

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN OPEN TABLE

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In August 2013 the Northern Illinois Synod put forward a memorial at the ELCA churchwide assembly asking the church to consider whether holy communion should be administered only to the baptized. The memorial was then adopted by the assembly and a resource entitled “Table and Font: Who Is Welcome?” was created and placed—albeit quietly—on the ELCA website and emailed to rostered leaders.¹ It is reported that this document was a topic of conversation at the ELCA Conference of Bishops in October 2014.² Should a change in the administration of holy communion be recommended and implemented in ELCA congregations, it would represent a drastic change in current and historic Lutheran sacramental policy.³

In light of this possibility, some people are beginning to ask whether such a change is biblically appropriate or confessionally acceptable. While those questions are interesting, I am not sure whether they get to the heart of the issue or address what is really at stake in this conversation. I don’t believe the impetus behind the memorial put forth by the Northern Illinois Synod has as much to do with theology as with the political and social existence of the ELCA. Thus the wording of the memorial has less to say about the biblical and confessional standards of admission to holy communion, and more to say about the ways in which the ELCA functions as one political body among others.⁴

Furthermore, a perusal of the study guide given to congregations to help them think through the issue reveals how little this memorial is concerned with theology. The first paragraph of the introduction to the study guide reads as follows: “The Church Council of the ELCA has invited members...”⁵ It doesn’t read, “The theologians of the ELCA are inviting people to study communion practices” but stresses the active role of the governing body. As if that phrasing weren’t telling enough, the Lutheran Confessions are given only one passing mention as a resource that congregations can use, and Scripture isn’t cited *at all!* How can a person reflect theologically in any adequate way without the Bible? Meanwhile, *The Use and Means of Grace* is mentioned six times by my count. This 1997 publication is not even a binding confessional document, yet it dominates the 2014 study guide.

As Lutherans we believe, teach, and confess that the marks of the true church are twofold: the church exists where the gospel is properly preached and where the sacraments are properly administered.⁶ Should a change in official eucharistic policy be proposed, we must ask: what does this change say about the church? And what does it say about the ecclesiology of the ELCA?

Ideological Identification in the Church

One way to answer this question might lie in David Fitch’s critique of Evangelicalism in *The End of Evangelicalism: Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission*. In Fitch’s book, in which he takes the political philosophy of Slavoj Žižek—a Slovenian Marxist political thinker, psychoanalyst, and culture critic—and applies it to the church, he argues that “evangelicalism, in reaction to the modernist-fundamentalist controversies, pursued a strategy for survival via a defense based in the autonomous structures of modern reason and politics. In the process, we gave up the true core of our Christian politics—the person and work of Christ—and set ourselves up for a fall by in essence becoming a form of religious ideology.”⁷ In other words, Fitch argues, Evangelicals chose to define who they were as a political body by turning their core beliefs—which he defines as the belief in an inerrant Bible, the importance of a personal decision for Christ, and the concept of a Christian nation—into indicators of a religious ideology.⁸

So, for example, when Fitch takes up Evangelicalism’s core belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, he finds that while the doctrine was originally intended to point to the reliability of Scripture despite what the new tools of biblical interpretation might have implied, it was now used to identify a group or person as a Bible-believing Christian, therefore “not liberal.” Thus, he writes,

[t]he assertion of “inerrancy,” therefore, acts an identifier used to assert the organization’s, church’s, or one’s own personal evangelical orthodoxy. It serves to generate a certain ideological identification that we are conservative Bible-believing Christians who can

be trusted. It serves to identify a group as “not-liberal.” The actual belief, however, in “the inerrant Bible” means little in terms of what each evangelical organization or church actually believes about biblical interpretation, the manuscripts, and/or internal contradictions as exposed by higher biblical critics.⁹

For Fitch, the use of a core belief like biblical inerrancy in any way other than to express the Bible’s trustworthiness is wrong and so shapes people and communities in unfaithful ways.

To arrive at the point where Fitch can make this critique of Evangelicalism, he begins with the assumption that a community’s beliefs plus its practices shape who its members are and what they do.¹⁰ Following Žižek’s political philosophy, Fitch then examines Evangelicalism’s political theology and asks whether what the church is gathering around and building itself upon is at odds with the gospel that the church claims to believe, teach, and confess.¹¹

To help identify whether the church is gathering around a false ideology, Fitch uses the concept of master signifiers. Master signifiers are conceptual objects “around which people give their allegiance, thereby enabling a political group to form.”¹² They are beliefs that become interwoven in the lives of people and groups. Master signifiers begin innocently enough, like the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, but then are abstracted from their original use and turned into objects to rally people and groups, with little resemblance to their original form or function.

