

Admission to, and Registration for, the Lord's Supper

by P.E. Kretzmann

Ever since the group of Christians who, as members of the Roman Catholic Church, felt in conscience bound to separate themselves from the followers of the Roman Pontiff and rallied round the man whom God had chosen as His instrument to reform and reconstruct the ancient Church of Christ and His apostles, this *ecclesia renovata* has been named after this champion of the truth, Martin Luther. The designation "Lutheran" was attached to this group of confessors ever since the Leipzig Debate of 1519 and the Diet of Worms of 1521. Its significance to every member of the Lutheran Church, therefore, is this that it demands a return to the conditions of the Apostolic Church, to the full adherence to the Scriptures as the only foundation of doctrine and the only norm of life. As the apostles felt themselves bound to the command included in the words of their Master: "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," and again: "Make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," so the Church of the Reformation regarded it as its prime duty to re-establish and maintain the purity of doctrine and practice which had characterized the Church of the first century.

One of the greatest treasures of the Church is the Holy Eucharist, the last will and Testament of the Savior, bequeathing the benefits of His suffering to the believers until the end of time. From ancient times the Church had therefore been very zealous in guarding this Sacrament against abuse. Admission to the Lord's Supper had always been regarded as a very great privilege. Accordingly we have the institute of the catechumenate in the early Church, which required a careful instruction of all candidates for membership. And if any member of the Church had become guilty of false teaching and confession or of some sinful deeds, which made church discipline necessary, the various congregations employed strict measures in disciplining and reinstating the erring member, lest the purity of the relationship in the body of Christ be sullied.

The Church of the Reformation, specifically the Lutheran Church, felt in duty bound to employ safeguards similar to those applied in the early Church. This the Church was under obligation to do for her own sake, as the body to whom the means of grace are entrusted and whose pastors are stewards of the mysteries of God, and for the sake of those who might desire the privilege of receiving the Lord's Supper, lest they do not give thought to the worthy reception of Holy Communion, as set forth in the Word of God. Thus the instruction of prospective members became one feature of Lutheran practice, although the rite of confirmation was not made a sacrament. And the other safeguard against an unworthy reception was provided by the custom of receiving announcements, or registrations, for the Holy Communion.

The latter custom grew out of the statement of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. In the former document we read: "For none are admitted except they be first examined. The people are also advised concerning the dignity and the use of the Sacrament." (Conc. Trigl., Art. XXIV, p. 65.) In the Apology the corresponding passage reads: "For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved." (Conc. Trigl., 383f.) As the whole line of argument in the confessions shows, the Reformers kept the Biblical injunctions concerning the proper use of the Sacrament in mind in both their teachings and their practice, including not only the words of institution, but also the discussion offered by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 10:16, 17 and chap. 11:18–32.

The custom of registration or announcement is a part of the genuine Lutheran observance of close communion. It is based, as we have seen, on certain requirements clearly set forth in Holy Writ and has as its purpose the safeguarding both of the congregation and the pastor as being in charge of the Sacrament and, on the other hand, the prospective communicants. Altar fellowship in the Scriptural sense is not permissible when

there is a divergence in doctrine and in life. Where there is no unity of the spirit and no agreement in practice, it is absurd to simulate a fellowship that does not, in fact, exist.

It is true that there may be a twilight period in church relationships, while people who have been subject to error are instructed, while they are honest searchers for the truth and otherwise have the personal qualifications for worthy attendance at the Lord's Table. That was the case while negotiations were carried on between the Oriental and the Occidental branches of the Church. The Iconoclastic Controversy did not result in severing relationships at once. But when the *Filioque* Controversy could not be adjusted according to the Word of God, the Roman Church, in this case at least the exponent of orthodoxy, broke off relations with the Eastern Church, and thereafter there was no intercommunion. At the time of the Reformation there again was a twilight period, namely while the Swiss Reformers and others were being instructed with regard to the truth of God's Word. But when the necessary instruction had repeatedly and patiently been given and subsequently the lines of demarcation between truth and falsehood had been established, especially after Marburg, Luther felt in conscience bound to oppose every kind of church fellowship with Zwingli and his adherents. Thereafter, his denunciations of altar fellowship with the Reformed do not lack in clarity or in force. In his "Warning Against the Doctrine of Zwingli" he writes: "It shocks me to hear that in one and the same church, at one and the same altar, both parties should take and receive one and the same Sacrament, with one party believing that it receives nothing but bread and wine, and the other believing that it receives the true body and blood of Christ. And I often ask myself whether it is possible that a preacher or pastor could be so callous and wicked as to tolerate such a thing, to let each party conceive of the Sacrament in its own way and let both parties think that they are receiving the same Sacrament. But if there be such a pastor, he must have a heart harder than stone, steel, and adamant; he certainly is an apostle of wrath." (St. Louis Ed., XVII: 2016, #20.) The same thought is expressed in Luther's "Interview with Dr. Georg Major." (XVII: 1180. Both quotations in Walther, *Kirche und Amt*, 117.)

