [baptized? recognize and repent of sins? believe that the body and blood of Jesus are present with the bread and wine in the sacrament?] are not taking their commitment seriously either. It is time to take what we say and confess fully to heart once again, lest our Synod become "saltless" by its failure of leadership from synodical president to district presidents to circuit counselors to parish pastors. I rejoice in the work of President Harrison. He loves God's Word and God's people. May those LCMS pastors among us, poisoned by the false sense of love that requires them to open the altar of the Lord at which they preside to those who will not "turn to the infallible truth of the divine Word and unite with us," themselves be turned from their evil and destructive ways and embrace once more the truth entrusted to their care as confessed in the Augsburg Confession.

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