The danger that Fitch wishes to expose in his discussion of master signifiers, and that those of us in the ELCA should heed as he critiques Evangelicalism, is that when the church slips into becoming a false ideology and not the biblical *ekklesia*, four worrisome things happen.¹³ First, the church is pacified in regard to social

injustice. Thus instead of concerning itself with loving its neighbors, the church spends all its time and effort supporting its ideology. Second, the church fails to practice discipleship; rather, it diverts all its energies into maintaining an ideology to rally people. The church becomes more of a leader’s hobbyhorse and less the messenger of Jesus Christ who died to save people from their sins. Third, the church assumes a defensive posture, always needing to justify its existence because the forgiveness of sins is not enough. Finally, the church exhausts itself because anger as a motivating force will be depleted after enough time passes. If the church becomes an ideology it will die, because it places its trust in its ideology and not in Christ. The church ultimately violates the First Commandment as it relies not on God but on itself.

*Holy Communion, Master Signifier
of an Empty Ecclesiology?*

So the question before us now is: What does an official change in the church’s policy regarding the administration of the sacrament say about the ecclesiology of the ELCA? On the basis of Fitch’s categories of ideology and master signifier, it will become evident that a change in the current policy regarding holy communion will lead to a corresponding change in the ecclesiology of the ELCA. Before we discuss the proposed alteration, however, we must be clear as to what the ELCA’s current communion policy is and why those in favor of change seek to alter it.

One place to begin this discussion is with the 1997 document, *The Use of the Means of Grace*. Principle 37 clearly states, “Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Application 37G goes on to state, “When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ’s presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion

need to be ashamed... That person is invited to learn the faith of the church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.”¹⁵ While *The Use of the Means of Grace* is clear that holy communion is for the baptized, we should note that the document is not prescriptive. (Interestingly, “Table and Font” also makes this point.)

What is prescriptive in determining who should and should not commune is Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. While 1 Corinthians 11 is clear that those intending to receive the sacrament should be Christians and approach holy communion in a worthy manner, the Confessions spell out exactly who should and should not commune. In Luther’s preface to the Small Catechism, he writes, “Those who do not want to learn

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these things—who must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians—should also not be admitted to the sacrament.”¹⁶ Again, the Solid Declaration of Article VII of the Formula of Concord states, “It is essential to explain with great diligence who the unworthy guests at this Supper are, namely, those who go to the sacrament without true contrition or sorrow over their sins and without true faith or the good intention to improve their lives.”¹⁷ In short, insofar as it is a Lutheran church, the ELCA currently invites to the table those who are baptized and repentant and who believe in the words that Jesus spoke: “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

Why consider a change in policy? The memorial from the Northern Illinois Synod identifies four reasons.

First, because the ELCA is in full-communion partnerships with other denominations that do not share our understanding about who can and cannot receive holy communion. Second, this lack of shared understanding with those partners has created issues around eucharistic hospitality. Third, there is a possibility that this lack of a shared understanding of the sacrament may exclude some people. Finally, open admission to the altar is already practiced in some ELCA congregations.¹⁸

The study guide issued by the churchwide worship team goes a step further in laying out specific scenarios in which one might be tempted to commune someone who is not baptized. The writer then states, “In these and other situations, ELCA members and both baptized and unbaptized guests ask, ‘Is going to communion OK? Who is invited?’ Pastors themselves wonder, ‘Should I welcome everyone to the table?’”¹⁹ Notice how the ecclesiological identity of the ELCA is being driven by a series of what-if questions.

Now that the present sacramental policy of the ELCA is clear and why it is that some wish to change it, our question can be asked: what does an official change in the administration of holy communion say about the ecclesiology of the ELCA? If this policy changes, what does it signify about the right administration of the sacraments as a mark of the church? The only thing it can signify is that the ELCA is operating under a false ideology and has an empty ecclesiology.

How so? A false ideology implies that the set of beliefs and practices the ELCA is using as a rallying point, should such a change in policy occur, would not be in line with the faith itself. In other words, the change in policy would make holy communion a master signifier of the false ideology of the ELCA. The reader should remember that master signifiers pluck objects from their original use and turn them into something new to rally people around. No longer would holy communion be what it was meant to

be: the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. Instead it would become a sign of a certain group’s desire for inclusiveness and hospitality. Yet what this inclusiveness and hospitality might mean would be defined in a million different ways by a million different people.

