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DESIRING THE TABLE: REVISING THE DOCTRINE OF CLOSED COMMUNION

Mark Brown

Let me describe a situation. It happens to have been my situation, with some additional characters should someone consider doxing me, but I think it might resonate far beyond the parochial. It starts when you are parachuted into a congregation that has twenty worshipers on an average weekend. My particular version included splitting those twenty people across Saturday and Sunday, but that was just a wrinkle. Also, the particular number isn't really the issue: twenty people meeting in a house weekly would be a big number; a number that might not be able to afford a pastor with an M.Div. degree, but still a full number. Yours could be a congregation that has a hundred worshipers on any given weekend, but when the building seats 650, and the front twenty pews are empty (because we know that Lutherans always sit at the back), that hundred feels just as empty. Likewise, circuit riding between multiple locations, let us say three points with thirty souls each, would be similar. Now, let us talk demographics. At the beginning of that situation, you are an old 37; by any reality you are approaching the end of childbearing years, firmly in middle age. Yet you very likely are the only person in the congregation that could even think of having a child. The presence of your family might take the average age down by over a decade.

Next, let us add the financial reality. There is never more than the next payroll in the bank accounts. Fifty percent of the congregation's budget comes from two folks, one of them already well past the

biblical eighty years if they have the strength. And you, tithing pastor, are number three. The difficult part of this situation really isn't the 80/20 rule of church financing, in which 80 percent of the money comes from 20 percent of the folks. That ratio will exist anywhere; the difficulty of the demographics is one common to all groups in the United States. All the money is owned by the over-65 crowd. So there are two things that happen here. First, to finance anything requires convincing your grandfather to pay for it; your father if you are fortunate. Second, at any time this source of funding could decide that Arizona looks good and move there.

The last bit of the situation is the theological reality. It is the boomers who control your finances and are the primary folks present. They are poorly catechized; addicted to anything that creates warm fuzzy feelings, which usually includes ecumenical activity; have likely never been disciplined, at least

not in what evangelicals would call basic Christian piety of prayer and Bible reading—but they are keenly attuned to anything they may call fundamentalism, which is just anything that might draw a distinction or harsh a buzz.

Parachuted into any situation such as this, which I think to be honest, is probably over 35 percent of congregations in the Missouri Synod, what do you do? Of course the first thing you do is deny communion to the first visitor that stumbles in the door, in accordance with LCMS practice, right? You courageously take your stand beside Gideon, saying,

My point is not to deny closed communion. That is and has been the standard practice of the church. My point, beyond a blatant attempt at self-justification and clearing of my conscience, is to think what closed communion means.

"Lord, it is still too many, cut it down more." When the person-who-represents-35 percent-of-the-budget's daughter, who was confirmed but attends only when in town on Christmas Eve to humor Dad approaches the rail, you politely give her a blessing, correct? Or when the nice Pres-

I believe that a simple and practical definition of closed communion would include: a) those who are baptized; b) those who confess their sinful state; c) those who join in the creed and hear the words of institution and so know what is offered at the level of a child's understanding; and d) those who desire to come.

byterian lady whom one of the recently widowed 80-year-olds decided to marry on a whim splits time between her church and her new groom's, you grill her about her beliefs—and when she says what typical mainline Protestants would say, you ask her to abstain from the rail.

And of course if you do any of these things, you are an idiot. You may be a theologically correct idiot, but you are probably an

unemployed idiot sitting on candidate-for-the-reverend-ministry (CRM) status working at the local used car lot for the rest of your life. Not that the seminary would care; they parachuted you into that situation, because hey, they have your tuition money. Not that the district would care. They care only to the extent that you can prevent people from complaining to them. If you cause people to complain, even if you might be theologically correct, they'd rather you were working at the used car lot. Now your conscience might bother you, at least if you have absorbed the theologically correct line. But when you have quit your job, spent four years in seminary, and your long-suffering wife with three kids is looking for grocery money, well, it is amazing how soft the voice of conscience can get.

Exegetical and liturgical grounding

Enough of my whining; by grace I survived my version of that scenario, so let me turn to the point of this meditation. My point is not to deny closed communion. That is and has been the standard practice of the church. My point, beyond a blatant attempt at self-justification and clearing of my conscience, is to think what closed communion means. I don't want to think about it in an era that already has more than one foot in the grave—the era of strong denominational identity. My point is to think about it in the living era of post-denominational reality. I don't want to think about it in an era of membership that is dying with the last of the World War II generation, but I want to think about it in what must be an era of discipleship, of nurturing baby Christians. And most of all I want to think about closed communion within the sense of being a cath-

olic, not a Roman Catholic, but simply a member of the universal church.