The staunch upholders of Lutheranism during the four centuries since Augsburg, both dogmaticians and practical theologians, have consistently followed the Scriptural principles referred to in the Lutheran Confessions as to altar fellowship. In discussing the question of close communion Pieper emphasizes the presupposition of unity in faith and doctrine, quoting with approval the words of Walther on the same question. (*Christl. Dogmatik*, III: 444, referring to Walther's *Pastorale*, #18, Anm. 4. See also Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, 153.) Stump presents the same position, when he states: "Admission to the Lord's Supper is an acknowledgment of unity in the faith; and this does not exist in the case of those who reject the Lutheran doctrine." (*The Christian Faith*, 356.) Bergendoff expresses himself in the same manner: "Christians are not divided because they do not celebrate the Sacrament together: they do not celebrate the Sacrament together because they are divided on other issues. Until greater unity is established in these other fields, only another issue is added if we insist on making the Lord's Supper a means to an agreement ... Open Communion is too easy a remedy for the wounds of the Body of Christ today." (*Christendom*, Autumn, 1942, 536.)

The more conservative Lutherans of America did, as a matter of fact, observe these principles. During the meetings that led to the formation of the Lutheran General Council, for example, the question of altar fellowship was an issue. At the organization meeting of the Council a communication from the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Adjacent States asked for a reply to the question: "What relation will this venerable body (the General Council) in future sustain to ... mixed communions?" (Ochsenford, *Documentary History*, 154 f.) The implied testimony of the Ohio Synod in this communication and similar misgivings expressed by the Missouri Synod were not without effect upon the General Council, as the further history of the "Four Points" shows. The Pittsburgh Declaration of 1869 was a move toward a stricter practice, which was then expressed in the Akron Rule of 1872 in the form: "I. The rule is: Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only. II. The exceptions to the rule belong to the sphere of *privilege*, not of *right*." This rule was affirmed at Galesburg in 1875. It is explained in the official declarations of the General Council as follows: "As regards the 'Communion with those not of our Church.' We hold: 1. The principle of discriminating as over against an indiscriminate Communion is to be firmly maintained. Heretics and fundamental errorists are to be excluded from the Lord's Table. The responsibility of an unworthy approach to the Lord's Table does not rest alone upon him who makes the approach, but also on him who invites it. 2. It is the right and duty of every pastor to make

such examination as is necessary to determine the Scriptural fitness, in doctrine and life, of persons applying for admission to the Communion. This should be done invariably when they are admitted for the first time and whenever afterward it may be necessary. So that it may be affirmed of our Church now, as at the beginning: ‘None are admitted except they be first proved’.” (Ochsenford, lc, 209. Cp *Lehre und Wehre*, 1888, 257 ff. 302–306.)

The Lutheran position with regard to altar fellowship was well summarized by S. Fritschel in an article contributed to the *Lutheran Cyclopaedia* in 1905, from which we quote: “The celebration of the Lord’s Supper constitutes the outward communion of the Christian Church, whose inner essence is communion of faith that comes to outward expression in communion of confession . . . The unity of outward church-communion in which the individual communicants are bound together presupposes their unity of faith and confession. Where such division and disunion has taken place that communions with different confessions exist beside each other there it is not possible, as the Apostle says, 1 Cor. 11:20 (οὐκ ἔστιν, it cannot be) to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in common. It is the sad inevitable result of the present division of the visible Church that now every church-communion must celebrate the Communion separately, and neither can the members of one participate in the celebration of the other, nor can the one admit the members of the other . . . Therefore the principle of unmixed altar-fellowship was from the beginning a confessional principle of the Lutheran Church, and was most decidedly maintained by it—as also by the Reformed Church—as long as it adhered to its confession. Unionism has relinquished the principle and made mixed altar-fellowship its shibboleth.”