An empty ecclesiology is indicated by this false ideology. If holy communion is a master signifier of a false ideology that the church gathers around

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each Sunday, and if the sacrament is a mark of the church—as Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession states—then one must pose the question: if the ELCA changes its communion policy, is it also divesting its ecclesiology of any meaningful content? Certainly, if it separates the sacrament from “word and sacrament,” something questionable is happening. To put it plainly, opening the table to all comers suggests that there is no real need to baptize, much less evangelize. I contend that the ELCA is evacuating its present ecclesiology and refilling it with something new; and if the study guide is any indication, “new” might

not include Scripture—as the study guide itself neither asks participants to read Scripture nor does it refer to Scripture even once.

A Way Forward

So is there a way to replenish our ecclesiology or plug the leak before the vessel is emptied? I believe there is, and it begins with understanding history. Part of the impetus behind the memorial from the Northern Illinois Synod was noble. The delegates wanted everyone to know the love of God in Christ. They wanted to share the great gift they have in the body and blood of Christ. It would seem, however, that they have forgotten that they are not the first to experience this desire to share. Issues of inclusivity have been discussed in the church for a long time. Werner Elert included a chapter in his book *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* that described the early church and its decision to have a closed eucharistic table.²⁰ Furthermore, our Lord gave specific instructions for the way in which this meal should shape our lives and the church’s. We must understand our history here.

Next, the church must find a way to speak old truths anew from a clear understanding of history. This is not a way of saying that the church must try to be relevant in an ever-changing culture. This *is* a way of saying that the church must find ways to teach new generations of Christians to revere God’s word and His commands. How this teaching is carried out is the difficult question that all pastors must learn to discern in their specific contexts, but it does not include taking nonbinding documents like *The Use of the Means of Grace* and assuming that they are prescriptive. It must include wrestling with authoritative documents like Scripture and the Confessions and engaging them honestly.

Finally, we must check our pride at the door. Our subjective experiences, contrary to what the study guide materials indicate, cannot drive

decisions to change doctrine. What anyone thinks hospitality means or doesn't mean is less important than how Scripture defines it. Our ultimate arrogance rears its head when we think we know more than God. The proposal on the table essentially asks: "How can holy communion be used to show our unity with other Christians, our inclusiveness, the acceptability of what we do and practice anyway?" Instead we should be asking: "How does God's efficacious and saving gift of His body and blood shape us to be His disciples?" We deceive ourselves—and others—if we think holy communion is a meal we can use to make a social statement. And we may find that the concern over unworthy reception strikes much closer to home than the unbaptized. LF

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Notes

1. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Table and Font: Who Is Welcome? An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion." Online at <download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_Table_And_Font.pdf> (this and all subsequent sites accessed October 15, 2014).
2. Paul R. Hinlicky, "The Truth about 'Radical Hospitality,'" *Lutheran Forum* 48/3 (2014): 37–39.
3. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 41.
4. Four of the six "whereas" statements in the memorial concern the ELCA's full communion agreements; only one of the six addresses the ELCA's sacramental theology directly. See Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Churchwide Assembly Resource Page, Section VII: Report of the Memorial Committee, 68, online at <www.elca.org/resources/churchwide-assembly>.
5. "Table and Font," 4.
6. "The Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [here-

after cited as BC], 42.

7. David Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism: Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 17.
8. *Ibid.*, xxii.
9. *Ibid.*, 56.
10. *Ibid.*, xv.
11. *Ibid.*, 8–9.
12. *Ibid.*, 26.
13. *Ibid.*, 29–38.
14. *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 41.
15. *Ibid.*, 42.
16. "The Small Catechism," BC 348.
17. "Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration," BC 605.
18. Report of the Memorial Committee, 68–70. The memorial regarding holy communion is at the end of the report, tucked in after sixty-some pages of memorials regarding gender discrimination, immigration reform, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, same-sex couples, gun violence, and fracking, perhaps suggesting something about the relative weight given to sociopolitical and sacramental issues in the ELCA.
19. "Table and Font," 4.
20. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), 75–83.

At one time in Lutheran churches the Prayer of the Church or the General Prayer (which then followed the gathering of the offering) was printed in the hymnal and was mostly the same every Sunday. Today with locally computer-produced worship booklets, it's common for congregations to use a different prayer each week.

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