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A Pastoral Letter Regarding the Distribution of the Lord's Supper

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

(I Corinthians 11:23-25)

Dear Brothers in Christ,

At a recent conference of the Pastors of the Montana District LCMS the brothers requested that I write a letter to the elders of our congregations offering guidance on two issues that seem to be troubling the faithful with respect to the distribution of the Lord's Supper. The request was founded upon the desire that a uniformity of practice be established in the District, and that elders be encouraged to support their Pastors in these matters. The two issues are: 1) How are we to care for those who cannot receive wine in order to assure them of their forgiveness in the Sacrament? 2) How are we to care for those attending the Divine Service who are not Christians or who hold to a confession that varies with ours? (Closed communion)

We must begin this discussion by reminding ourselves of the true and essential nature of the Lord's Supper. A simple answer, based on the Scripture, is found in Luther's Small Catechism.

"What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink...What is the benefit of this eating and drinking? These words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,' show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given us though these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

Those who are responsible for the distribution of the Lord's Supper, (Pastors, assisted by the elders of the congregation), must seriously consider how best to ensure that believers receive the benefits of the sacrament. This is sometimes complicated by obstacles in the lives of believers who come to the table. The specific issue at hand is the factual circumstance of those who cannot receive wine due to some biological condition. The Pastor here may consider an actual allergy, and drug induced allergy, ("Anabuse"), or extreme alcoholism.

The Pastoral care for these people must begin again with the nature of the sacrament. The Scripture passages about the Lord's Supper do not prescribe every detail of its practice. Nonetheless, the nature of the sacrament grants us confidence as we seek to answer specific questions. The sacrament is the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sin. For this reason the Lutheran Confessions discourage answering the question at hand by suggesting that the believer receive only the bread. Also discouraged is using something other than wine, because we know that Jesus used wine. This leaves us with limited options.

For the purposes of uniformity I suggest that your congregation consider the following options as opposed to others. If the believer is willing, dilution can be a satisfactory solution. This would entail adding a tiny drop of wine to water or to grape juice. The presence of wine satisfies the Scriptural institution of the sacrament while, the scarcity of its presence answers the need of the believer. In extreme cases you may consider what is called “non-alcoholic wine.” This is produced by distilling actual wine in order to remove the alcohol. The primary concern in presenting these options is that the believer is confident of receiving forgiveness in the sacrament.

I also encourage you to present this as a matter of Pastoral care not as a general option. Statements in the bulletin such as, “Those who may prefer grape juice...” imply an uncertainty as to the nature of the sacrament and turn a Pastoral exception into a general rule. Such cases should be dealt with on an individual basis. This means that no mention of the unusual case need appear in the bulletin. Individual believers who desire the Lord’s Supper but cannot receive wine will make their concern known to their Pastor. To preserve the confidentiality of the believer as well as respect for the sacrament, the Pastor and the Altar Guild will devise a discreet method of delivery.

Although not specifically requested let me also comment on the related issue of those communicants that may be gluten intolerant. In 1983 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations published a document entitled, “The Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper.” The CTCR noted that the word for bread used in the texts on the Lord’s Supper is a general word for bread and that it may refer to bread made from wheat, rye, or barley flour. Since each of these grains contain different quantities of gluten it may be helpful to experiment. In some cases the quantity of the bread may be the solution. As in the case with wine, if a physical solution is not forthcoming the spiritual solution will depend on the Pastoral assurance of the power of the Gospel at work in the communicant’s life.

The second issue must also be dealt with as a matter of Pastoral care. How are we to care for those attending the Divine Service who are not Christians or who hold to a confession that varies with ours? Luther gives us faithful instruction when he writes in the Large Catechism regarding the Lord’s Supper,

“...We must deal with the second sacrament in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament, and administer it, to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.”

First let us consider the very real danger involved for those who have a confession different than our own. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:27-32 that it is unhealthy, (“judgment”) for anyone to receive the Lord’s Supper who does not recognize the presence of the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. It may sound strange that something so good could be so unhealthy. Consider this medical analogy. If you take a prescription in the manner the Doctor ordered, it will function as medicine. If you take it in any other way it might very likely function as poison. So it is with the Lord’s Supper. If it is received as given by Jesus, to be His body and blood for the forgiveness of sin, it will function as medicine for the soul. If it is received in any other way it is unhealthy, it is judgment. The evidence of what that means is born out in verses 29-32.

This understanding is clarified in the Formula of Concord, Epitome, article VII as follows,

“We believe, teach, and confess that not only the genuine believers and those who are worthy, but also the unworthy and the unbelievers receive the true body and blood of Christ; but if they are not converted and do not repent, they receive them not to life and salvation but to their judgment and condemnation.”

No Pastor wants to do spiritual harm to a person who communes at his table. This would not demonstrate care. As a result he, and the congregation he serves, will want to commune only those that have the same confession as his congregation.

