

Ed Schroeder Weighs in on “Radical Hospitality”

Colleagues,

I spent my first four years as a young communicant at Concordia College in Adelaide, Australia. Those of us who boarded at the school went to church on Sunday at St. John's, the Lutheran congregation around the corner, where, in keeping with late-60's Lutheran practice in Australia and the U.S. alike, the Lord's Supper was celebrated once a month. I say “the Lord's Supper,” because no one outside the tiny high church crowd was thinking yet to call it “the Eucharist.”

Communing in those years entailed a ritual called “announcing for communion.” (I write this for younger readers who won't know about it.) At school it worked like this, at least for the boys who were housed on campus, as the girls were not: on the day before the sacrament was to be offered, those intending to receive would file in groups into the principal's office, where said principal, a Lutheran pastor, doubtless acting as an agent for the pastor at St. John's, would record our intention to receive in a ledger, offer some words of exhortation, and then walk down the line extending a hand of fellowship, without which none of us could dream of communing. The memory remains sharp of the day he bypassed the boy standing next to me and told him to stay behind. I winced for the lad as the rest of us filed out, though not so hard as I might have had I liked him more than I did. Ah, the ways of the old flesh, hanging still around our necks, as Luther puts it.

Ah too, the distance we Lutherans have traveled in Eucharistic practice from then till now—this being the chief point of the story I tell.

Two years ago the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which since its inception has urged communion as an essential aspect of every Sunday liturgy, asked its pastors and congregations to study some new ideas about who to welcome at the table. Until now, baptism has been the essential precondition of Eucharistic participation. Most congregations, though not all, have also regarded some measure of education about the sacrament as a threshold for a first communion. To the horror, I'm sure, of our kindred in the right wing of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), affiliation with other churchly traditions has been treated as beside the point. "All baptized Christians are welcome to commune." Such has been the standard message for the past two decades in the standard ELCA worshipping assembly.

Comes now a push to expand that. The core idea, masticated for quite some time by progressive theologians, is that communion is an embodiment of the hospitality of God in Christ, who asked no questions about credentials when he passed around the loaves and fish, to cite but one example. Ergo communion is for everybody, baptized or not. Ideas need labels if others are to grab hold of them easily. The label here has been "radical hospitality." Such was the focus of the study that was urged in 2014, responses due by the end of June of last year.

For the record, I'm among those ELCA pastors who regard the notion as dubious at best. I have no present plans to trot it out at the congregation I serve. That said, where conversation about it is sharp and thoughtful, I'm all ears, as indeed we're called to be in all things pertaining to the stewardship of the Gospel. With that in mind, I'm pleased this fortnight to pass along an analysis of the present matter by Ed Schroeder, with links to important background pieces that Ed will cite. The one by Paul Hinlicky of Roanoke College is especially germane, so take the time to read it.

Ed's undiminished knack, first encountered by some of us in seminary classrooms of yore, is to push all parties in a conversation to think more thoroughly about the matter at hand than they might otherwise. Even those whose minds are made up, yea or nay, about "radical hospitality" will want to read on. There's weighty stuff here. Hence the title of today's post.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Reflections on the "Radical Hospitality" Question

by Edward H. Schroeder

A local Lutheran pastor asked me for my response to a [letter sent to all ELCA pastors](#) by the board of [Lutheran CORE](#), the ELCA resistance group. With repeated references to "[The Truth about 'Radical Hospitality,'](#)" an August, 2014 essay by Paul Hinlicky for [LutheranForum.org](#), the CORE group urged ELCA pastors to "join with us in opposing the practice of inviting the unbaptized to Christ's table."

I sent the pastor some thoughts prepared for a discussion on November 18, 2014, at Bethel Lutheran Church, University City, Missouri, where Marie and I are members.

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1. There is no New Testament Greek term for the word Sacrament.
2. So far as I know, never does the New Testament link baptism and Lord's Supper under one overarching noun of

any sort. Each, when mentioned and discussed, is not linked to the other.

3. Thus there is no New Testament precedent for saying, first be baptized, then get access to the Lord's Supper. Nor the reverse.
4. Likewise, the New Testament has no term analogous to "means of grace." Never does the New Testament discuss the various media ("means") whereby God's grace is offered and received, nor ever bunch those means of grace together as a package.
5. In the Smalcald Articles (Part III, Article 4) Luther lists five "ways" that the Gospel "gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace" (Kolb-Wengert, 319). For Luther, no one means of grace is specified as prerequisite for another.
6. So we are encountering language fashioned by early Christians—and by later Christians as well—for this conversation.
7. In the New Testament, "hospitality" (standard English translation of the Greek term *philoxenia*, literally, "love of strangers") is never linked to congregational practice—either of baptism or of the Eucharist.
8. Ergo, hospitality should be put on the back burner initially. Better to start with what the New Testament does say—and then with what early generations of Christians said when they talked about baptism and the Eucharist.
9. However, the practices of these first generations shouldn't put obligations on us for how to proceed in our practice today—just as the practice of the apostles themselves reported in the New Testament itself is not necessarily binding upon us either. So practice may be changed, if there are sufficient "gospel-grounded" reasons

to do so. The “historic rule of faith”—Paul Hinlicky’s phrase for his position: “baptism first, then the Lord’s Supper”—does not mean such “rules” cannot be changed.

