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Theological Observer

Gold, Silver, and Bronze – And Close Communion

The famous Olympic prize metals may serve as handy historical markers. One might say, for instance, that the sixteenth century, culminating in the Book of Concord, was the Lutheran Reformation's golden age. The seventeenth century would then represent its silver age. After that comes bronze, which then inspires various efforts to return to former glories. Applying this to the Missouri Synod, the time of Walther might be taken as its golden age, and Pieper's as the silver age. The "bronze age" would then describe more mediocre times, marked partly by complacent self-satisfaction, partly by zeal for inherited clichés (the full meaning of which is no longer grasped), and partly by rebellion against the perceived mindlessness or callousness of the "tradition."

A typical Bronze Age trait is the idea that whatever I personally am accustomed to is "what has always been done." For example: "Pastor, why can't we sing good old hymns like 'The Old Rugged Cross' instead of these newfangled ones like 'We All Believe in One True God'?" One can sympathize with the perception and the sentiment, but one should be under no illusions about what is really old and what new here.

Or take the matter of Close Communion. First of all, is it "close" or "closed"? Actually "close" is simply an older form of "closed" – as in "close carriage." So, despite the touching stories that have been made up about "close" communion – and why that is so much better than the "exclusive," and therefore politically incorrect "closed" communion – the fact is that "close communion and "closed communion" mean exactly the same thing. The opposite of both is "open communion," not something like "distant communion"!

But which is the original practice and which the deviation – open or closed communion? There can be no doubt that during Missouri's "golden" and "silver" ages, that is, under Walther and Pieper's leadership, Close Communion was the single standard, drawn from Scripture and Confession. There was a clean break between confession and denial, truth and error, church and sect. Then, with the sudden switch to English after World War I, came the onslaught of the ways of "American Evangelical Protestantism." One prominent feature of this was the pervasive sense of the various

“denominations” as friendly rivals, their differences “man-made.” This is how Billy Graham put it in his 1953 book *Peace with God*:

The New Testament teaches that while there is actually only one church there can be any number of local churches formed into various denominations and societies or councils. These local churches and denominational groups may be divided along national and theological lines, or according to the temperament of their members. . . . I am always tempted to point out how many different styles of hats have come to be designed for both American men and women. We all belong to the same human race, but we all have enough physical differences to make it impossible for us to wear the same style of hat with equal satisfaction (175, 177).

A sea-change in the Missouri Synod came with the “Statement of the Forty-Four” in 1945—belatedly now endorsed by a former president of the Missouri Synod.¹ The inner logic here led to a collapse of orthodox and heterodox churches as viable categories in the practice of fellowship. After all, if only a congregation, but not “the synodical organization,” is really “church,” then the whole notion of a confessional *church*, as all Lutheran fathers including Walther and Pieper knew it, dissolves into a rickety patch-work of “man-made” regulations, puffed up perhaps as contracts or “covenants of love” freely entered into, and the like. What came now to the fore instead of the category of churches was the notion of individuals (that is, “Christians who differ from us” or “Christians of different denominations,” among others). And why should man-made “denominations” get in the way of “fellowship” with “other Christians”?

This Bronze Age confusion of tongues naturally drained much of the conviction out of Close Communion. That practice came to be seen by many as a quaint Synodical “policy”—on a level perhaps with the old Roman Catholic regulation against eating meat on Fridays!

All this lies behind the recent Florida-Georgia polemic against “a denominational or synodical requirement” on would-be

¹Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Missouri Lutheranism, 1945 and 1995,” *Lutheran Forum*, 30 (February 1996): 12-17.

communicants at our altars (*Celebrate!* Pentecost 1996). Substitute “confessional” for “denominational or synodical,” and the case is perfectly clear: “Neither Scriptures nor the Confessions impose a confessional requirement on baptized Christians who desire to confess the Real Presence and receive the body and blood of Christ offered in the Eucharist.” The sentence is clearly false in light of just Acts 2:42 and Romans 16:17 for starters, not to mention Galatians 1:8-9 and all other texts which forbid complicity with false teachings and with those who support them.

Unlike that weasel-word “denomination,” the word “confession” is very biblical indeed (Matthew 10:32), and it embraces the entire life-giving truth the Lord has entrusted to His church (John 8:31-32). Does it include the central truth about justification by grace alone? Or the truth that Baptism actually works regeneration? Or that the Lord gives His very body and blood under bread and wine, and not just “spiritually by faith,” but bodily, and into the mouth of every communicant, regardless of faith? To deny that issues like these irreducibly define the gospel is to reject the whole Bible as understood in the Lutheran Confessions. Yet it is just such issues over which the various “denominations” traditionally differ-not to mention the modern horrors of casting to the winds any Word of God which inconveniences anybody!

Are members of other “denominations,” who regularly (or irregularly!) attend the sacramental rites of their own (officially heterodox) churches, to be willy-nilly admitted also to the altars of the orthodox church simply on their own say-so? if yes, as *Celebrate!* argues, then it is profoundly untrue that “Lutheran Christians do not disagree in their doctrinal understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The primary area of disagreement concerns practice, about those who are to be welcomed as guests when a congregation celebrates the Eucharist” (*Celebrate!* Lent 1998). There is something very wrong with any “doctrinal understanding of the Lord’s Supper” which can so cavalierly tear that holy Sacrament loose from its natural setting in the fullness of the “apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42), and from what that means for church, gospel, confession, ministry, and fellowship.

The Lent 1998 *Celebrate!*, which has just been sent to us, and I assume to all Missouri Synod pastors, presents itself as a “Bible Study.” It is in fact a very slanted piece of advocacy, which claims to cover the Words of Institution and the “only passages in the

remainder of the New Testament that deal with the Eucharist," but never mentions Acts 2:42 or the clearly eucharistic Romans 16:17 (see the "kiss of peace" in verse 16)!

One can fully sympathize with the plight of ministers of a certain age, who had been trained in the warm and fuzzy ways flowing from the "Statement of the Forty-Four," and who feel like fish out of water as the Synod tries to reclaim its older, sounder confessional heritage. They were wronged by those who misled them. But with all the human sympathy in the world we dare not lose sight of what really is biblical and confessional and what is not; what is old and what is new; what is standard and what is eccentric. The best book on the subject is still Werner Elert's *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*. Here is a sample: "Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all" (182).

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