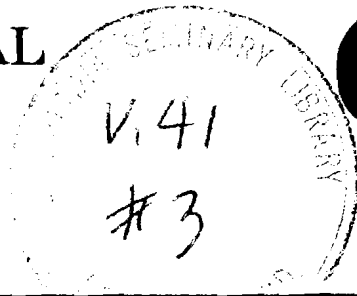


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God's People in Fellowship at the Communion Table

Lowell C. Green

We are living in what may well be the most exciting age since the world began. Discoveries in natural science, medical research, technology, and other areas of knowledge." Also the Christian Church is being confronted by radical change. A primary example is the Ecumenical Movement. Changes in the Church of Rome, changes in our Protestant neighbors, and changes within our own circles make it necessary to reassess our own position. We shall attempt here to reexamine the stand of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on the question of Communion fellowship, both within our own church and within the Christian Church as a whole.

I. The Communion Table

A. The Theological Basis of the Sacrament

It is commonly said that the chief doctrine of the Reformation was forensic justification. There is much truth in this. But we shall never understand forensic justification unless we see that even more important was the doctrine of Christ (Christology). It was on this point that the Lutheran and the Reformed groups of Protestantism parted company in 1529. Many people assume that the cause for the split between Luther and Zwingli was merely the question of Christ's presence in the Sacrament. Actually it went far beyond that to the question of Christ's presence under any circumstances. Zwingli held that on Ascension Day, Christ ascended to heaven in such a way that he is now separated from the Church on earth till he comes again at the end of time. Behind this was what Bultmann calls the mythological view that the earth is flat, and that heaven and hell are both spatial places like this world, except that the one is above the earth and the other beneath its surface. Since Christ had gone straight up in his Ascension, according to Zwingli, he could not be present in the Bread and Wine of the Sacrament. Therefore the earthly elements were symbols alone of the Body and Blood of Christ, which were at some far away spot beyond the clouds. It was Zwingli's naive idea of the universe, and his concept of a Christ separated from his followers, that led to his view of the Sacrament. Luther and his friends saw that therefore the real problem was a matter of the doctrine of Christ.

Lutheran theologians did not accept the mythological view of heaven and hell. They understood that heaven was not a spatial, material place, but rather a spiritual realm. What did Scripture therefore mean when it said that Christ ascended to the Father's right hand? It meant that he freed himself from earthly restrictions and took upon himself the divine powers that were his before the Incarnation. "For," said Luther, "the right hand of God is everywhere!" In other words, through his Ascension, Christ becomes closer to his followers, rather than more distant. Hence the Festival of the Ascension is one of the key church-days wherever Lutheran faith is strong. It is significant that this festival has little significance for our brethren in the Reformed Churches. Where this day is overlooked, could it mean that the doctrine of justification, of Christ, and of the Lord's Supper are not being understood? Ascension Day is the festival of our Lord's Real Presence and therefore a chief festival where Lutheranism is strong! Perhaps where Ascension Day services have been discontinued, it is due to the misconception that a day is great because of the number of people that can be gathered into one church, rather than because God has made the day great by one of his immeasurable acts for our salvation.

Werner Elert writes: "It was Luther's Reformed opponents, who played their view of Christ's Ascension against Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, that led Luther to loose the relationship between Here and the Hereafter from the worldview of his time. 'Heaven' as the dwelling-place of God is not a place in the spatial sense. Even if his doctrine of the Lord's Supper had had no other importance than that it led Luther to clarity on this point, and that it led Luther to insist upon this in spite of all the condemnations of the Reformed theologians, its importance would have been very great. The results of Luther's stand have had an incalculable influence on the development of the modern worldview."¹

Lutheranism has taken a very positive view toward the world as God's Creation. The highest indication of God's love for this world was when he himself became part of Creation through the Incarnation. In that act, God who was Infinite became Finite. Now it is true that the ancient Greek philosophers denied that this was possible. They taught, "The Finite cannot contain the Infinite." (*Finitum non capax infiniti.*) Unfortunately, the Reformed leaders took up this slogan, and applied it to Christ and the Sacrament. On the other hand, a modern Lutheran theologian like Ernst Kaesemann is able to see a very positive meaning in Christ's becoming a part of what is earthly. Kaesemann points out that in the New Testament, the body is the possibility of Christ entering

into communication with his people. In the Sacrament, under the Bread, Christ gives us his Body. "He is for us there 'bodily', he gives us participation in himself 'bodily'. Thus he who is now the Exalted One can, in the Lord's Supper, ever and again give that which he who was the Dying One gave once and for all: 'My Body which is given for you'."²

B. The Sacrament as Communion

A recent translation of the Small Catechism changes Luther's question, "*Was ist das Sakrament des Altars?*" to read, "What is Holy Communion?" While this is not an exact translation, it commends itself for teaching purposes. The name of the Sacrament, under American influence, has more and more changed to Holy Communion. As Evangelical Lutherans, we see a three-fold communion taking place in the Sacrament—the Sacramental Union between the earthly element and the heavenly gift, the union of the believer with Christ through oral eating and drinking, and the union of the unbeliever with the foes of Christ when he eats and drinks judgment to himself. Let us study these three phases of Communion more closely.