If we carefully study the Scriptural principles involved, we find it clearly indicated that inter-communion, altar-fellowship without doctrinal unity, is rank hypocrisy. If people who according to their open confession do not share the same faith, if they are at variance with regard to truths which both parties claim to find stated in the Bible, and yet engage in a rite which is meant to express, in the most solemn manner, the fullest spiritual communion, they make a pretense at unity which does not exist, and they “practice this deception in the innermost sanctuary of the Christian Church.” No one was more filled with zeal concerning the inviolability of the Holy Scriptures in this respect than Luther. Notable among his expressions on this subject is his exposition of Gal. 5:9, where he states, among other things: “In the matter of faith and salvation, when men teach lies and errors under the color of the truth, and seduce many, here hath charity no place; for here we lose not any benefit bestowed upon the unthankful, but we lose the Word, faith, Christ, and everlasting life.” (Luther on Galatians. Trsl. by Middleton, 446.) Just as clear and unequivocal are the conclusions of Rudelbach in discussing the principles concerned in the matter of unionism in the churches: “The more sharply men understood the differences, the more sincere they were toward one another, the less they shunned the necessary polemics, the more we are justified in assuming that there was a true tendency toward union, not one which was merely simulated or occasioned by external considerations; (on the other hand) the more careless men were with reference to the questions in dispute, the more eager they were to hide the wounds, the more they regarded a mere peaceful compromise as the desired objective . . . , the farther removed they were from the unity of the spirit which is the innermost essence of all true union.” (*Reformation und Union*, 343; cp 491, 499.) Charles Porterfield Krauth also shares this position, as appears time and again in his well known monograph *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, notably in the last section. The following statement is ascribed to him: “To go to the same Table with those whom we know to be in error in regard to any truth which Christ has revealed, is not only to hold the truth of Scripture cheap, but to make such persons all the more settled in their errors or indifferent to the importance of truth.” (Quoted in *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. LVII (1938), p. 53.)

The application of these principles places a heavy responsibility on every Lutheran pastor, especially in our days, when a blanket subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is not in itself a guarantee of the unity of the spirit required for altar-fellowship. And Since the Lord’s Supper is the Sacrament of the most intimate fellowship of spirit, a confession of the unity of the spirit which the Lord of the Church desires all Christians to strive after, therefore the attitude of pastors, of congregations, and also of entire church bodies or synods must be determined by the instructions of Holy Writ. If, for example, the one group, body, or synod bearing the Lutheran name, officially declares, for conscience’ sake its belief in the inerrancy and inviolability of the Holy Scriptures, stating that “they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the

infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters,” and teachers of other Lutheran bodies regard only the “religious content” of the Bible as inspired, or if they speak of a “unique cooperation” between the inspiring Agent and the inspired writers, thereby placing the human and the divine element on the same level, then there is evidently no unity of the spirit with regard to this important doctrine. When one synod officially declares, in an official statement, that the Confessions of the Lutheran Church “are binding upon the conscience not because our Church has made them nor because they are the outcome of doctrinal controversies, but only because they are the doctrinal decisions of Holy Scripture itself,” and when its pastors and teachers are required “to pledge themselves to teach according to the symbols not ‘in so far as’, but ‘because’ the symbols agree with Scripture,” and other church bodies and teachers modify this to mean an acceptance only *quatenus*, then the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions becomes, as Luther so aptly put it, “a waxen nose.” then there is no unity of faith. If the one body or group declares, for conscience’ sake, that lodgery and unionism are incompatible with sound Christianity, and other Lutheran bodies tolerate lodgery and promote unionism, then there is again no unity of the spirit. To practice intercommunion under such circumstances means to promote disunity.

When the admission of individual Christians to the Holy Communion is in question, in instances where there is no letter of transfer or guest card to decide the matter, the conscientious pastor must consider it his duty to determine, in an evangelical way, whether the person or persons concerned may be admitted according to the statements made above. This exploration may be made in an altogether informal way, in the form of an ordinary conversation, the purpose being to find out whether there is a true unity of the spirit. The individual situation will suggest whether there must be a formal renunciation of membership in a church body whose doctrinal position is at variance with that which we profess. Quite frequently it will be found that persons desiring the Lord’s Supper in our midst hold to the simple truths of Luther’s Catechism, with their correct explanation, and that they are altogether unaware of the false stand taken by the church body to which they have belonged. A large measure of wisdom is required in such cases, when individuals and entire groups and congregations give evidence of their being soundly Lutheran in doctrine, although church fellowship has not yet been established between the synods to which they severally belong. Frequently it may be difficult to determine whether an actual dissent of applicants from the official false stand of the church body in which they hold membership must be required. Questions such as ministering to members of a congregation in the pastoral care of another man may enter in, or the conscientious pastor must ascertain whether the persons involved are *eo ipso* becoming partakers of other men’s sins if they are not *in statu confessionis* over against errors held officially in some church body which may, on paper at least, subscribe to the correct confessional foundation.