10. For making changes in our practices around baptism and the Eucharist, we have a precedent in the Augsburg Confession itself: “The apostles commanded abstention from blood, etc. But who observes this command now? Those who do not keep it certainly do not sin, because the apostles did not wish to burden consciences through such bondage... For the general intention of the gospel must be considered in connection with the decree” (Kolb-Wengert, 101:645-66). [The Tappert rendering of the Latin *perpetua voluntas evangelii* is better: “perpetual aim of the gospel.” Literally it is “the perpetual will of the Gospel.”]
11. And from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. “...the apostles themselves ordained many things that were changed over time, and they did not hand them down as though they could not be changed” (Kolb-Wengert, 291:16)
12. When we put hospitality on the back-burner initially, we can give theology itself primal consideration. Then we can devise our practice—what we propose to do—as a consequence of that theology. But always according to “what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is.”
13. The best term to start with is the key term that Paul uses when he writes about the Eucharist: “communion,” *koinonia* in Greek. The prime text: 1 Corinthians 10:16: “The cup of blessing which we bless, 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?” *Koinonia* is the Greek term in both places.
14. For Paul, communion or *koinonia* comes in two flavors—determined by grammar. There is *koinonia* with a genitive case noun following, as in the Corinthians text above. There is also *koinonia* with the dative case for the

noun that follows. They have very different meanings.

15. The dative case connotes HORIZONTAL togetherness linked to something common (the root meaning of *koinos*) to all. "We're all members of Bethel." "We all enjoy Ted Drewes frozen custard."
16. With the genitive, it is the VERTICAL connection to something or someone whereby we get a "part" of that something or someone. We receive a share, becoming shareholders; becoming a "part" of that reality. Therefore, according to Paul in Corinthians, in the Eucharist, Christ is imPARTing himself to the receivers. It is our PARTicipation in what is being imparted as we PARTake, becoming PARTners.
17. In Luther's two catechisms, the theology of the Lord's Supper focuses on *koinonia* with the genitive, our PARTicipation in the gift which Christ is imPARTing. And what is that?

[From the Small Catechism:] "Answer: We are told in the words 'given for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sins.' Namely, that in the sacrament the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are SHARED with us via such words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation... These words together with the physical eating and drinking constitute the core of the sacrament, and whoever trusts these words has a SHARE in what they actually mean, namely, the forgiveness of sins." And who is "worthy" to PARTake in this? Answer: "Truly worthy [is the one] who trusts these words 'for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sins' ... for the words 'for you' call the heart simply to trust them." [EHS translation from the German text.]

19. In the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the words of St. Paul, "for all who eat and drink without discerning the Lord's body, eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1

Corinthians 11:29) were cited to support “just us true church folks are to come forward in our Lord’s Supper events.” The intent was to give, in effect, a “blessing” (by averting a curse) to the outsider.

20. In this practice, “not discerning the Lord’s body” was understood as not knowing or believing the “real presence” doctrine.
21. But Paul’s words in Corinthians 11:29 about “not discerning the Lord’s body” need to be linked to his scoldings in earlier verses about the “drunken party” that apparently ensued now and then as part of Corinthian Eucharistic celebrations. For Paul, these drunken parties resulted in “contempt for the godly gatherings” of worship. In this way, the Corinthians were “not discerning the Lord’s body,” turning a “participation in Christ” into an orgy. The consequence: “eating and drinking judgment against themselves.”
22. Back to Bethel. The “drunken orgy” distortion has never been our problem.
23. “Discerning the Lord’s body”—both the body as participation in Christ (*koinonia*, genitive case) and as the horizontal fellowship of participants in Christ (*koinonia*, dative case)—can be expressed explicitly in the statement we put in the worship folder. It seems to me that we could improve our current statement by expressing more clearly how these two “communions” take place in the Eucharist.
24. Yes, our current policy is indeed different from the long tradition of church history. Taking our cue from our Augsburg-confessing predecessors, we still need to articulate HOW and WHY our current “changed” policy (“y’all come”) is indeed “what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is.”
25. I think it can be done, but we haven’t spelled it out at

Bethel.

26. My own preference would be to scrub the welcome/hospitality reference entirely. What I've written above contradicts "Baptism first, only then the Lord's Supper." But Hinlicky is right in caveating any sort of "We're more hospitable than you are!"
27. But Hinlicky is *not* right in citing the "historic rule" as unchangeable. At least, not for Augsburg Confession Lutherans. Even more dangerous, Hinlicky gets close to the Judaizing heresy that plagued those early Christians in St. Paul's congregations. Making baptism a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's body—a "rule" that says: "you gotta first do this"—sounds frightfully close to "You gotta first be circumcised, and then..."
28. The issue here is not what's now called "Eucharistic Hospitality," but "what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is." That's what we are practicing at Bethel. It's not us being hospitable. Rather, it's the Lord of the Supper promoting his own "perpetual aim of the Gospel." And that Gospel is "given for you for the forgiveness of sins."

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P.S. In the discussions at Bethel last year, Marie and I told the story of our meeting a young couple at Sunday worship in Berlin years ago. We went to a congregation that was gaining members for the Sunday liturgy and not losing them as many German congregations were. We sat next to a young couple, strangers to us, of course. It was a complete communion liturgy. After the benediction we got to talking. They asked us to join them for lunch. There we learned that they were once plain old pagans. They had no church connection ever. Never baptized. Then some friend invited them to come to this congregation. First time that they'd ever been in a church. They participated in everything. Went to communion too. "We met Jesus

there in the communion," they said. "We're now active members; we've been back every Sunday since then." Here is a case study to illustrate Luther's Article 4 in Part III of Smalcald Articles (see above, Paragraph 5).