1. *Holy Communion is the Sacramental Union of the Bread and Wine with the Body and Blood of Christ.*

Are we dealing with merely "a personal presence of Christ"? This is not an adequate description of the position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The earliest text that we have in the New Testament describing the institution of the Lord's Supper is I Corinthians 11:23-25—"For I have received from the Lord that which I also transmitted to you: Our Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my Body which is for you. This do in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after they had eaten, he took the Chalice, saying, 'This Chalice is the New Covenant in my blood. This do, as often as you drink, in remembrance of me.'"

One of the principles of proper Biblical interpretation is that the literal sense is to be understood in a text, unless it was clearly intended to be interpreted in some other light. The literal meaning of these words is clear enough. "This is my Body" meant that when the communicant took the Bread, he received the Body of Christ. In his controversy with the Reformed, Luther placed all his emphasis on this phrase: "This is my Body." When Zwingli tried to say that "is" here means "represents," Luther steadfastly clung to the text of Scripture.

Some have tried to prove that Luther was wrong by pointing out that Christ probably spoke in the Aramaic language, which has no word for "is." Such an argument is pure sophistry. For

one thing, even if there is no separate word for "is" in Aramaic, it like all languages, is capable of expressing thoughts which, to be rendered in other languages, must have the copulative verb, "is." How strange our Bible would sound in Greek or in English if we became such literalistic fools that we left out every "is"! Furthermore, the text that we have was given to us in Greek, and it tells us that that which Christ said must be rendered in Greek, as in English, in such a fashion as this: "This is my Body."

Various attempts have been made to explain how the Body of Christ is present in the Bread. The medieval theologians taught *transubstantiation*, claiming that through a miracle of the officiating priest, the bread was changed into the Body of Christ. Other medieval schoolmen held that while the Body of Christ was present, the bread was still bread; their view is called *consubstantiation*. Our Lutheran forefathers held that Scripture does not tell us *how* the Body of Christ is present in the Bread, but only *that* it is there. Hence they avoided terms such as transubstantiation and consubstantiation, and spoke only of the Sacramental Union (*unio sacramentalis*). It was not transubstantiation, for the bread remained bread. Nor was it consubstantiation, because it was neither a case of two spatial things being joined, nor their being joined in a permanent union. Christ's Body was not present in the spatial sense that it was confined to the Host, for the glorified Christ has been made to sit ". . . at God's right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion . . ." (Eph. 1:20f). Furthermore, since Christ is present in the Bread and Wine only for the duration of the Sacrament, one cannot speak of a consubstantiation, which would imply a permanent union. Hence the only proper term, in the light of Scripture, is "Sacramental Union."

This concept is described as follows in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord VII: "For as in Christ two distinct and untransformed natures are indivisibly united, so in the Holy Supper the two essences, the natural bread and the true, natural body of Christ, are present together here on earth in the ordered action of the sacrament, though the union of the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine is not a personal union, like that of the two natures in Christ, but a sacramental union . . ." (S.D. VII, 37).

2. *Holy Communion is the oral eating and drinking of Christ's Body and Blood.*

If the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the consecrated Bread and Wine, then the communicant, in eating

the Bread and Wine, simultaneously eats the Body and Blood of Christ. This point has aroused tremendous opposition from Reformed theologians. In his biography of Melanchthon, Clyde Manschreck over-emphasizes the divergency between Melanchthon and Luther. When Melanchthon was sent to meet with the Reformed theologians before the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, Luther sent him instructions. Manschreck says that in his letter, Luther said that Christ's flesh "... is actually torn with the teeth and eaten..."³ However, this phrase is not genuine, but is a later addition to what Luther really wrote. Nevertheless, Luther insisted on the oral eating and drinking as the inevitable consequence of the Sacramental Union. Hermann Sasse correctly quotes Luther's advice to Melanchthon in these words: "Our opinion is that the body is in such a way with or in the bread that it is truly received with the bread. Whatever the bread suffers or does is also true of the body. Thus it is rightly said of the Body of Christ that it is carried, given, received, eaten, when the bread is carried, given, received, eaten. That is the meaning of 'This is my Body.'"⁴

3. Holy Communion bestows Christ's Body and Blood also on those who are unbelievers or otherwise unworthy, who receive it unto judgment.

