

BULLETIN BLUNDERS

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

People often bring me bulletins from churches they visit when they are away. Sometimes these bulletins can be very revealing of the condition of our Synod in these errant times. Recently I received one such bulletin from an LCMS congregation in our district, and when I read through it, three things jumped out at me.

1. According to its bulletin, this LCMS congregation practice blatant open communion, contrary to the Word of God and the teaching of the Synod.

The note to visitors in the bulletin says this: “If you are a Christian, and believe that the body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament, and acknowledge your need for the forgiveness and blessings offered here, we invite you to commune with us at the altar today.” So, anyone who considers himself a Christian, and who thinks he believes in the Real Presence is welcome to commune at this LCMS church, no matter which sect or cult they may be a member of. So if I were a Baptist visiting this LCMS church, I’d be able to commune, no questions asked, even though my own Baptist church rejects and mocks the idea of the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and slanders Lutherans for practicing “cannibalism” in our services. Even if I were a Mormon, a member of an anti-Christian cult that denies the cardinal doctrines of historic Christianity, I could still commune in this LCMS church, because I consider myself a Christian, and I think I know what Holy Communion means, and no one is asking any questions. You see? Anyone who thinks he’s a Christian, and who has some vague gobbledygook idea about the meaning of Holy Communion can come to the altar with impunity. This results in two exceedingly unimportant things:

First, there are uninstructed, unbelieving visitors coming to this LCMS altar and eating and drinking damnation to themselves because they have no idea what they’re doing, or what they believe. Isn’t that a loving thing? To let poor, deluded, ignorant visitors heap God’s judgment upon themselves by misusing the sacrament with no questions asked? Listen – in these days of spiritual ignorance, one can barely be confident that lifelong Missouri Synod Lutherans know what they believe. What do you think a person who has never been properly instructed, and who holds membership in a church that rejects Lutheran doctrine, understands about Holy Communion? So they come forward with no understanding of the Real Presence, they fail to discern the Lord’s Body, and sin against the Body and Blood of the Lord, while these foolish LCMS people pat them on the back and smile approvingly.

Second, by inviting anyone who thinks he is a Christian, and who thinks he understands what Holy Communion is about, the LCMS congregation is making a strong public statement that it doesn’t care about the pure doctrine of the Word of God. It is, in effect, saying, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you think you have faith in Christ, whatever that means to you. We have a confessional standard that we consider unimportant and we don’t care that many of our forefathers suffered severe persecution rather than deny that confession.”

Now this congregation would, no doubt, protest violently, claiming that they are doing no such thing. But all their protesting and posturing notwithstanding, that is what they are doing. Open communion is a blatant act of doctrinal indifferentism, and a denial of the standards we embrace together as congregations of the LCMS. The only way to maintain the pure doctrine of the Word of God in this pluralistic, unbelieving age, is to

practice closed communion: to admit to our altars only those who have been properly instructed and are communicant members of congregations in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS.

But what does this say about the Synod as a whole? Well, I am sorry to say that many of our LCMS congregations practice open communion in just the way I have described above, and our synodical leaders are not censuring them about it, but allowing it to go on unrebuked, despite Scripture, the Confessions, and countless synodical convention resolutions upholding our long standing practice of closed communion. It is becoming increasingly a rare thing to visit an LCMS congregation that practices consistent closed communion. What else can we conclude from this other than that there is a gradual ELCA-ization taking place in our beloved Synod?

2. According to its bulletin, this LCMS congregation offers grape juice as an option at Holy Communion for those who cannot drink wine contrary to the institution of Christ.

According to Christ's institution of the Sacrament the proper earthly elements in the Holy Communion are bread and wine. We are commanded to administer the Sacrament according to the institution of Christ. The only way to do this is to use what Christ gave us to use: bread and wine. When we change the institution of Christ by substituting something other than bread and wine, we no longer have the Holy Communion that Christ instituted but a supper of our own in its place. Did Christ institute the use of grape juice? No. Did He promise the sacramental union of His Blood with grape juice? No. Therefore, the use of grape juice casts serious doubt about the validity of the Sacrament, and this is a spiritually deadly state of affairs.

It is necessary for a proper reception of the Sacrament that one receive in full faith and assurance that what is eaten and drunk is the true Body and Blood of Christ. Doing anything in the administration of the Sacrament that casts doubt on whether a real Sacrament is being offered, makes faith impossible. What is doubtful does not belong where faith is necessary. Is the Sacrament being offered the real thing, or a counterfeit? It is impossible to have faith that a Sacrament using grape juice is the real thing, because Christ instituted the Sacrament with wine, and grape juice is a change in the institution of the Sacrament. To those who argue strenuously that grape juice is not a change in the institution of Christ, the very MOST that can be said is, "Maybe". But faith cannot abide a maybe. Faith needs a "Yea and Amen!" and that a grape juice monger cannot deliver no matter how compelling his reasonings and historical investigations may be.