The entire reason that closed communion is even an issue is because of 1 Corinthians 11. Paul writes that "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord." Another way of saying that, I believe, would be simply, "If you partake unworthily, you crucify God again." Now in admitting we are sinners, we already acknowledge

The historic LCMS understanding reads Luther's words as plural and introduces the concept of the collective. This is where our fear of the table comes from. If we admit someone who does not fully share our confession, if they do not have the pure gospel, then perhaps they have defiled the entire sacrament.

that we have caused the crucifixion, but what unworthy participation is akin to is joining the Jews in saying "His blood be upon us and our children." So the question then becomes, what is eating and drinking unworthily? Luther answers this question in the

Small Catechism, but Paul first answered it in 1 Corinthians 11. He begins by saying, "Let a person examine himself." Paul also uses this phrase in 11 Corinthians 13:5; the point is simply one of faith. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith." And what is that faith? "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon themselves." The one who eats and drinks worthily is the one who believes that the sacrament is Christ given for us. This is exactly what Luther says in the Catechism: "That person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'" Yes, there is a second phrase, which I will discuss shortly, but for now the one who receives worthily is the one with faith. And we should recognize that the Apostle says that it is for the person to examine themselves. Luther also in the Large Catechism holds that "This is the entire Christian preparation for receiving worthily. Since this treasure is entirely presented in these words, it cannot be received and made ours in any other ways than with the heart.... This is done by faith in the heart, which discerns this treasure and desires it." Presenting oneself at the rail is presenting belief and desire.

But if that were the whole story, I've just turned closed communion into open communion. What else should be a fence to the table beyond the individual's determination? I want to turn briefly to the practices of two other communions. First, the Eastern Orthodox, who practice infant communion immediately upon baptism. This practice holds well with a standard Lutheran response to Baptists concerning communion: "Babies can have faith." Faith is not an intellectual endeavor but

is itself the gift of God. And that gift comes in the indwelling of the Spirit in baptism. The Eastern Orthodox practice of postbaptismal infant communion gives us one of the justifiable external barriers to the table. Are you baptized? Has the gift of the Spirit been given to you through water and the word? Although babies can have faith, this practice would seem to call into question Paul's admonition to examine ourselves. The Roman Catholic communion opens

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the table to children around seven years of age. The requirements are a basic understanding of the faith and sacrament such that a seven-year-old can grasp, which amounts to three items: What you

would hear at Mass; recognition of our sinful state; and confession. This list is not far from the "Christian Questions with Their Answers" in Luther's Catechism. These are also all exemplified in the Lutheran liturgy: in the corporate confession and absolution or simply in the Kyrie, in the creed, and in the words of institution. Participation in the liturgy is fitting preparation.

I thus believe that a simple and practical definition of closed communion would include: a) those who are baptized; b) those who confess their sinful state; c) those who join in the creed and hear the words of institution and so know what is offered at the level of a child's understanding; and d) those who desire to come. We need to take to heart Luther's words in the Large Catechism regarding this treasure from heaven that Christ has brought us: "We must never think of the Sacrament as something harmful from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy that grants salvation and comfort.... Why, then, do we act as if the Sacrament were a poison, the eating of which would bring death?" Luther continues to say, "To be sure, it is true that those who despise the Sacrament and live in an unchristian way receive it to their hurt and damnation, but nothing shall be good or wholesome for them." That sounds to me like Luther's acknowledgment that of course there are those who will come unworthily. But it is worse to be overly scrupulous—to treat the sacrament like poison—than to accept the fact that some who present themselves might be unworthy.

Historical setting

Now let me turn to that second phrase of the Small Catechism

that I elided before and a historical argument. That second phrase is "But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe." This phrasing is a little troublesome in English, which other than the colloquial *y'all* does not have a distinctive second person plural pronoun. The historic LCMS understanding reads Luther's words as plural and introduces the concept of the collective. This is where our fear of the table comes from. If we admit someone who does not fully share our confession, if they do not have the pure gospel, then perhaps they have defiled the entire sacrament. Hence the very catholic low fence I have suggested—baptism, childlike understanding, desire—has often been replaced with a very high fence: agreement in all articles; declaration and pastoral examination; and all of this represented by membership either local or synodical.