If the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Sacrament, as is taught in I Corinthians 11:23-25, then it would follow that all those who take the Bread and Wine receive also the Body and Blood of Christ, even though they do it in ignorance or unbelief. This is actually taught in verses 27-29. Paul continues: "As often as you eat this Bread and drink this Chalice, you do proclaim the Lord's death till he come again. Therefore whoever eats this Bread or drinks this Chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the Bread and drink of the Chalice. For he who eats and drinks, not discerning the Body, eats and drinks judgment to himself."

The idea that a person could be harmed by receiving the Lord's Body in the Sacrament has been most unpalatable to those who do not believe in the Real Presence. Typically, Reformed theologians have tended to interpret "the Body" in verse 29 as the church. However, such an interpretation does not fit the context, and has been rejected by most leading interpreters. No less a scholar than Ernst Kaesemann says bluntly: "To me, it does not seem possible to connect *to sōma* (the Body) with anything other than the sacramental element in the Lord's Supper."⁵ Kaesemann also writes: "In a strict analogy, the Bread and Chalice, and Body and Blood of the

Lord, correspond with each other. These are clearly identical, but yet in a mysterious way for which no one can account. And still if one does not account these two as identical, one conducts himself, '*anaxiōs*', which means not exactly 'unworthily' but literally 'unfittingly'."⁶

Hence, Kaesemann continues, whoever attends the Sacrament, ". . . not discerning the Lord's Body . . .," joins the foes of Christ who failed to discern that he was the Son of God, and nailed him to the Cross. "Such a one however is guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord, which can hardly be understood other than to mean: guilty of the death of Jesus. The appearance of Christ offers only two possibilities—either with the congregation to proclaim the death of Jesus, or with the world to bring this death to pass. And to overlook this appearance means to become guilty with the world in the death of Jesus In the Sacrament, that which will be revealed on the Day of Judgment already comes into the present, in a certain sense."

II. Hindrances to Communion Fellowship.

A. Reformed Theology

Recently, Helmut Gollwitzer of Germany has issued a passionate plea for intercommunion between Lutheran and Reformed congregations. He blames the lack of unity among the churches on the fact that they have not communed together, and claims that if the various denominations would commune together, they would soon be united in doctrine also. If unity could be reached in such a way, this would of course, be the path of follow. But impatience will not accomplish this purpose. A crash program of communing with the Reformed would not really bring us closer together, but would likely only result in the destruction of the Sacrament. For the Reformed do not look upon the Sacrament in the same way that we do. (In fact, Luther said that since they reject the clear word of Scripture and institution of it, they really do not have the Sacrament at all, but mere bread and wine, even as they say.) At any rate, Gollwitzer seems to think that altar and church fellowship are matters about which men are free to make their own arrangements. We read in I Corinthians 11:17-22 how the Corinthians had attempted to make it their own supper. Paul tells them bluntly that what they are observing is not the Lord's Supper and then, referring back to Christ's institution, that they must again have the Lord's Supper, not the Christians' supper.

B. Lutheranism in America

In the history of Lutheranism in America, Communion fellowship has been a greater problem than elsewhere. During the early part of the nineteenth century, loose Communion practices threatened the dissolution of the Lutheran Church. Samuel Schmucker advocated unionistic practices within the General Synod, which led to a split and the later formation of the General Council. But even within the General Council, which was the most confessionally-minded of the major bodies in the eastern states, there was a lack of uniformity of doctrine and practice.

In the synods that developed further west, stricter practices were the rule. For many years, the former Iowa Synod cooperated with the General Council. Observers were sent to their conventions, money was contributed towards foreign missions of the General Council, a joint German hymnal, the *Kirchenbuch*, was produced, and there was a general move toward unity. But this was disrupted by loose practices within the General Council. At its convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1872, the Council attempted to bring forth a statement that would convince the Iowa Synod that it was really confessional in its fellowship practices, but there was much opposition. Finally this declaration, the Akron Rule (often confused with the Galesburg Rule) was promulgated:

1. The Rule is: Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.
2. Any exceptions are to be only a matter of special privilege, and no a matter of "rights."
3. In all matters relating to such exceptions, the pastor must decide in accordance with these ground rules according to his best conscience.⁸

