

Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries: A Review

Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

Surely one of the most controversial issues in the LC-MS today is that of “closed communion”. It is perhaps the one theological position that most distinguishes the LC-MS from the Christian denominations of the American mainstream. So called neo-evangelicals, and conservative mainline denominations such as the PCA, may identify with the LC-MS’s stand on the ordination of women. Liberal churches such as the ELCA and ECUSA may identify with our liturgical and sacramental tradition, even if that tradition is no longer a consistent norm. Most members of these churches, however, do not understand our continued insistence on closed communion as a synodical norm. The liberals consider it an archaic practice; the neo-evangelicals consider it unbiblical. Appeals to its continued usage in the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Patriarchies is less than persuasive in discussions with people who have little contact with those traditions.

Yet one thing that often makes people stop and listen is an appeal to the traditions of the early church. “Church Growth” congregations and liberal denominations alike appeal to the early church to support their own ideological bents. Consider just two examples of such appeals. Dr. Walter Huffman of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH wrote in favor of open communion, among other things, in a recent essay. He stated that “the heart of the original Jesus movement was a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources centered in table fellowship...Jesus created a ‘welcome table’ no longer based on social status but on the liberating God for all people.”¹ Or consider the words of Pastor Scott Bull of Tomball, Texas: “The early church was certainly more effective than the church is today in most cases. Why? The reason is that they focused their energy on the people in the church, building *adult* Christians that went on to turn the then known world upside down.”² The common denominator in almost all these appeals to the early church is the lack of real, documented evidence. Instead, authors and speakers often read “between the lines” of existing texts to uncover a “new” meaning (Dr. Huffman), or simply pour back into the apostolic age their own ideas of what the church should be about (Pastor Bull).

What is refreshing about Werner Elert’s book Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries³ is that its findings are based on the actual writings of the early church, not flights of fancy. In the book, Elert uses the actual letters, council documents, and canons of the early church to determine how it understood the Eucharist, and what role the Eucharist played in determining fellowship both within and between churches. He concludes that the church of the first four centuries did indeed link the Eucharist with church fellowship. Communion was closed not only to unrepentant sinners, but also to heretics. To be in “fellowship” was to be in doctrinal agreement, and therefore to commune together in confessional unity. These understandings stemmed from the belief that the church was not simply a voluntary association of people who display their fellowship in a meal. Rather, the church was united in Christ, by Christ, in the partaking of his very body and blood. To ask Christ to gather all at the altar together as one, while at the same time being disunited in confession, would have been unthinkable for the early church. “The unity of faith is not merely some shared sentiment. Paul had already made clear not only that there is no faith without *kerygma*, but also that believing with the heart is coupled

with confessing with the mouth (Rom 10:8).”⁴ To commune with unrepentant sinners and while in confessional disagreement would have been to profane the holy.⁵

Ewert’s book can be divided into three parts. The first part deals with the Eucharist and the constitution of the church, as both were understood in the first four centuries after Christ’s resurrection. The second discusses the application of these principles in the local congregation, including a discussion of closed communion. The last part explores the relationships between congregations and the role the Holy Communion played in those relationships. This report will present some of the author’s findings from each of these three parts. It will conclude with a brief critique of the author’s work.

