**Communion Club**

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The second rule of Communion Club: *You don't talk about Communion Club.*

At least, that's how I read my experience in congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.  I allow that, being as young as I am, I have misread the history; but here's what I see:

Three or four generations ago, you didn't need to talk about why our communion practice is the way it is.  There may have been a skirmish here or there, especially once you got to the Sixties, but other than that, Roman Catholics never went to Lutheran churches, and vice-versa.  Generally, the stricter Calvinists didn't either.  Not that this was altogether healthy.  The fact that Christians of varying traditions and confessions did not visit other churches was due, at least at times, to cultural differences, animosity, distrust, and misinformation.  The point is that there was no need to tell people *why* they ought not commune in churches of different confessions, because they never would have gone there anyway.

But in the United States, this state of affairs could never remain for long.  Not only did you have cultural dynamics such as tolerance, but you also had ecclesiastical dynamics such as the ecumenical movement.  Combine these things with American individualism and increased mobility, and there is no chance that the relative isolation of congregations and church bodies is going to remain unbreached.  Again, not that isolation is a good thing.  If we're going to disagree, we ought to at least disagree about what is really at stake, and not based on our unexamined presuppositions and prejudices.  If I'm going to tell people what different churches believe, I would much rather have it from the mouth of the person who actually believes those things.  However, if the previous generations had no need to give a reason for our long-standing communion practice (which is, in principle, shared with the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches, as well as [the Church going back her first centuries](http://www.amazon.com/Eucharist-Church-Fellowship-Werner-Elert-ebook/dp/B0039QGJ84/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1386958583&sr=1-1&keywords=eucharist+and+church+fellowship+in+the+first+four+centuries)), now they were not *able* to give a reason, because they had never heard one.  You just didn't talk about Communion Club.  And a "club," often secretive, is probably what those who don't share our practice would call it.

Perhaps we have brought the accusation on ourselves.  We have often acted as if our communion practice is akin to the rite of some mystery religion, in which only those with the right mystical *gnosis* (knowledge) are allowed to take part.  And this *gnosis* only comes once you're already inside.  If you're inside, you get it; if you're outside you don't.  Sort of like Fight Club.  Now it's true that at least in parts of the early Church, no one who was not baptized or instructed was even allowed to witness the celebration of the Sacrament, but that was exactly because they understood that their confession required unity; it was never a means to unity.  (And, as Werner Elert points out, the secrecy flowed from their concern for the integrity of their communion, not the other way around.)  Our silence on our practice is from ignorance or apathy, not a concern for our Lutheran teaching and confession.

What someone said about the Gospel ([Herbert Mueller, Jr.?](http://wmltblog.org/2013/05/the-gospel-assumed-is-the-gospel-denied/) or see the beginning of [this post](http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=ArtRead&var2=866&var3=main)), that to assume it is to deny it, is likewise true about most things.  The liturgy assumed is the liturgy denied.  The Resurrection assumed is the Resurrection denied.  Faithful communion practice assumed is faithful communion practice denied.  So if we have never talked about why our communion practice is the way it is, why would we expect pastors and people, let alone the people who visit from other traditions, to understand it?  True, we have documents detailing our confession, but documents are worthless if pastors don't teach it, and instead assume it.

Perhaps the reason why there have been so many acrimonious debates about "close/d" communion is because we have only been arguing about whether it is right or wrong, without ever exploring the reasons that undergirded the practice in the first place.  In other words, it is pointless to talk about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, if we have no idea why so many churches of different confessions upheld essentially closed communion for so long.  In fact, it probably wasn't until the late seventeenth century that any church of any confession opened its altars to Christians of another confession, although it had certainly happened in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century.  (Even then, there would have been no thought whatsoever of opening their altars to whomever might happen to be there.)

So let's have no more Communion Club.  We had better learn again why our confession of the Lord's Supper entails a particular practice of the Lord's Supper, and either hold to it fully or reject it fully.  No more secrecy, no more ignorance, no more apathy.  Either our confession of Jesus' own words means that those who do not confess their truth cannot share with us His Supper until they confess the same thing we do (the definition of "confess"), or let us be done with declaring church fellowship at all.  If everyone can commune at the same altar, even if they normally commune at an altar of a different confession, why bother with seeking further agreement in the Word of God at all?  When the ELCA allows all baptized Christians (and even the unbaptized) to commune at their altars, what is the point of declaring church fellowship at all?  What Jesus meant when He said "This is My Body" apparently has ceased to matter.  And if Jesus' own words have ceased to matter, except as a historical-confessional oddity, can the Church herself matter?  If He didn't mean it about the bread and the wine, perhaps when He said it about the Church, it was also merely a metaphor.  And, in fact, that is exactly the pathetic state of the Church in America today.  We are all autonomous individuals who decide for ourselves what we think Jesus meant in any particular place, and the Lord's Supper has ceased to be what St. Paul says it is in 1 Corinthians 10:16: we are no longer one body, no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves otherwise.  If we do not eat Christ's Body, born of Mary, crucified, resurrected, ascended, and likewise drink that Blood, then (even if this was its purpose) our eating and drinking has no power whatsoever to unify us.  And if some at our altars refuse to confess that Christ's Body and Blood are eaten and drunk actually, though supernaturally, then we cannot pretend to be unified with them.  Christ's Body and Blood cannot, at the same time, be present and not be present.  But that is what we confusedly confess when we do not practice closed communion.

So, Church, which will it be?  Communion Club, where we continue a practice but we don't know why?  Every man for himself, with autonomous individuals who have ceased to be the Church?  Or a faithful practice born from the confession of Jesus' words?  We cannot have it more than one way.

[**Pr. Timothy Winterstein**](http://alienrighteousness.org/author/timotheos/) | December 18, 2013 at 1:33 PM