I suggest that the high fence is something of a historical accident, perhaps appropriate to a previous time and place, but wrongheaded in our time and place. Let me outline three historical phases: The first I will call the Westphalian era. The Peace of Augsburg introduced the concept of the ruler's religion as the faith of the territory (*cuius regio, eius religio*), but there were only two options: Roman Catholic and Lutheran. The Treaty of Westphalia included the Reformed option. When the Continental development was combined with the English Reformation, what resulted was a patchwork of civic state religions. This outcome led to a period of religious confessionalization and the construction of nation-states. There may have been a high fence for the table, but it was never a fence that was tested. Italians

who found themselves in Sweden would not present themselves at the altar rail. And the common folk following the Thirty Years' War were fine with the religion on offer in their region rather than a return to open conflict. This

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and desiring the
grace offered in the
sacrament.*

Westphalian world allowed for high fences that simply were never tested.

The second period we can call the denominational era. That title is a little anachronistic, because denominations are really a nineteenth-century American development, and this era stretches back a bit before 1776. But what we are talking about is the era of formerly state churches being transported to the liberal paradise of the United States. Initially,

ethnic identity continued to shape one's religious identity. If you were English, you were an Anglican or Congregationalist if of true Plymouth stock. If German, you were usually either Catholic or Lutheran, or possibly Old Order Amish. If a Scot or a Dutchman, Presbyterian. But these ethnic identities began to break down as the melting pot did its business. The state church connections to the old countries broke down. And what took its place was denominations and the emphasis on church membership. It is a weak heuristic, but you can take a look at the Google *n*-gram for church membership. In the early 1800s, the term is nonexistent in the literature. It takes a step up through 1910, as the denominations are formed and the last of the nineteenth-century immigrants are assimilated. It takes a massive step upward from 1920 through 1980, the salad years of the denominations. And then you can see it starting to decline. Church membership attempted to carry all the weight of the centuries of ethnic confessionalization, and it broke. The table fence during this era would be tested by intermarriage and frequent geographic movement. Those high fences would be maintained through the testing; but eventually denominational identity would break under both ecumenical activity and the sociology of the United States. The high fence was tested and breached.

That leads us to the third era, which started roughly in the 1970s and continues. I've called it the post-denominational reality. This survey could at this time run through all the acronyms of all the denominations and talk about who has altar fellowship with whom; who even cares; and also the wild and woolly post-denominational space, but part of the purpose of this discussion is to

admit that such things are at best nonsensical. The denominational fences have all been broken, even Rome's. Ask yourself when was the last funeral Mass (or regular Mass) that you attended in which you would not have been given the host. The only one in which I would not have been able to commune was a funeral Mass said for a man who attended what was normally a Latin Mass outpost. That priest, knowing there were Lutherans present, including the widow, specifically asked that all non-Catholics abstain. But even this man gave the host to the widow. And she took it. The priest told the others to abstain. Her Lutheran pastor was there and followed that admonition. And I don't know what the priest thought, but we were the priest and the Levite that day. And the Samaritan widow taught us something. The post-denominational reality is that all the extra fences that we have humanly erected have come down. What remains

are those from a simpler, more catholic time.

Conclusion

In sum, I think we all feel the conflict between the denominational era we inherited that would like us to maintain a much higher fence, and the parochial post-denominational reality. And this tension finds its way into your parish existence, because there is usually at least one person who either out of nostalgia or out of superior knowledge pines for that higher fence. And they have the backing of the denomination, which invokes "closed communion" like a mantra while never actually showing what it looks like. The best construction I can put on it is that they might still be living in places where the denominational age lingers. And if you don't agree with them, you are advocating open communion.

The purpose of this short reflection is to refute definition and

to assert a practice of closed communion that finds solid support in the Catechisms; is attentive to the Apostle Paul; and is contextually attuned. A catholic practice of closed communion recognizes the body of Christ. That body of Christ is present both on the altar but also in the one who approaches the altar and is drawn to that altar. That body of Christ is: baptized, cognizant of sin, repentant, and desiring the grace offered in the sacrament. The right presider at the sacrament does not spend time worrying about dispensing poison but instead is pouring oil and wine on human wounds—spiritual wounds that in our age have left many half dead on the road. We should not pass by on the other side of the rail. *LF*

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