The Eucharist and Church Fellowship

Ewert contests the notion that the church is constituted by “the voluntary actions of men and continues to exist only through such actions.”⁶ Instead, he suggests that the church is a fellowship in the Eucharist itself. One of the ways he supports this argument is by conducting a close examination of the phrase “communion of saints” as it appears in our creeds. The common interpretation of this statement is that it refers to the fellowship we all share as believers. Ewert believes this is not a sufficient and complete understanding of the phrase. Retroverting the Latin *sanctorum communio* back into the Greek, Ewert believes the phrase refers not to the “communion of holy *people*”, but actually to the “communion of holy *things*”. It is true that the Latin *sanctorum* can be translated as τῶν ἁγίων, the genitive masculine plural substantive adjective “holy”, which means “the holy ones” in English. But the far more likely retroversion would be τὰ ἅγια, which means “the holy things”.⁷ Ewert shows, using other ancient Greek church texts, that this is certainly a reference to the Eucharist. Further support for this theory is given in the form of an ancient French translation of the Apostles’ creed. In English, the relevant part of the third article clearly reads “I believe in...the communion of holy things”.⁸ This makes a belief in the Eucharist being the basis for church fellowship a very early and strong tradition in the church. Interestingly, whereas in the *ousia/hypostasis* debate it was Greek ambiguity that confused matters, it is Latin ambiguity that Ewert feels has muddled the Greek clarity of the “communion of saints” statement of the creed.

Ewert continues in the second, third, and fourth chapters to build on this theme of fellowship being tied to the sharing of the Eucharist. In particular, he shows how the word “*koinonia*” is used interchangeably for participation in communion and church fellowship in the early church. Fellowship, he asserts, is partaking of the Lord’s Supper. It is the Supper that is the defining characteristic of fellowship. In Chapter 2 he quotes Isidore of Pelusium: “*Koinonia* is the name for the reception of the divine mysteries, for thereby we receive the gift of being made one with Christ and partakers of His kingdom.”⁹ Irenaeus believed that “through the Eucharist we become members of the body of Christ and that thus all who partake are made one body.”¹⁰ John of Damascus wrote that “We say *koinonia*, and so it is, for through it we have *koinonia* with Christ and partake of his flesh and deity, but through it we also have *koinonia* and are united with one another.”¹¹

The Lord's Supper in the Local Congregation

The key thesis of this section of Elert's book is that "the unity of the church is the presupposition of church fellowship."¹² This unity was not a unity of feeling or of love only, but also a unity in the "sense of agreeing and being at one together."¹³ This unity ran deep: in the Codex Theodosianus of 428 AD a number of confessions are mentioned, all but one heretical.¹⁴ Yet all but one would have balked at the statement "Jesus Christ is the Lord", "a statement which in our day has been taken as sufficient to qualify a church as Christian."¹⁵ Not only were none of the heretical confessions permitted to commune at the table of the majority orthodox church, but they did not commune among themselves either. Elert spends time discussing how the three-fold character of confession, episcopate, scripture, and rule of faith, helped churches determine who was orthodox and who was not. All three must operate together, Elert asserts. Furthermore, he notes that the rule of faith, and all dogma in general, are kerygmatic tools.¹⁶ Dogma is that which is worthy of inclusion in the liturgy, and is something to be proclaimed, such as "Jesus is Lord", and not simply something to be believed.

Elert establishes his point that "being in communion", "having fellowship", and "being of one mind" are all synonyms in the early church by quoting the writings of several church fathers. Justin Martyr writes that no orthodox Christians are "in communion" with the Gnostics. He also states that heterodox bishops are not only out of fellowship with orthodox Christians, but also "all who are in communion with him." Athanasius also reports that a certain Arsenius wishes to be "in communion with us."¹⁷ "There is no doubt," writes Elert, "that in each case the meaning is to have fellowship with someone."¹⁸ Ignatius expects that all members of the local congregation will know the dogmas of the faith.¹⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem wrote a catechism for use with baptismal candidates, that expects quite a thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine.²⁰ "Belief" was not sufficient for a Christian. A Christian must also know what it is that is believed.

The local congregations of the early church took seriously the need to be one with one another. Oneness could be broken in two ways: through a lack of a unity of confession, and through the presence of gross sin. Elert first examines the procedures for dealing with gross sin in the local congregation. It is clear for Elert that the church after the Apostolic Age dealt with gross sin in a different manner than the earliest church. The earliest church was concerned about preserving the church pure for an imminent parousia.²¹ The later church believed in the possibility of a sinner's rehabilitation before the return of Christ. Because of that shift in thought, excommunication as a means of discipline became a temporary (although sometimes a life-long 'temporary') exclusion. The East especially considered excommunication a means of healing the individual, whereas the West saw it more as a penitential procedure.²² Elert also points out that there were varying degrees of excommunication, depending on the sin committed. Between total shunning and full communion were a variety of "partial" states. Participation in the Lord's Supper, however, was restricted to those who were in full fellowship only.