To these considerations in the field of doctrine, about which every conscientious pastor will be most seriously concerned, we must add also such questions as pertain to life, to the field of Christian ethics. If one professing to be a Christian continues to practice sins, which are clearly portrayed as such in the Bible, and refuses or deliberately neglects to rectify the situation, he would manifestly go to the Lord’s Table to his damnation. For that reason the instruction preceding a person’s admission to the Lord’s Supper must include the Christian’s life and conduct, as indicated also in the second section of the Fifth Chief Part of the Catechism as in use in our circles: Of Confession. A correct knowledge of sin and sinfulness must of necessity precede the confession of sins; otherwise the entire procedure will become a mere mechanical performance. A pastor may have a splendid opportunity to discuss some of the special temptations that assail our people in these times, referring in particular also to such transgressions of God’s holy Law as may from time to time become evident. Quite frequently a formal exploration will in no wise be demanded by the situation, since the helpfulness suggested by the pastor’s whole attitude will encourage prospective communicants to speak of matters burdening their consciences without further incentive. In this fashion the ideal atmosphere of proper communion registration is created.

Faithful pastors have consistently followed the principles presented above. In smaller congregations the practice has always been observed according to which hours of registration were announced. During those hours the pastor would, if possible, meet in person those who desired to partake of the Holy Supper, and it was usually possible to make more of the interview than a mere perfunctory expression of good will, with the wish that the

Lord would grant His blessings to the respective communicant. The personal announcement of each individual communicant was ordinarily not insisted upon, and it was customary for the younger members of the family to announce the intended attendance of their parents together with their own. Evidently most pastors wanted to keep in closer touch with the newly confirmed, in order to continue and deepen the instructions of the catechumen class. On the whole, announcements by telephone have not been encouraged, since they would hardly serve the purpose for which communion registration was originally introduced. Registration by means of post cards, and restricted to *bona fide* communicant members of the congregation, are in use in some instances. In at least some larger congregations another form of announcement seems to have found favor, one that at least in a measure observes the suggestions and regulations found in the Lutheran church orders of the sixteenth century. During the hours set aside for announcement, the prospective communicants assemble in an anteroom. At intervals of ten or fifteen minutes the pastor will receive a group in another room, where he hits an opportunity to speak to them informally on some phase of the Lord's Supper and the many topics which are related to the worthy reception of the Holy Supper. This method has obvious advantages, especially for every pastor who takes this phase of his work seriously. Some pastors find it advantageous to set a few minutes aside at the end of meetings of various organizations preceding the celebration of the Holy Communion. A talk of a few minutes, carefully prepared, may bring home some of the significant features of the Holy Supper. Then those who wish to partake of the Lord's Supper may come forward and signify their intention to the pastor. If they wish to have a longer interview, this can be arranged for at some convenient time. The main thing is that the institution of "*Anmeldung*" be not discarded, but that it be made to serve the original purpose in an evangelical way.

The entire situation is well presented by Luther, who as early as 1523, in his *Formula Missae*, presents these suggestions: "Moreover the custom is to be preserved here which is observed in connection with baptism; namely, that notice first be given to the bishop, by those who are about to commune, that they request to be communicated with the Lord's Supper, so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. Then let him not admit those seeking, unless they should give a reason for their faith; and being questioned should answer whether they understand what the Lord's Supper is, what it stands for, and of what they wish to become partakers by its use, to wit, if they are able to recite the words of consecration from memory and explain that they come because of the consciousness of sin, or the fear of death, or troubled by some other evil or the temptation of the flesh, of the world, of the devil, they hunger and thirst for that word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord Himself through the ministry of the bishop by which they may be consoled and comforted, such as Christ out of priceless love gave and instituted in this Supper when He said: Take and eat, etc.

"But I think it will be sufficient if this questioning and investigation of him who seeks to be communicated is done once a year. Indeed it is possible that the one who seeks may be so understanding that he should be questioned either once only in his life, or in fact never. For through this custom we desire to guard against this, that the worthy and unworthy do not rush blindly to the Supper of the Lord, as we have seen done in the Roman Church hitherto, where nothing else is sought but to be communicated ... Then when the bishop has perceived that they understand these things, he should also watch this whether they evidence this faith and knowledge in life and conduct; for Satan also both perceives all these things and is able to talk about them; that is, if he should see some fornicator, adulterer, drunkard, gamester, usurer, slanderer, or one made infamous by some manifest crime, let him be excluded absolutely from this Supper, unless by evident proof he shall have witnessed that his life has been changed. For the Supper should not be denied these who sometimes fall away and return, sorrowing over the lapse; indeed we should realize that the Supper was instituted especially on account of just such as these so that they may be refreshed and strengthened; for we all offend in many things; and we carry each other's burdens while we also mutually burden ourselves." (*Holman Edition*, Vol. VI: 93–95.)