Paragraphs 2 and 3 were not acceptable to Iowa. Hence three years later the General Council, meeting at Galesburg, issued a statement omitting Paragraphs 2 and 3. But although the Galesburg convention gave greater prominence to Scripture and the Confessions, the less confessional group saw to it that the objectionable paragraphs from the Akron Rule were still sustained. The political compromising that took place is clear. Hence the Iowa Synod was not willing to accept either the Akron Rule or the Galesburg Rule. As a leader from Iowa, Pastor Johannes Deindoerfer, expressed it: "Since the parts regarding exceptions and special privileges were allowed to remain in force, the back door had been left open for lax practices on the part of the less confessionally-minded party in

the General Council.”¹⁰ History proves time and again that doctrinal laxity leads not to unity but to further division!

In preparation for the forming of the American Lutheran Conference in 1930, a group of propositions called the ‘Minneapolis Theses’ was drawn up. In Article III, Section 2, the Minneapolis Theses rejected “all unionism and syncretism,” and affirmed the rule, “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.”¹⁰ But this rule appears to have been made ineffective in the *United Testimony on Faith and Life*, 1952, where exceptions again are brought in. In other words, the specifically Galesburg decision was once again suspended to make room for the unionistic Akron Rule!

There seems to be a steady erosion in American Lutheranism regarding the sanctity of Communion fellowship. In the “Model Constitution” prepared for congregations in 1962, the ALC suggested that Communion participation was “. . . open to confirmed members of this and other Lutheran congregations . . .” (By-Law 1). In 1965, the College of District Presidents approved changing the phrase “. . . and other Lutheran congregations . . .” to read, “. . . and to individual members of other congregations . . .” So By-Law 1 now reads: “Participation in Holy Communion shall be open to confirmed members of this congregation and to individual members of other congregations who accept the Lutheran teaching in regard to Holy Communion as set forth in Paragraph 2” Paragraph 2 then states that worthy participation requires sincere repentance, faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour, the earnest desire to amend one’s sinful life, and the acceptance of the Scriptural teaching of the Real Presence of Christ with his Body and Blood in the Sacrament.

Now, one might ask, what more could be wished than that a prospective communicant should show these marks of worthy participation, and especially the last—accept the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ with his Body and Blood in the Sacrament? Unfortunately, history proves that words alone do not really solve a thing. When Luther and Zwingli debated on the Sacrament at Marburg in 1529, they were unable to reach an agreement because Zwingli insisted that Christ according to his human nature was confined to heaven since the Ascension, and therefore could not truly be present in the Sacrament. And yet a year later, when Bucer tried to bring together the Lutheran and Reformed groups, Zwingli cheerfully agreed to Bucer’s formula on what was called the “Real Presence.” As Theodore Kolde relates it: “Zwingli was ready to acknowledge the presence of the Body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, only

not in a natural or bodily manner. Thereby, through further clarification, it was seen that he really had not changed his position. But also, upon Bucer's insistence, he conceded this formula: 'The true Body of Christ is truly presented.''' Therefore, the repeating of theological cliches proves nothing.

C. Reasons for Close Communion.

Attendance at Communion in Lutheran churches, in normal situations, should be limited to confirmed Lutherans for the following reasons.

1. Holy Communion is the act of a group of people who share a oneness in Jesus Christ. This oneness embraces their faith in Christ and their convictions concerning the Sacrament. It is disturbed by the presence of an outsider who does not share that faith. This is why the Ancient Church dismissed all non-members before the celebration of the Eucharist.

2. Reverence for the Sacrament requires that the Body and Blood of the Lord not be distributed indiscriminately. It is both a matter of shielding the Sacrament from abuse, and also of preserving the integrity of the congregation. The congregation has been entrusted with the Means of Grace. From the time of the Ancient Church, this has meant that the Sacrament has been distributed only to those who have qualified themselves.

3. Attending the Lord's Supper, at least for Lutherans, is an act of confession. Going to a Lutheran altar is telling others that one believes the Real Presence as taught by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Where members of denominations questioning the Real Presence are admitted to the Sacrament, it suggests that perhaps their doctrine is just as valid as ours. Concern for confessional honesty and integrity demands that certain principles be set up and followed to decide who shall be admitted to the Lord's Table.