In the case of false doctrine, however, full excommunication was the only option. "No one who taught false doctrine might receive Holy Communion in an orthodox congregation."²³ Elert points out that the terminology employed by the early church for false doctrine can be ambiguous. Heresy, for example, is sometimes a good thing, as when Justinian writes about the "Catholic heresy" in praise of orthodoxy.²⁴ Elert distinguishes especially between schism,

heresy or false doctrine, and Basil's "parasynagog". Schism is a division due to some non-doctrinal matter. The breakaway of the Lutheran Church – Canada from the LCMS could, perhaps, be called a "schism". "Parasynagog" is an arbitrary formation of a second local congregation not disagreeing in doctrine from the other local congregation. The various LCMS churches of Ft. Wayne, for example, may not be in doctrinal division even though they are not united under one bishop or pastor. Obviously the most important issue at stake for fellowship is the teaching of false doctrine, with which the word heresy came in time to be fully identified.

Elert traces all fundamental Christian dogmas back to Philippians 2. He believes that all heresies, for the early church, were those teachings that flatly contradicted this important Pauline writing.²⁵ Any who taught such contradictions were to be immediately excluded from fellowship. This is in contrast to the treatment of sinners, who may have been only partly excluded, or temporarily excluded. The 3rd Synod called against Paul of Samasota declared that "there is no need for any judgement first upon his deeds, since he is outside. He has departed from the canon and gone over to false and illegitimate doctrines."²⁶ The fact that Paul may have been of unchristian character was irrelevant: his heresies were far more potent grounds for immediate excommunication. Deacons of churches were often responsible for questioning strangers as to whether they were of orthodox or heretical faith.²⁷ Justin Martyr writes: "This food is called the Eucharist among us. Only those are permitted to partake of it who believe the truth of our doctrine."²⁸ The early church excluded gross sinners in the hopes they would repent and be healed. It excluded heretics because of "the original command that in the unity of the Lord's Table there may be nothing that separates one from another."²⁹

Communion between Churches

If this was the situation in the local congregation, how did congregations deal with fellowship amongst each other? One of the important points Elert makes in this section of the book is that divisions in the church existed as far back as the 2nd century. The modern situation of having several denominations in one town did indeed occur in the early church. "Nicaeans, Semi-Arians, Eunomians, Macedonians, and Apollinarians confronted one another in the same locality."³⁰ How did local congregations deal with this bewildering array of confessions? First of all, the local congregations recognized that the orthodox, true church was bigger than they were. The church was fully realized in their location, but at the same time present elsewhere, in the same way the Body of Christ is fully present in the Eucharist wherever it may be celebrated. Second, the churches came to develop ways of relating to one another in such a way as to recognize that "catholicity".

One way that churches of the same confession recognized each other was by recognizing each other's excommunications. Furthermore, synods began to have the right to excommunicate individuals from the entire catholic church.³¹ Bishops, such as Cyprian and Cornelius of Rome, informed each other of excommunications from their dioceses.³² Letters of Fellowship were given to traveling lay members so that the Bishop of the town to which they were traveling could recognize them. The Council of Carthage made it a canon that travelers had to have such a letter.³³ Bishops examined each other to determine whether or not to enter into fellowship.³⁴ In certain cases, a congregation with a heterodox bishop could be in fellowship with other orthodox churches, if the bishop's teaching was under protest by the congregation. The best example of

this was the congregation of Antioch, which remained in fellowship with other sees despite its highly unorthodox bishop, Paul of Samosata.

