

The Lord's Supper: How open, how close?

Colleagues,

Marcus Felde is the pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, an ELCA congregation in Olean, Indiana. He's a frequent contributor for Sabbathology text-studies, the companion piece to these Thursday postings. If you've read his stuff there, you know he's an awesome Gospeller—and an awful punster. In this essay—with its “pax on both your houses”—he's doing more of the same. Responses, if you wish, can go straight to him at “mfelde@seidata.com” ‘Course, I wouldn't mind seeing a copy. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Ecumenist Has No Close (Nor Does the Sectarian)

For what reason do we say that Christians in two congregations, separated by distance and partaking of the Lord's Supper at different times, are communing together? What fact or force can we point to, to explain the togetherness of people taking part in two events that are separate?

On the other hand, who can say that Christians in two congregations are not communing together when they eat the Eucharistic meal, whatever they call it?

Christians who gather around one table, in one building, at one

time, are obviously “in communion” with each other. But how are they in communion, what is their unity, with other Christians?

It seems to me that much ecumenical effort is founded upon a faulty assumption about how Christians are united in the meal we call the Eucharist. Is it really possible by a vote in a churchwide assembly to bring about a unity in the meal which did not exist before that action? I don't think so. Eucharistic unity would seem to be created by the fact of our doing the same thing. We commune, they commune, ergo we are united in Christ.

This leads quickly to a question about when people are doing the same thing. Was the Quaker meeting I attended as a child at which Ritz crackers and grape juice were offered actually the same thing we do at St. Paul Lutheran, Olean, Indiana? Perhaps ecumenical actions amount to recognition that the others are doing what we are doing?

Maybe. But if that is so, refusal to recognize the Eucharistic actions of any other Christians is tantamount to denying that they are communing when they think they are communing. That amounts to calling them liars, and saying they are not Christians but only think they are; we are saying that Christ is not among them.

What I am asserting is that denominational declarations of full communion are irrelevant hot air. Christ is present, not at the bidding of a denomination, but according to his own promise, even in the Supper. If there is any unity that matters, among those who partake of the Lord's body and blood, it is a unity that exists because Christ has promised that those who eat truly partake of him, for their salvation. That unity transcends time and space, and it transcends our declarations.

Any boundaries drawn by denomination decision are fictions.

There are two such fictions, of course. Some churches insist they are "not in communion" with other churches. "Because they don't _____, they can't possibly be doing what we're doing." (You fill in the blank, either with a belief or a practice.) "Therefore we are not in communion with them." (And we'll let them know, because when they come to visit us, we won't let them take part!)

The other fiction is that, after years of comparing notes, we are now ready to establish "full communion" between the members of our denomination and the members of another denomination. The vote is taken, a rousing joint celebration is undertaken (ironically in one building) and we feel we have enlarged the boundaries.

Nonsense. Neither fiction amounts to more than the judgment of some Christians on other Christians. Such judgments neither establish nor confound Eucharistic unity.

But not so fast, you say. Are there not very serious differences among us? Do not some Christians hold that the Eucharist is truly the Lord's body and blood, while others deny that fact? Do not some Christians guard the evangelical character of the sacrament, while others surround the meal with strictures and requirements? Does it not matter what we do and say?

Oh, yes. It matters. But it is dangerous to confuse our judgments about how the sacred meal should be conducted, and what should be believed about it, with Christ's promise to be present when we eat and drink. We confuse these when we use the words "in communion with" to describe the fruits of ecumenical endeavor.

Should we not be ecumenical? Oh, yes, we should care about the oikumene, the whole church. We should awaken to the oikumene.

We need to know that the whole church is there, and we need to act like brothers and sisters of those who are our brothers and sisters because Christ calls them our brothers and sisters. He gives them to us!

But he does not only do so when our denominational assembly decides they are so similar to us in doctrine and practice that we can swap altars, pulpits, and ministers.