4. Close Communion is called for by our concern for the welfare of those who participate. As was said previously, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is committed to the teaching that the Body and Blood of Christ are distributed to all who receive the Bread and Wine. Those who do not discern the Lord's Body in the Sacrament "... eat and drink judgment to themselves..." The Church has a heavy responsibility at this point. Christian love requires that none be admitted to the Communion Table until they have been properly instructed in how to prepare themselves.

5. The whole parish education system of the Church is built around the assumption that instruction is needed prior to communing. This system would be jeopardized if Open Communion were practiced. Furthermore, our practice of Close

Communion is not at all exclusive. It is not that we are forbidding people to come. All that we ask is that if they are sincere about wanting to attend the Sacrament, they accept instruction and confess their agreement with it. Everyone in the community is invited to come provided he is willing to qualify himself.

I once served a congregation where Open Communion had previously been practiced. After I became pastor, I tried to take the Lutheran position and, of course, there were conflicts. But I stood my ground. In one case a family that had communed for years without joining the congregation was offended. So I went to their home to explain our position. I told them, "This hurts me as much as it does you. I don't like to see you unable to come to Communion. But I feel that the teaching of the Church is right." They agreed to come to my Adult Class. If they had never come to this class, they likely would never have joined the Church. They did, and became loyal members of the Church. Afterwards they could not tell how glad they were that they had enrolled. They became enthusiastic supporters, urging others to attend the Pastor's Class. Where this matter is handled in a kind and tactful way, I am convinced that it will work out.

III. Communion as the Fellowship of God's People.

A. They are One Bread!

In the Sacrament, not only do we have Communion with the Crucified, Risen, and Ascended Lord, but also with one another in the Church. This is brought out especially in I Corinthians 10:16-17: "The Cup of Blessing which we consecrate, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? The Bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ? Because there is one Bread, we who are many are one body, for we are all receivers of that one Bread." Some have wondered why Paul here reverses the usual order, and mentions the Chalice before the Host. The reason is that he is using the one Bread as an illustration of the oneness that Christian believers have through their fellowship in the Body of Christ.

The Greek church father, John Chrysostom, makes this comment: "For what is the bread? The body of Christ. What do they become who partake of it? The body of Christ: not many bodies but one body. Many grains are made into one bread so that the grains appear no more at all, though they are still there. In their joined state their diversity is no longer discernible. In the same way we are also bound up with one another and with Christ. You are not nourished from one body and the

next man from a different body, but all from one and the same body. For this reason he adds, 'We have all partaken of one bread. If of one and the same bread, then we are all become the same thing.' "12

B. The Proclamation of Christ's Death

"As often as you eat this Bread and drink from this Chalice, you do proclaim the Lord's death till he come again" (I Cor. 11:26). The task of the Church, standing between the Lord's first and second coming, is to proclaim Christ's death. In the practical task of the Church, we speak of stewardship and evangelism. We receive strength for this work in the Blessed Sacrament, which has been given to sustain Christ's people till he come again. Christ is coming again. And every time that we commune, we are confessing our faith in this Christ who once died, but is risen, and will return to judge the quick and the dead. And, as Kaesemann suggests, the command to do this in memory of Christ means not only to partake of the Sacrament again and again, but faithfully to proclaim the Gospel till Christ comes at the end. At that time, the Lord's Supper will be changed into the Great Supper of heaven.

Hence, everytime that we, God's People, gather in fellowship at the Communion Table, we are united with one another. But the fellowship in which we are united transcends that of the particular church to which we belong, and unites us with members of all churches which practice the Sacrament according to its institution. Furthermore, time is no barrier. We are united with God's people in the communion of saints who have gone before us and are in the presence of Christ. This fact is brought out in the Sanctus, where we join the believers on Palm Sunday with those of all time. And our fellowship is expressed best of all in the Communion Preface for Ascension Day which marks the high-point of our liturgy:

It is truly meet, right, and salutary, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God:

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who, after his Resurrection, appeared openly to all his disciples, and in their sight was taken up into heaven, that he might make us partakers of his divine Nature.

Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee, and saying:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; Heaven and earth are full of thy glory; Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest.

FOOTNOTES

1. Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Muenchen: Beck, 1952), p. 364; *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Walter A. Hansen, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), p. 415.
2. Ernst Kaesemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Goettingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), p. 33.
3. Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchton, the Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), p. 233.
4. Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), p. 307.
5. Kaesemann, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
8. Christian Otto Kraushaar, *Veraussungsformen der Lutherischen Kirche Amerikas* (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1911), p. 473.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
10. *Handbook of The American Lutheran Church*, Edition of 1967, p. 146.
11. PR 21, pp. 387f.
12. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, N.E. Nagel, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), p. 28.