Fellowship and doctrinal unity in the church catholic was preserved by two means: the visits of clergy from other parishes, and the exchange of correspondence. Basil writes to Ambrose that these are means given by Christ himself for mutual recognition.³⁵ In time, letters were not only exchanged between specific churches but were also written for circulation to all churches. These were the first “encyclicals”, or “letters to everywhere”. These letters were often written to inform congregations of the decisions of synods, or to expound a doctrinal position over and against an opinion considered “heterodox”.³⁶

Conclusion

The thesis of Elert’s book can best be summed up in his own words. “The modern theory that anybody may be admitted ‘as a guest’ to the Sacrament in a church of a differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable.”³⁷ He strives to make this point by first linking communion with fellowship. We fellowship not with people, but in the Eucharist, which defines the fellowship of the church. Unity is an essential for that fellowship. To be of one mind, to be in fellowship, and to communion with one another are all part and parcel of being “church”. Communion is not a matter of personal feeling: it is a matter of confession. To believe with the heart is to confess with the lips (Romans 10:8).

Elert certainly mounts a very credible defense of the practice of closed communion. But the book goes much beyond that chief purpose. It also shows the early church to be very much concerned about right living and right doctrine. Far from being the “free love”, socialist, liberating community of justice envisioned by many mainline theologians, the early church was a community keeping itself pure in action and belief like a bride preparing for the arrival of the bridegroom. Elert is not content, either, to begin in the 2nd century but instead traces his suppositions back into the Scriptures. The suggestion that “closed communion”, confessionalism, and moral rigor were later developments in the church is excluded by Elert’s able exegesis of the epistles and gospels. He also demonstrates the validity of his exegesis by showing how his interpretations are consistent with immediate post-Apostolic writings, as well as later writings. An inability to do the same has often forced liberal scholars to conclude that, since their exegesis of Scripture must be correct, the early church must have departed from “true Christianity” soon after the passing of the apostles.³⁸

All in all, this book is a wonderful exploration of the writings of the early church, and how it understood fellowship, the Eucharist, and what it means to be “church”.

¹ Huffman, Walter. “Liturgical Space: Faith takes Form” in Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission. Thomas Schattauer (ed). (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 1999), p. 118

² website: <http://www.thechurchatomball.org>, last accessed May 23, 2000

³ Elert, Werner. Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries. N.E. Nagel (trans). (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1966)

⁴ Elert, Eucharist, p.71

⁵ Elert, Eucharist, p.77

⁶ Elert, Eucharist, p.2

-
- ⁷ Elert, Eucharist, p.7
⁸ Elert, Eucharist, p.10
⁹ Elert, Eucharist, p.19
¹⁰ Elert, Eucharist, p.26
¹¹ Elert, Eucharist, p.33
¹² Elert, Eucharist, p.49
¹³ Elert, Eucharist, p.49
¹⁴ Elert, Eucharist, p.41
¹⁵ Elert, Eucharist, p.41
¹⁶ Elert, Eucharist, p.57
¹⁷ Elert, Eucharist, p.63
¹⁸ Elert, Eucharist, p.63
¹⁹ Elert, Eucharist, p.70
²⁰ Elert, Eucharist, p.72
²¹ Elert, Eucharist, p.92
²² Elert, Eucharist, p.97
²³ Elert, Eucharist, p.109
²⁴ Elert, Eucharist, p.109
²⁵ Elert, Eucharist, p.112
²⁶ Elert, Eucharist, p.113
²⁷ Elert, Eucharist, p.115
²⁸ Elert, Eucharist, p.114
²⁹ Elert, Eucharist, p.118
³⁰ Elert, Eucharist, p.141
³¹ Elert, Eucharist, p.127
³² Elert, Eucharist, p.128
³³ Elert, Eucharist, p.132
³⁴ Elert, Eucharist, p.139
³⁵ Elert, Eucharist, p.151
³⁶ Elert, Eucharist, p.152
³⁷ Elert, Eucharist, p.175
³⁸ Torjesen, Karen Jo. When Women Were Priests. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p.7