What I'm suggesting is: lighten up about the "close" of ecumenical dialogues, the triumphant establishment of communion with one another. Get more serious about the reality Christ himself creates. The ecumenist is not able to "close the deal" on unity—Christ already has. Nor is the anti-ecumenist able to "close the door" on other Christians—Christ unites us even if we close our eyes to that unity. (Willy-nilly, LCMS Christians [= Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, whose communion policy is "for LCMS members only"] , for example, commune with every Christian in the world every time they approach the altar.) Christ will decide all by himself whether to be present at this altar or that, in this fellowship or that. And we had better be cautious before we declare, for instance, as I heard one of our ELCA [= Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with its "open" communion policy] ecumenists declare in a rant, that Southern Baptists are hardly Christian.

Are we serious about the Augsburg Confession's Article VII? It says that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacrament be administered in accordance with the divine Word." Our participation in ecumenical dialogues seems to be based on this sentence. Our goal is to figure out whether they, in their preaching and practice, are as right as we are. Are they? We get into full communion with each other! Are they not? They'll have to wait,

to commune with us.

Is this not shocking? What say do we have, on any given Sunday, about whether the people of some village, gathered around some sort of table by some sort of (let's say) sectarian minister doing his level best (or not!) to obey the Lord's command, are actually having TRUE communion? Answer: we have no say.

May we safely assume that all congregations of the ELCA are in communion with each other, based on Article VII? That all our preaching is in conformity with a pure understanding of the Gospel? That all our sacramental practice is in accord with the divine Word?

What if, in fact, none of our sacramental practice is in accord with the divine Word precisely because, by denying that we are in communion with most other Christians, we are denying the body of Christ? Oh, no!

But isn't that what we do? Most Lutherans would say that we are "not in communion" with Roman Catholics or Southern Baptists. We eat the wafer and sip the wine under the illusion that we do so only with our relatives in Minnesota and Pennsylvania, and a few million Presbyterians (effective 1998), etc., and not with the Catholics in the church up the street. Does not that false illusion defy the very promise of Christ, that he is present not at the invitation of a denomination but in our eating and drinking? I believe so.

When I was little I lived for a couple years in Barbourville, Kentucky. (It's not on Lutheran maps.) My very Lutheran family attended, but never joined, several types of churches during our seven years in Appalachia. One Sunday we were having Sunday School at the Lend-a-Hand Center on Stinking Creek in Walker, Kentucky, with our good friends Peggy and Irma, who ran quite a mission to the people of their hollow. They were Mennonites, I

think. Rev. Russell had come over that Sunday from the Red Bird Mission of the Evangelical United Brethren (hope I've got that straight). In addition to leading us in some songs and Scripture readings, he preached and had communion.

Before he began that part of the very informal service, he cast a little aside in the direction of my Dad, whom he knew to be a little testy on doctrinal matters. (Dad had attended Luther Seminary and ministered in South Dakota for a few years.) "We can each take part," he said, "according to our own beliefs."

Rev. Russell was being quite generous, he thought. Well, Dad didn't think so. Dad thought he was making things worse by being relativistic. So he leaned over to us kids and told us not to go up. So while the other kids joined in, we kept our seats, smug in the certainty that only those who agree with Luther about the Lord's presence actually have communion. These people had better watch out!

Now, I think Luther had it right about the presence thing. I think doctrine makes a difference. I think Christians should discuss our differences, even argue about them. I think we should push the Gospel criterion on our brothers and sisters in other denominations. And we should listen to them. And work together with them.

But we turn the sacramental Amazon of God's grace into a stinking creek when we set up fictional "zones of unity," and act like they are of Christ when they are really of our own making. We need to say, as the ELCA, not that Christ is present in the denominations where we say he is present, but wherever Christ has promised to be present. We need to declare that our tables are open to all Christians, and never link that openness to denominational business like how to organize our clergy and seminaries, etc. Let our ecumenical officers be busy linking us

to other Christians, left right and center. But let them not pretend they are forging a unity that only Christ can make—and already has.

Ecumenical efforts to build cooperation should not be fueled by guilt, but by the Gospel.

In other words, we should not feel that it is urgent to overcome denominational differences in order to have communion with others. Bologna. We already have communion with them. What we don't have is a clear understanding of how the Gospel works, in this or that respect. So, assuming the meal-based unity, we work on what is not a given—namely, a pure understanding of the Gospel. And that is something the church will always need to work on, not just between us and others but also in our own denomination.

Rev. Marcus Felde, Olean, Indiana