Caring for the person under consideration will require the Pastor and his elders to consider the public confession of both the individual and the congregation. By virtue of membership in a congregation an individual testifies that his confession is the same as that of the congregation. When we confirm or welcome new members into a congregation we ask them, “Do you confess the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Scriptures, as you have learned to know it from the Small Catechism, to be faithful and true?” Please note that this confession embraces all Christian doctrine, not just that of the Lord’s Supper.

This is what it means to be a member of a particular congregation and Synod. The confession of the body of believers becomes the confession of the individual. When an individual that is not a member of a congregation comes to commune at the table where he is not a member what is he saying? Due to the unifying themes in the Lord’s Supper and by placing himself under that Pastor’s care he is implying that his confession is the same as that of the Pastor’s congregation. If that is actually true, as in the case of LCMS members communing in other LCMS congregations, there will be little disorder. However, the Pastor should be informed of the individual’s public confession so that the individual, the Pastor and the congregation are not confused.

If the individual’s public confession is contrary to that of the congregation he is visiting, something unhealthy is happening. For example, many non-Lutheran confessions refuse to recognize that the body and blood of Jesus are present with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sin. If a member of such a congregation visits an LCMS congregation he should not commune because his public confession is contrary to that of the LCMS congregation, (not to mention the words of Jesus).

But what if this visitor tells the Pastor that he really believes in his heart that what the LCMS congregation teaches is true? This is a dangerous position to hold. The individual is telling the Pastor that his private confession is at variance with his public confession. In this case both confessions cannot be true. The individual is not telling the truth in one confession or the other. The Pastor cannot see into the person’s heart. He cannot see the person’s private confession. He can only judge by the person’s public confession. Consequently, he will abide by the visitor’s public confession and ask him not to commune. If the Pastor were to commune such a person he would be contributing to further division within the person by adding a third confession: 1. The person’s public confession of the congregation where he is a member. 2. The person’s private confession just given to the Pastor. 3. The confession of the LCMS congregation where he is communing. This cannot be considered a loving act. This is no way to care for people.

The teaching of closed communion does not suggest that members of the LCMS are the only true Christians. This is not a matter of ecclesiastical snobbery. In a concrete way it teaches Pastoral care for those who commune. It also teaches that we ought to take the

differences of public confession seriously. We ought not to pretend that doctrine is unimportant. If we do not practice closed communion we are, in effect, saying, "God's Word doesn't really matter, as long as we can all feel good about ourselves." Thus the discussion ends, and God-given unity is mocked. A healthier way for the Church to act is to ask only those who are members of that confession, and thus can reasonably be expected to agree with the public confession of the Church, to commune at that table.

We do understand that the implementation of closed communion requires room for Pastoral care. After all, the sacrament is given for the forgiveness, life and salvation of the believer. This calls for great wisdom. It does not free the Pastor and elders to ignore their obligations to those who would come to the table, to their congregation's confession, and to the Synod.

We also understand some congregations may have a more difficult time implementing closed communion. The larger the congregation becomes, the more likely the Pastor will not recognize visitors or have time to speak with them prior to the service. This means that the elders and the congregation should be well-trained in presenting the case for closed communion. Both can assist the Pastor in caring for those who do not hold the confession of the congregation. Members can instruct visitors they bring that the Lord's Supper requires a common confession. Elders can assist the Pastor by contacting visitors before the service.

It will also be beneficial to have a carefully worded instruction in the bulletin, or perhaps even read prior to the administration of the Lord's Supper. Such instruction should be offered as a means of caring for those who hold a different confession. For the sake of the Gospel, every effort will be made to do this in a kind and loving manner. For your benefit I have appended a sample bulletin statement.

I am sure that much more could be said, but let this suffice for now. God bless you as you assist, support and encourage your Pastor in honoring the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, while also caring for those who come to the table. In so doing you can be assured that forgiveness, life and salvation is distributed in a God-pleasing manner.

In His Service,

Terry Forke
President- Montana District LCMS
Pastor Trinity Lutheran Church, Harlowton

Appendix:

A Sample Communion Statement for a Sunday Bulletin

Dear Visitor: Today the congregation of _____ Lutheran Church celebrates the Lord's Supper. This Sacrament is a precious gift of God to the Church. Since this gift belongs to the Church and not to individuals it is proper for the Church to distribute it in a way that is beneficial to all who commune. The Scriptures clearly teach, (I Cor. 11:27-32), and this congregation confesses, that in the Lord's Supper the Body and Blood of Jesus are given with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sin. Since receiving the Lord's Supper is a confession of faith, it is our conviction that only those who agree with us in the confession of our doctrine and practice ought to commune at this table. We ask you to respect that conviction. If you are a visitor please see the Pastor prior to coming to the table.