In an orthodox, properly functioning Synod, congregations fooling around with grape juice would be a) instructed in the proper administration of the Sacrament, b) told to cease and desist in the use of grape juice, and c) threatened with expulsion from Synod if they do not amend their ways. But the fact that congregation after congregation is allowed to practice such shenanigans with Christ's Sacrament without rebuke calls into question whether we really believe the Word of God, and whether we have any fear of God at all.

Congregations which change the institution of Christ by using grape juice are trying to respond "sensitively" to three groups of people: 1) Those who have severe allergic reactions to alcohol, 2) Recovering alcoholics who have been unnecessarily frightened by anti-sacramental AA propaganda into believing that a Sacrament that Christ instituted for their blessing will somehow bring them harm, and 3) tee-totallers who pride themselves on their abstinence and think that Holy Communion with wine spoils their perfect record of works righteousness. But while changing the earthly elements may be regarded as "sensitive" in our therapeutic culture, how are we helping these people when

we end up giving them a counterfeit or doubtful sacrament? Responsive to people with genuine needs we must be, but we must not change what Christ has instituted.

3. According to its bulletin, this LCMS congregation allows women to publicly read the Scripture lessons during the service contrary to the Bible.

It is very common these days in LCMS churches to have laymen read the Old Testament and Epistle Lessons, and for the Pastor to read the Gospel and preach. But the reading of the lessons is a part of the public ministry of the Word. Therefore, it is proper for the Pastor to read the lessons and preach. St. Paul urged young Pastor Timothy, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Tim 4:13). He's telling Timothy to be conscientious in his public reading of the Scriptures and to his preaching in the congregation. He's not talking about Timothy's private Bible reading. Any Christian may read the Scriptures, and any Christian may preach to his neighbor in the private sphere. But in the public services of God's house, this should be done by the called Pastor. Our Augsburg Confession, article 14, says, "Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call." Since the public reading of Scripture in Church is intimately connected to the preaching of God's Word, it is only proper that the Pastor should read the lessons.

In the case of necessity, such as when the Pastor is absent due to illness or travel, the duly elected elders of the congregation may conduct service, read lessons, and read an approved sermon, but in such a way that they do not give the impression that they are taking the office of the ministry upon themselves without a regular call. But when the Pastor is present, there is no need for laymen to read lessons, and this practice should be discouraged.

But rather than discourage irregular and unnecessary novelties, it is becoming more and more common in our Synod that women are being included in the group of laymen who publicly read the lessons in the service. This hardly squares with the Word of God which states: "As in all churches of the saints, let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:33-35). Scripture further says, "Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (1 Tim 2:11-15). Notice how clearly these passages teach that a woman should be silent and not assume speaking leadership roles in the congregation. How can any honest Christian woman take God's Word seriously, and then get up and publicly read the lessons in the church without her conscience smiting her?

But these days in our Synod we have women reading lessons, conducting the liturgy, assisting in the distribution of Holy Communion, giving childrens' sermons, temple talks, and the like. You see how one mistake begets another? How long do you think it will be before the LCMS will be ordaining women? In nearly every denomination that now has female pastors, they got there by gradual steps, piece by piece, until there was no way to prevent women's ordination with denominational scholars working overtime to re-interpret offending passages in churches that are increasingly feminized.

The LCMS has recently taken another baby step towards women's ordination. At the last convention we learned that according to the CTCR it may now be possible for women

to be elders and presidents of synodical congregations. If you don't see this as yet another step in the direction of women's ordination, then I just don't know what to say to you. Unless we find a way to start putting the toothpaste back in the tube, we will have female pastors in another decade or two. And if we find ingenious ways to ignore God's Word on this subject, how long before we learn to ignore God's Word on other important subjects? Look upon the ELCA and marvel!!! Such an apostasy is beginning to loom on our horizon!

If the LCMS were in better shape doctrinally and spiritually, such practices would be rare and would be soon corrected. But they cannot be corrected in today's LCMS because they are done with the full knowledge and cooperation of the people running the show. A congregation or pastor who complains is simply ignored and branded a troublemaker. And even many laymen in solid congregations just don't want to be bothered to learn about things that might make them have to make hard and unpleasant decisions regarding church fellowship. Ignorance is bliss. What to do? Time will tell. But God grant that we may cherish His Word as our true treasure, practice the faith in accordance with it, and by His grace remain faithful to Him at a time when the love of many has grown cold.